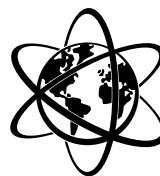


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## Governance based on partnership with NGOs: implications for development and empowerment in rural Bangladesh

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### Abstract

In line with the current global trend of streamlining the role of the state, the governments in most countries have transferred some of their economic activities and basic services to non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are now considered partners in governance. In the developing world, some of the largest and most well-known NGOs are in Bangladesh where the government has formed partnership with these NGOs in various sectors with a view to enhance human development and social empowerment in rural areas. But in reality, such partnership has been quite ineffective (and even unfavorable) to achieve this goal. This article briefly introduces the current debate on governance based on partnership between the state and NGOs; explains the forms and dimensions of such partnership in the case of Bangladesh; and evaluates this partnership experience in terms of whether it has achieved the stipulated objectives of development and empowerment. It also explores major factors and interests (internal and external) behind this partnership and offers some suggestions to rethink partnership and overcome its drawbacks in Bangladesh.

### Introduction

In the contemporary global context characterized by the diminishing role of the state and the growing significance of non-state actors, most developing countries have embraced various modes or forms of partnership in public governance. Since the 1980s, this greater emphasis on partnership between the state and non-state entities has emerged in line with the recent shift in the government's role from rowing to steering, the priority given to public participation to ensure 'good governance', the

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concern for public sector inefficiency and ineffectiveness, and the preference of foreign donors for partnership in delivering services (Brinkerhoff, 2003: 105–6). Such partnership is now considered essential to enhance organizational capacity, cost-effectiveness, resource mobilization, managerial innovation, consensus-building, people's participation, and public accountability (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998; Asian Development Bank Institute (ADB), 2001; Caplan, 2001). Since each of the major stakeholders has its own strengths and limits, the partnership option allows them to use multiple perspectives and strategies and, thus, contribute to the realization of their respective goals more effectively (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998; ADB, 2001). Based on these perceived positive outcomes, partnership has become a most frequently used buzzword in development debates, a widely used tool in economic policies, and perhaps an 'overused and abused' term in the current age (Paoletto, 2000: 30; Brinkerhoff, 2002a: 19).

However, there is no common consensus on the meaning of partnership, it often means 'different things to different people', and its definition has evolved from a matter of simple coordination and coalition to more participatory terms such as mutual collaboration, common goal, and shared responsibility (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998; Lister, 1999; Brinkerhoff, 2003). Realizing the limits of an ideal-type definition of partnership (as a matter of mutual respect, trust, influence, transparency, and accountability) in terms its universality and objectivity, Brinkerhoff (2002a: 20–2) suggests that the definition of partnership must include two essential components: (a) 'mutuality', which refers to interdependence and commitment between partners, equality in decision-making, and rights and responsibilities to each other; and (b) 'organizational identity', which refers to the maintenance (rather than surrender) of each partner's own identity, beliefs, and values. It should be noted, however, that in the actual process of any partnership, the extent to which such mutuality and identity can be realized may often depend on the social, economic, and political powers of the partners involved. It is always the more powerful partner whose identity and interest become dominant in most cases.

In recent years, the scope of partnership has considerably expanded among various stakeholders with diverse backgrounds, including international financial institutions, foreign corporations, government agencies, consulting firms, academic and research institutions, local governments, pressure groups, and non-government organizations or NGOs (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998; Paoletto, 2000). However, the priority in partnership and the choice of partners often depend on the kind of tasks and sectors involved and the context in which partnership is pursued (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998). For example, for the profit-making manufacturing sector, the partnership is usually among governments, private firms, and foreign investors, whereas for rural development at the local level, the partnership is often among government agencies, foreign donors, and local and foreign NGOs. In the context of developing nations, due to a greater need to mitigate rural poverty and empower local people, the partnership with NGOs has considerably increased, especially due to the worldwide condemnation of monopolistic state bureaucracies and the advocacy for NGOs as a more preferred alternative for these tasks (UNESCAP, 1999).

In addition, partnership with NGOs is prescribed in order to reduce the risks and responsibilities of government, minimize public sector debt, and enrich the quality of

public policies (Farrington and Lewis, 1993; McCormick, 1993). The preference for NGOs as partners is also due to the realization that compared to the business sector, NGOs are in a better position to possess local knowledge, address rural poverty, understand local needs and priorities, and practice consultative management (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998; Caplan, 2001). In the current literature, these largely positive outcomes of partnership between the government and the NGO (henceforth the GO–NGO partnership) can be identified with the three main perspectives. First, the ‘normative’ perspective (stressed by the advocates of NGOs) explains the GO–NGO partnership as inherently and ethically good for development, empowerment, participation, and accountability; second, the ‘reactive’ perspective (practiced by international donors and state agencies) tends to glorify such partnership to counter criticisms, defend their own activities, and strengthen public relations; and third, the ‘instrumental’ perspective (often endorsed by experts and advisers) views this partnership as a means or strategic tool to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness (Brinkerhoff, 2002a: 19–20).

The previously mentioned dimensions of partnership — i.e. causes, meanings, actors, and outcomes — have been extensively discussed in the current literature. However, in assessing the implications of GO–NGO partnership, there is a tendency to stress mainly its positive outcomes highlighted by the proponents of the three perspectives previously mentioned. In this regard, Brinkerhoff (2002b: 14) suggests that for most people, partnership ‘conjures a positive reaction, implying a desirable, values-laden type of relationship’. Even those who focus on negative impacts are concerned largely for the adverse organizational or procedural outcomes of partnership — e.g. the time-consuming process of resolving disagreements, the use of scarce resources in building partnership skills, the unrealistic objectives set by partners, and so on (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998). These critics seem to pay inadequate attention to the implications of partnership for realizing its eventual objectives like human development and empowerment (explained later in this article). It is crucial to go beyond the instrumental outcomes of the GO–NGO partnership and evaluate its consequences in terms of achieving the final goals and, as far as the developing world is concerned, the stipulated final goals of this partnership are to enhance development and empowerment at the grassroots level (Davis, 2000; Brown and Kalegaonkar, 2002; Tvedt, 2002).

In examining the implications of GO–NGO partnership for such development and empowerment, this article focuses on Bangladesh, which is one of the most well-known cases in terms of engaging NGOs by the government and donor agencies to accelerate community development and serve millions of people (Ahmed, 2000: 272). According to some estimates, NGOs provide micro-credit and other services to about eight million poor (mostly women) in Bangladesh (World Bank, 1998). The Bangladesh model of GO–NGO partnership is also globally known and, in various degrees, it has been replicated in many other countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Dutta, 1999; Chowdhury, 2001). Some of the major NGOs in Bangladesh have gained increasing support from and formed partnership with the government in pursuing the common goals of rural development and people’s empowerment (M.H. Rahman, 2000). This process of partnership has expanded since the adoption of new policy agenda in the 1980s, which encouraged the government to transfer its

socioeconomic role to the private sector and non-state entities under the influence or pressure of international aid agencies.

This article attempts to argue that there is no adequate evidence to suggest that the GO–NGO partnership has succeeded in realizing its goals of development and empowerment in rural Bangladesh. It suggests that the increasing GO–NGO partnership, in fact, may have adversely affected the process of development and empowerment in this country. Thus, compared to the dominant trend in the literature to focus on the organizational, managerial, and technical outcomes of the GO–NGO partnership, this article examines the implications of such partnership in terms of its eventual impacts on society and people. In doing so, the article takes a more critical approach to stress the adverse consequences of this partnership (beyond its over-publicized positive results) in Bangladesh. However, before exploring these critical implications, the next section describes the scope of such partnership in terms of its major forms, levels, domains, and institutions, and uses the examples of selected NGOs and their experiences in Bangladesh.

### **Partnership with NGOs in Bangladesh: forms, levels, domains, and institutions**

Since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh has undergone considerable changes in the mode of governance at the macro-level at some major stages — including the one-party socialist system under the Awami League in the mid-1970s, the dictatorial military rule under the Zia and Ershad regimes in the 1980s and early 1990s, and a multi-party parliamentary democracy under the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party since the mid-1990s. It is interesting to note that despite certain diversity in the ideological inclinations and policy positions of these ruling parties, there has been a gradual expansion of the role of NGOs, although greater partnership between the government and the NGOs began largely during the recent transition to democratically elected governance since the mid-1990s.

In Bangladesh, NGOs are engaged in various sectors and activities. The major well-known NGOs include the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Grameen Bank (Rural Bank), the Proshika Manobik Unnayan Kendra (Proshika Human Development Center), the Association for Social Advancement (ASA); the Swanirvar Bangladesh (Self-Reliant Bangladesh), the Nijera Kori (Do It Ourselves), the Gonoshasthya Kendra (Public Health Center), and so on (World Bank, 1996a). The partnership between the Bangladesh government and these NGOs began with the external initiatives adopted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in certain health and family-planning projects, and it expanded to other sectors based on similar initiatives taken by international agencies like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Canadian International Development Agency, and International Fund for Agricultural Development (Dutta, 1999). This growing trend in GO–NGO partnerships in Bangladesh reflects the current global trend toward such partnership (Ahmed, 2000). In this section, some of the major typologies of partnership (in terms of its forms, geographical levels, functional domains, and institutional means) are discussed with specific reference to Bangladesh.

### *Forms, levels, and institutions of partnership*

First, the forms of GO–NGO relationship may vary considerably. In terms of financing and delivering services, such relationship can be government-dominant, NGO-dominant, dual or parallel, and collaborative; and in terms of autonomy and control practiced by government, NGOs can be relatively independent, complementary, or adversarial to government (Gidron et al., 1992; Young, 2000). In contrast, Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2002: 6) classify these various forms of GO–NGO relations into two categories: ‘repression, rivalry and competition (where government resists institutional pluralism); and cooperation, complementarity and collaboration (where government accepts institutional pluralism)’. It is mainly the second category of relations based on cooperation or collaboration rather than rivalry or competition which can be understood as the GO–NGO partnership. However, this partnership can take specific forms, including formal collaboration between partners to achieve shared objectives, contracts signed by partners to deliver services, linkages between partners without strong mutual obligation or commitment, consultation between partners for sharing experiences, and so on (Farrington et al., 1993; Ahmed, 2000).

In Bangladesh, the main forms of partnership between the government and NGOs cover the joint implementation of projects by both partners, the subcontracting of public sector services to major NGOs, and the direct financial support of government extended to various NGOs (World Bank, 1996a; Dutta, 1999). However, the sub-contracting option has become the most common form of GO–NGO collaboration in which the government enters into formal contracts with major NGOs in implementing specific projects in Bangladesh (World Bank, 1996a). More specifically, in line with the recent privatization agenda, the contracting-out of services to NGOs has been pursued by the Bangladesh government and donors in areas such as rural banking, primary education, adult literacy, primary health, rural works, crop storage, and training extension (Farrington and Lewis, 1993; Wood, 1997). In particular, in the health and population sector, projects are implemented by extending service delivery contracts to relevant NGOs based on the framework of shared objectives and principles (Ahmed, 2000: 275).

In addition, although the GO–NGO joint effort to co-finance or co-execute projects has been relatively limited in Bangladesh, it has been quite frequent in rural micro-credit, natural resource management, women’s development and empowerment, disaster relief, children’s rights, and environmental issues (Dutta, 1999; Zaman, 2003). Many government agencies are seeking cooperation from NGOs in delivering inputs and services in order to use the valuable experiences of NGOs in group formation, human resource development, income generation activities, awareness creation, and so on (Aminuzzaman, 2000). It is expected that through cooperation, these experiences of NGOs could have positive impacts on the field-level government employees, especially in improving their local knowledge, commitment, and responsiveness (Aminuzzaman, 2000).

Second, in terms of the levels of partnership, NGOs usually have affiliations with various layers of stakeholders, including international donor organizations, national government agencies, local government units, and business enterprises. In Bangladesh, there has emerged partnership among international institutions, government

departments, public enterprises, local governments, trade unions, business organizations, academic institutions, and NGOs (World Bank, 1998; Ahmed, 2000). However, most relevant here is the partnership of NGOs with national and local governments, often based on financial support and technical assistance from international donor agencies. In most cases, partnership has simultaneously involved the government, international donors, and NGOs. In certain projects related to health care, road infrastructure, public works, and resettlement in Bangladesh, there were joint efforts and collaborations between the government, NGOs, and foreign donors such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Health Organization (Dutta, 1999; World Bank, 1999). For instance, in order to help vulnerable groups, especially destitute women, the Bangladesh government formed partnerships with NGOs like the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) to distribute food, provide logistic support, and impart training – it evolved as a major project (Income Generation for Vulnerable Group Development Program) based on collaboration among the government, BRAC, and the World Food Program (Aminuzzaman, 2000).

In recent years, the World Bank has been financially supporting and working with the Bangladesh government and NGOs in order to provide micro-credit to the rural poor, provide basic education and health care, improve rural roads and rural electrification, deliver drinking water and sanitation, and sponsor conferences and seminars on these issues (World Bank, 1999). Similarly, the Asian Development Bank has tried to reinforce its partnership relations with the Bangladesh government and NGOs in adopting and implementing various projects (BRAC, 2002). At the level of local administration, some degree of collaboration has emerged between NGOs and local government units in projects related to vulnerable groups and road maintenance (Dutta, 1999). According to one survey of NGO representatives and local government members, there is a growing desire for partnership between them in sharing resources and facilitating programs (World Bank, 2002: 63). Since the mid-1980s, the central government has redesigned development plans and policies in order to encourage partnership among state agencies, NGOs, and local government institutions (M.H. Rahman, 2000). The scope of partnership between local government and NGOs has expanded in such areas as non-formal education, immunization programs, social forestry, and disaster management (M.H. Rahman, 2000).

Finally, in terms of institutions for the GO–NGO partnership, there are certain well-established mechanisms or arrangements. One such institution is the so-called Palli Karma Shahayak Foundation (PKSF) or Rural Works Assistance Foundation financed and managed by the government, which provides soft-term loans to its partner NGOs in order to enable them to extend income-generating micro-credit to poor families (Dutta, 1999). Thus, the PKSF aims to alleviate rural poverty by providing the necessary funds to poor households through various NGOs (World Bank, 1996b). Another institution is the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), which was created by the government in 1990 to provide one-stop services to NGOs, such as registration, project approval, fund disbursement, and so on.

In contrast, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) is an umbrella organization playing an important role in facilitating coordination and networking among NGOs and to enhance collaboration between the government, NGOs, civil society groups, and foreign donors (ADAB, 1996). By reinforcing linkages

and networks, the ADAB attempts to create a conducive atmosphere for a GO–NGO partnership. However, a more relevant institution for such a partnership is the Government–NGO Consultative Council (GNCC) established in 1995. The GNCC consists of both government and NGO representatives, and functions as a forum for dialogue between government agencies and NGOs in order to increase interaction, create greater mutual understanding, and promote collaboration between the two partners (UNESCAP, 1999). It also helps identify the main impediments to the GO–NGO collaboration in Bangladesh and formulate a framework for involving NGOs in the government’s development policies and projects (Dutta, 1999; Mujeri, 1999).

### *Major functional domains of partnership*

In the existing literature, the functional scope of partnership includes issues such as income generation, economic productivity, poverty eradication, empowerment of clients, education, health, group mobilization, and so on (Bovaird, 2003; Zaman, 2003). In Bangladesh, the scope of GO–NGO partnership is quite broad, it covers certain major areas such as poverty alleviation, micro-credit provision, health and family planning, education and training, rural empowerment, disaster management, water supply and sanitation, and so on (Dutta, 1999; Mujeri, 1999). Depending on their agenda, NGOs have different sets of priorities in dealing with some of these domains or activities. For instance, compared to many other NGOs, BRAC and Grameen Bank have been more effective in managing micro-projects for rural development, while the Gonoshasthya Kendra has been more involved in public health programs and pharmaceutical policies (World Bank, 1996b).

First, in the domain of poverty eradication and employment creation, there is now greater recognition of the need for GO–NGO partnership in Bangladesh. This partnership has evolved from a matter of simple informal consultation or discussion to a more formal collaboration in sectors such as agriculture, irrigation, livestock, fisheries, forestry, housing, population control, environment, and so on (Mujeri, 1999). For example, BRAC (one of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh) started with its own agenda of empowering the rural poor and gradually moved to form a partnership with the government in carrying out income-generation programs for vulnerable groups such as disadvantaged women (UNESCAP, 1999). Similarly, Proshika introduced a new irrigation program under which the landless rural poor could own irrigation equipment and generate income by selling water to local farmers and, later, the government began to collaborate with Proshika through its agricultural cooperative system to expand this program (see Farrington and Lewis, 1993). However, Grameen Bank adopted the micro-credit program for the poor in order to engage them in income-generation activities (e.g. livestock, fisheries, agriculture, shopkeeping) by providing them loans without collateral. This poverty eradication initiative based on micro-credit has been so expansive and so strongly supported by foreign donors that the government formed a collaboration with the Grameen Bank to finance this micro-credit program (UNESCAP, 1999).

Second, in the education sector, considerable partnership between NGOs and the government has emerged, especially in non-formal and primary education. Realizing

its limitations in reaching all children of school age in rural areas, the government has decided to use NGOs as partners to offer literacy and post-literacy education (equivalent to primary education) to youth and adults – this is evident from the creation of the Directorate of Non-formal Education (DNFE) in 1996 which serves about 2.5 million children (dropped out from primary schools) through various NGOs (World Bank, 1996b; Ahmed, 2000). For this non-formal education program, there are nearly 43,000 schools and centers run by NGOs of which more than 550 NGOs are approved by the government for this purpose and about 250 NGOs receive funds from the DNFE (Ahmed, 2000). Among these NGOs, however, BRAC has been the most active partner (with more than 34,000 schools and centers) of the government to provide such non-formal education (World Bank, 1996b; UNESCAP, 1999).

Beyond non-formal education, some NGOs are involved in running the formal primary education system in collaboration with the government. The Primary Education Development Program (1997–2002) supported by foreign donors emphasized greater collaboration between the government and NGOs, especially to improve classroom and teaching in government schools based on the experiences of NGO schools (Ahmed, 2000). The Fifth Five-year Plan (1997–2002) also stipulated expansion of the adult literacy rate through active participation of major stakeholders like NGOs (Planning Commission, 1998). A major NGO partner in the formal primary education system is Gono Shahajjo Shangstha (GSS) or People's Aid Organization, which follows the formal primary school education structure (with five grades) but tries its own ways to improve the classroom environment and quality of teaching in many schools in order to enhance children's learning achievements (Ahmed, 2000).

Third, in the domain of the health sector, the GO–NGO partnership has become a common practice in Bangladesh. Due to its own incapacity to perform this nationwide task alone, the government extends various responsibilities related to health, nutrition, and family planning to NGOs – there are over 4000 NGOs involved and many of them are financially supported by foreign donors (World Bank, 1996b; Ahmed, 2000). In its Fifth Five-year Plan, the government reiterated the significance of the GO–NGO collaboration in health care and birth control. Such collaboration is crucial at the grassroots level, especially for the provision of basic health services, dissemination of health education, encouragement of contraceptive users, and so on. In formulating health policy, in 1998, the government formed a panel involving professional experts and NGO leaders as partners and, in this policy, the government emphasized the expansion of its partnership with NGOs and other voluntary organizations (Ahmed, 2000). Another area of GO–NGO partnership can be observed in the realization of community-based nutrition in rural Bangladesh where malnutrition is a serious health problem. More specifically, the implementation of the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (supported by the World Bank and the UNICEF) has involved partnership between the government, the community, and NGOs (Ahmed, 2000). Similar GO–NGO partnership can be found in urban health care for the underprivileged people living in slums.

Among all NGOs, BRAC has been most active in providing rural health services in partnership with the government. In this venture, the program workers and village cadres of BRAC work together with their government counterparts to provide health services (World Bank, 1996b). BRAC assists the government's health-care activities



through social mobilization and deliver basic services such as child immunization, child nutrition, maternal health, and reproductive health (UNESCAP, 1999; Ahmed, 2000). Grameen Bank has adopted similar strategies of primary health care for the rural poor. Gonoshasthya Kendra, however, employs female paramedics and has established health centers and sub-clinics to achieve self-reliance in health and family planning (Ahmed, 2000). Dhaka Community Health Trust (another NGO) also aims to achieve self-reliance in health care by providing low-cost health care through its rural health-care clinics, training community-based health workers, delivering family planning services, and supporting health research (Ahmed, 2000).

Fourth, another area of GO–NGO partnership in Bangladesh is water and sanitation. Examples of such partnership include the formation of Water and Sanitation Committees by the government for facilitating sanitation at the local level with active involvement of NGOs (Dutta, 1999). There is also the Bangladesh Arsenic Mitigation Water Supply Project based on partnership between the government and NGOs, which aims to resolve the problem of the arsenic poisoning of drinking water, identify alternative sources of water supply, and monitor the maintenance of such water supply (World Bank, 2003). There is also the Urban Primary Health Care Project based on the GO–NGO collaboration for mitigating the problem of urban poor living in crowded slums without services such as garbage collection, clean water, and sanitation (Ahmed, 2000). Furthermore, there has emerged a strong partnership between local NGOs and municipal governments in some districts in Bangladesh such as Mymensingh and Sylhet, especially in developing and maintaining the drainage network and the waste disposal system (Alam and Rahman, 1997). One major NGO selected for this purpose and given contracts by the municipal authorities is Shubashati (Good Habitat), which has experiences in services like sanitation, waste disposal, and slum development (Alam and Rahman, 1997).

These examples demonstrate that the GO–NGO partnership in Bangladesh has expanded in major sectors or domains such as income generation, primary health care, basic education, and water supply and sanitation. This partnership can also be found in other areas like disaster management. During the severe floods in 1988 and 1998, many NGOs worked together with the government to overcome the crises by extending resources and manpower support (Dutta, 1999). However, it should be mentioned that, to a large extent, the GO–NGO partnership emerged in Bangladesh not only as a result of the government's own incapacity and resource constraints, it has also expanded as a result of the influence of major foreign donors strongly prescribing such partnerships.

### **Adverse impacts of GO–NGO partnership on empowerment and development in Bangladesh**

In assessing the outcomes of partnership, there is a tendency in the current literature to use certain criteria such as the level of each partner's satisfaction, effectiveness of conflict resolution, equity and accountability among partners, transparency in partnership activities, compliance of partners with mutually agreed contracts or obligations, and so on (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998; Ahmed, 2000). However, these assessment criteria seem to consider partnership as an end in itself rather than a

means to achieve the respective goals of individual partners. In other words, the ultimate success of partnership should be judged in terms of whether it has been conducive to the realization of the objectives of various partners, which they would not be able to achieve by themselves.

In the case of Bangladesh, the formal objectives of both the government and NGOs have been to assist the underprivileged population (especially the rural poor) to have better living conditions and greater voices, especially by expanding the GO-NGO partnership and working jointly in various sectors (World Bank, 2002). These objectives are largely articulated in government plans and programs as 'human development' and 'social empowerment'. It has been repeatedly stated by the government and NGOs as well as foreign donors that they need to collaborate as partners to enhance development and empowerment, especially for the poor in rural areas (Aminuzzaman, 2000; M.H. Rahman, 2000; Chowdhury, 2001). In the current literature, human development is usually understood as the process of making progress or improvement in terms of income, employment, living standard, self-reliance, equality, freedom, and sustainability (Haque, 1999; UNDP, 2003; Haque and Mudacumura, 2004). However, social empowerment is often interpreted as the process of shifting power to the common people by enhancing their capacity to manage their own affairs and exercise influence over decisions that affect them (Kraft, 2000; Terselic, 2000). However, as the primary objectives of GO-NGO collaboration in Bangladesh, human development and social empowerment are presented in terms of criteria such as poverty alleviation, income generation, skill development, awareness creation, and people's participation in diverse sectors, including agriculture, livestock, forestry, health, and education (Farrington and Lewis, 1993). In this section, the assessment of GO-NGO partnership in Bangladesh is made in terms of these two broad objectives, development and empowerment.

### *Implications for human development*

In general, the idea of partnership among major local, national, and international actors has gained significance as a tool for enhancing socioeconomic development (Siddiqi and Oever, 1998; Paoletto, 2000). This growing emphasis on partnership (especially with NGOs) in development activities can be observed in major conferences, workshops, donor policies, and government programs (Brinkerhoff, 2002b: 7-11). In Bangladesh, the government and NGOs share the common goal of national development in terms of alleviating poverty and illiteracy, generating income, improving health care, and upgrading living standards (Mujeri, 1999; Chowdhury, 2001). In this regard, NGOs are often glorified for their developmental achievements. It is observed that in partnership with government, NGOs like Grameen Bank, BRAC, Proshika, and others have economically helped about five million rural families to overcome the poverty trap, contributed significantly to birth control and a decline in infant mortality, assisted school drop-out children to complete primary education, and so on (Islam, 1999a; Ahmed, 2000). However, the question remains as to whether such developmental achievements could be realized without GO-NGO partnership or collaboration.

From the earlier discussion, one may conclude that it would be extremely difficult

for the government to make these developmental achievements without the active collaboration of NGOs, especially when the business sector is quite weak in Bangladesh. In particular, the partnership with NGOs, which have greater grassroots experience and affiliations, has been important in pursuing economic improvements in rural areas (Mujeri, 1999). As mentioned earlier, the GO–NGO partnership in non-formal education has led to the establishment of nearly 43,000 schools and centers by well-known NGOs, especially BRAC and Proshika, with an enrollment of about 2.5 million children (Ahmed, 2000: 252). In the area of health, through GO–NGO partnership, the expansion of health services has made basic health care and family planning accessible to nearly a quarter of the population (Ahmed, 2000). Similarly, with the government's support and encouragement, NGOs have been able to extend safe water and basic sanitation to about nine million rural people in Bangladesh (World Bank, 1996b).

Although these claims of achievements realized by NGOs in partnership with the government seem to be commendable, the overall situation of poverty and inequality remains quite dismal in Bangladesh. From various surveys, it is observed that between 1983–84 and 1991–92, the incidence of poverty in Bangladesh hardly changed — despite some improvement in poverty made during the mid-1990s, the country still remains one of the poorest in the world, and its Human Poverty Index (HPI) is worse than the average South Asian HPI (M.H. Rahman, 2000; Temple, 2000). According to some estimates made in the late 1990s, about half of the total population (127 million) in Bangladesh lived below the poverty line and the number of landless families nearly doubled between 1984 and 1996 (Islam, 1999b). In addition, the problems of illiteracy, malnutrition, and poor health still remain a formidable challenge (Torres, 1993). According to one study, each year, only 1 percent of the total population has a chance to overcome poverty though the micro-credit programs managed by NGOs in cooperation with the government (S.M. Rahman, 2000). In fact, there are reasons to believe that the GO–NGO partnership may have negative impacts on rural development issues like poverty eradication.

First, under the framework of partnership, some major NGOs in Bangladesh have expanded collaboration with government agencies, foreign donors, and private enterprises; become more interested in gaining funds, business contracts, and profit-making ventures from these partners; and, thus, moved away from their original development agenda of improving the socioeconomic conditions of the rural poor. According to critics, instead of assisting the needy, some Bangladeshi NGOs are helping themselves by undertaking commercial ventures in the name of improving people's living standards (Chowdhury, 1990; Islam, 2000; Zaman, 2003). In collaboration with partners, some of the largest NGOs, including BRAC, the Grameen Bank, Proshika, and Gonoshasthya Kendra, have become increasingly involved in ventures such as grocery stores, cold storage, real estate, garments factory, food processing, telephone networks, shopping complexes, transport services, printing press, and computer and software business (Dutta, 1999; Ahmad, 2001; Chowdhury, 2001). Thus, the non-profit development agendas of these NGOs are adversely affected.

Second, while close collaboration or partnership has enabled large NGOs to obtain massive grants and loans from the government and foreign donors, the same NGOs provide micro-credits to the rural poor at extremely high interest. For instance,

the interest rate charged by some of the largest NGOs, including BRAC, ASA, the Grameen Bank, and Proshika, ranges between 20 and 30 percent, which is much higher than the rate charged by regular commercial banks (10–14 percent) operating in the country (Hossain, 1995; Kurien, 1995). While the government provides through PKSF a substantive number of loans to NGOs for 10 years at only 3–4 percent service charge, these NGOs lend such money to the rural poor for only one year at 20–30 percent interest rate (World Bank, 1996a: 48). Without such partnerships with NGOs in micro-finance, the government and donor agencies could directly extend such micro-credits to the poor at a minimal interest rate through alternative state-sponsored agencies or local government units, which could replace the financial burden on the poor created by excessive interest rates charged by NGOs. In other words, although GO–NGO partnership may have benefited NGOs a great deal in making considerable financial gains (by obtaining grants and low-interest loans from partners and lending the same money to the rural poor at much higher interest rates), it may not be good for the poor in Bangladesh.

Third, in the name of partnership with NGOs, the government has transferred or outsourced its basic service provisions to major NGOs, which may paradoxically imply the erosion of its own obligations to play an active developmental role in providing basic services to the disadvantaged population in Bangladesh (Farrington and Lewis, 1993: 7). By forming partnerships with NGOs, although the government may have reduced its burden of directly carrying out rural development activities, these NGOs are often financially, managerially, and technically incapable of undertaking any massive tasks such as improving the socioeconomic conditions of millions of rural population. It has been found that some of the major NGOs in Bangladesh, in fact, fail to provide services to the ‘hungry poor’ or the ‘hard-core poor’ (who are totally assetless), because the criteria for forming NGO groups often require the group members to have at least some assets (M.H. Rahman, 2000; Zaman, 2003). Thus, in alleviating poverty, the over-publicized role of Bangladeshi NGOs (in partnership with the government and donor agencies) has to be re-assessed in this light and the government itself may have to play a more active role to reach people in abject poverty.

Finally, since GO–NGO partnership has led to the transfer of major local-level developmental responsibilities from the government to NGOs, it has created the fragmentation and duplication of the overall development agenda for the rural poor in Bangladesh. Various NGOs pursue piecemeal programs and activities without an overall development agenda and they are often engaged in similar functions, duplicating and competing with each other for obtaining government and foreign funds (Ebdon, 1995). In addition, since most well-established NGOs in Bangladesh have some kind of partnership with foreign donors, each of these NGOs is dependent on multiple foreign donors prescribing or imposing their preferred projects that are often mutually conflicting. As a result, such NGO partnerships with foreign donors may have led to the dominance of these varied donors’ preferences at the expense of local people’s needs and caused the disintegration of the rural development agenda in Bangladesh (Aminuzzaman, 2000; Zaman, 2003).

### *Implications for social empowerment*

In the existing literature on partnership, some scholars emphasize its significance for empowering people, especially by allowing NGOs as partners in various activities such as basic education, gender equality, environmental justice, and so on (Chowdhury, 2001; Brinkerhoff, 2002b; Tvedt, 2002). In most Asian countries, people's participation and empowerment has been a major concern in the activities of NGOs and their partnership with the government (UNESCAP, 1999). In the case of Bangladesh, although most NGOs began with the agenda of empowering the rural poor as one of their primary objectives (World Bank, 1996b), according to critics, this agenda of social empowerment has remained largely unrealized even after the recent expansion of GO–NGO partnerships. In the past, the activities of NGOs were blamed for disuniting the poor by creating competition among them for micro-credit, for depoliticizing them by diverting their attention away from broader political issues to petty monetary matters, and for reinforcing their dependence on NGOs controlling their lives (Chowdhury, 1990; World Bank, 1996b; Haque, 2002). In fact, this process of disempowering the poor may have worsened due to the greater collaboration or partnership of these NGOs with the government and foreign donors.

First, in the process of GO–NGO partnership, some kind of polarization has emerged among major NGOs in terms of their alignment with major political parties, especially the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party forming the government during the current decade (Zaman, 2003). This bipartisan political alliance of NGOs has not only eroded their neutrality, it has also made them more powerful in relation to the powerless rural poor. Thus, the GO–NGO collaboration is quite politicized in Bangladesh, which has empowered NGOs themselves instead of empowering the people (Ahmad, 2001). Some NGOs have used such partnerships with the ruling party to avoid state regulations and influence government decisions in their favor. In short, GO–NGO partnerships may have increased government support for certain NGOs to the extent that they do not need to worry about the opinions and expectations of their poor members. Thus, some critics argue that these Bangladeshi NGOs are not that interested in participation by the people in the policy-making process (World Bank, 1996a).

Second, one of the main mechanisms by which the people can exercise power over NGOs is their capacity to make them accountable or answerable. Since NGOs themselves are not elected bodies, it is largely the NGO-related rules and regulations used by the elected government through which the people have some legal means to influence NGOs. The elected government is supposed to use these legal means to make NGOs accountable to the people. However, the effectiveness of government controls over NGOs have diminished due to the current emphasis on GO–NGO partnership – it is increasingly difficult to exercise strict rules and regulations by the government over NGOs since they are now its close partners. A neutral and legal relationship between the government and NGOs is also challenged by the fact that the élitist socioeconomic backgrounds of NGO leaders and top government officials are very similar and there is a tendency to use personal connections and patron–client relations by these leaders and officials in Bangladesh, where the maintenance of clientelism and status quo is a common feature (Chowdhury, 1990; Siddiqi, 2001;

World Bank, 2002). Since this élitist alliance and patron–client relationship may have been reinforced by the GO–NGO partnership, the government is less likely to exercise effective legal controls over NGOs and ensure their accountability to people in rural areas. Thus, although the GO–NGO partnership may benefit the top NGO leaders by expanding their autonomy from state regulations and access to government officials, it can hardly empower the rural poor.

Third, the public accountability of NGOs, which has already been affected by their partnership with the government, is weakened further due to their growing partnership with foreign donors. In supporting major NGOs in Bangladesh, these foreign donors often put pressure for the reduction or withdrawal of the state regulations and controls that are quite essential for ensuring the accountability of these NGOs to the people and the government. In this regard, although there exist various laws, rules, and institutions to regulate the role, behavior, and performance of NGOs in Bangladesh (World Bank, 1996a, b), these are now being questioned and often opposed by foreign donors partnering with such NGOs. In addition to providing more foreign funds to NGOs, which amounted to nearly 18 percent of total foreign aid received by Bangladesh in 1995–96 (Ahmad, 2001), foreign donors have become increasingly active in supporting such NGOs in escaping from state regulations. For example, in the early 1990s, under strong pressure from foreign donors, the Bangladesh government withdrew its decision to cancel the registration of certain NGOs causing financial irregularities and instead transferred the head of its regulatory bureau in charge of NGOs (Hashemi, 1995). It should also be mentioned that the growing number of partnerships between NGOs and foreign donors may not only erode their public accountability, it may also make them more ‘autocratic’ (Zarren, 1996). Thus, although the collaboration between the Bangladeshi NGOs and foreign donors can expand the power of such NGOs, it may have diminished the power of the people and the elected government to make these NGOs accountable.

Third, GO–NGO partnership has led to the transfer of rural development activities and local services to non-elected NGOs not only from the elected central government but also from elected local government bodies. It has an adverse impact on the empowerment of rural people, because while they can exercise direct influence on their elected local representatives, they cannot have a similar influence on the founding leaders of NGO (often self-appointed) since they are neither elected by local people nor appointed by the government. In Bangladesh, with the growing emphasis on GO–NGO partnership, the government began to pay greater attention to NGOs as partners in delivering micro-credits, agricultural inputs, and services, the elected local government units such as the Union Parishads (Union Councils) became sidelined and were transformed into some ‘symbolic institutions’ without effective programs for the rural poor (Aminuzzaman, 1998). With this declining significance of elected local institutions (over which people can exercise the voting power) and the increasing importance of non-elected NGOs (in which people have no voting power), the local institutional power of the rural poor may have eroded. As long as the leaders of NGOs remain non-elected, any expansion of GO–NGO partnership at the expense of the role played by elected local institutions is unlikely to empower the rural poor.

## Concluding observations and some recommendations

In a poor country like Bangladesh, there is no doubt that the government is not in a position to pursue development and deliver services alone due to various constraints and NGOs can play a crucial role in this regard due to their grassroots affiliations and experiences (World Bank, 1996b; Mujeri, 1999). However, as discussed in this article, the objectives of partnership between the government and NGOs to enhance human development and social empowerment have hardly been realized. As previously explained, this GO–NGO partnership, in fact, may have adversely affected development and empowerment in rural Bangladesh. Due to such controversial outcomes of the partnership, one needs to go beyond these formal objectives or rationales of partnership and explore other major causes behind its expansion. In this regard, it is possible to identify the following internal factors and vested interests behind the GO–NGO partnership in Bangladesh:

- 1 the diminishing capacity of the state, as a result of its promarket reforms, led to the use of NGOs to deliver services;
- 2 the tendency of government to avoid its developmental responsibilities and shift the blame for its own development failures onto NGOs;
- 3 the strategy of the ruling party to use NGOs to expand its public support in rural areas; and
- 4 the desire of NGO leaders to get close to the government in order to escape from state regulations (see Haque, 2002).

However, it is the external influence or pressure exercised by various bilateral and multilateral foreign donors that has been a more critical factor behind the current expansion of GO–NGO partnership in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2000: 280). In almost all developing nations like Bangladesh, the role of donor agencies has been crucial in initiating and building such partnership. As Brinkerhoff (2003: 115) mentions, 'It is unlikely that partnership would have been achieved without the incentives of donor funding . . . the initial terms of the partnerships between government, NGOs, and citizen groups were predetermined by the donors'. In Bangladesh, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have provided financial support and technical assistance to the government with the prescription for greater GO–NGO partnership (*The Independent* [Bangladesh], 1999; World Bank, 1999). In the current global context dominated by greater emphasis on such partnerships, Bangladesh can hardly avoid this global trend, especially due to its external dependence on international donors favoring this new mode of governance based on partnership.

As seen, internal and external causes reinforce the need for GO–NGO partnerships in Bangladesh and it is unlikely that the scope of such partnerships will be drastically reduced and the process reversed. In these circumstances, what the government can do is to undertake the appropriate measures to make the GO–NGO partnership more effective in achieving its intended objectives and avoid its adverse outcomes related to human development and social empowerment discussed in this article. First, it is necessary for the NGOs themselves to reconcile certain dilemmas arising from their partnership with the government and foreign donors, which is

caused by considerable competition for foreign funds between NGOs and the government (Dutta, 1999), and it is usually NGOs that are favored by foreign donors. As a result, the partnership between the government and NGOs in Bangladesh is not always based on trust; they often use each other in the partnership process. Thus, there is a need for establishing a clear and comprehensive framework for the allocation of foreign funds between the government and NGOs in order to make the GO–NGO partnership based on mutual trust and commitment.

Second, it is also essential for NGOs to overcome the conflicting goals created by the GO–NGO partnership. In fact, there is a growing apprehension that due to the businesslike partnerships of NGOs with government and the private sector based on profit motivation, their grassroot character and developmental mission are increasingly at risk in Bangladesh (World Bank, 1996b; Mujeri, 1999). More specifically, due to such partnerships, NGOs have conflicting priorities — such as improving the socio-economic condition of the rural poor versus undertaking large commercial projects for profit; protecting people from excessive government intervention versus partnering with the government to gain contracts; and empowering and serving the local communities versus forming partnership with foreign donors and carrying out their imposed programs and projects. Thus, NGOs have to reconcile these conflicting goals and rethink their partnership ventures in order to maintain their identity and mission as non-profit and non-government organizations serving the rural poor in Bangladesh.

Third, due to the increasingly business-oriented partnerships and donor-dependence of Bangladeshi NGOs, a comprehensive mechanism for accountability needs to be worked out, especially since the leaders and employees of these NGOs are neither elected nor appointed by a neutral, legitimate institution. As discussed earlier, GO–NGO partnership has, in fact, made the existing state regulations less effective in ensuring the accountability of NGOs. In this regard, some authors suggest a greater degree of transparency and information disclosure about the codes of conduct and financial transactions of Bangladeshi NGOs in order to ensure their accountability (Mujeri, 1999; Ahmed, 2000; Zaman, 2003). Mujeri (1999) recommends that NGOs can have regular publication of annual reports and audited financial statements, which should be made available to the public. There are also suggestions for establishing a parliamentary committee to scrutinize the activities of NGOs and to tax their commercial activities (Ahmad, 2001). The point, in short, is that the recent proliferation of partnership between NGOs and other stakeholders, which often involves commercial ventures, business contracts, and profit-making activities, requires the adoption of appropriate measures to ensure their integrity and accountability.

Fourth, in relation to this concern for accountability, the Bangladesh government should not expand its partnerships with NGOs without rethinking its adverse implications. In fact, the very assumption of this partnership, i.e. NGOs are more efficient and effective than government in carrying out programs related to rural development and empowerment, needs to be re-examined. According to some studies in Bangladesh, there are some large NGOs that can be quite bureaucratic and less cost-effective (Aminuzzaman, 2000). However, when the government finds it crucial to form partnerships with NGOs, it must maintain an effective regulatory role without practicing



excessive intervention. It needs to strike a balance between the operational autonomy of NGOs needed for effective service delivery, on the one hand, and the regulation of NGO activities required for maintaining their accountability, on the other. This framework for balancing autonomy and control can be developed through institution like the GNCC that provides a useful forum for dialogue and cooperation between the government and NGOs. In this regard, foreign donors also should not be too complacent – they must emphasize the transparency and accountability of NGOs while stressing their partnership with other stakeholders (World Bank, 2002).

Finally, it is necessary to identify an overall development vision for Bangladesh, because in the current context, the nation's developmental agenda has become extremely fragmented and confusing due to diverse objectives, programs, and the interests of leading NGOs, foreign donors, and government agencies. In this regard, it is essential to have greater coordination among these stakeholders to work out an overall development agenda in the interest of the common people instead of pursuing the individualistic goals of these partners themselves. Unlike partnership in the business sector that aims to maximize the monetary interests of partners themselves, GO–NGO partnership in Bangladesh is supposed to assist the people, especially the rural poor, in terms of their empowerment and development. In this regard, Mujeri (1999) suggests that GO–NGO partnership should rather be guided by a broad framework of development envisioned by a democratic national government, while NGOs can still offer alternative development strategies within this overall development framework in Bangladesh.

What seems to be the most critical point here is that although the role of NGOs and their partnership with other stakeholders has gained significance in recent years, the role of government still remains crucial. In critical times, many NGOs and private firms may 'walk away', while the public sector under any popularly elected government would not be able to distance itself from responsibilities (Caplan, 2001). In Bangladesh, according to Ahmed (2000: 234), the role of the government sector in delivering basic services remains essential, especially for setting policy priorities, protecting the public interest, and enforcing necessary regulations, although the role of NGOs and other actors need to be recognized. In conclusion, although GO–NGO partnership has become a priority in Bangladesh in line with the global trend, its implications for human development and social empowerment are, at best, controversial and there are adverse consequences of partnership-related changes in NGO activities in this regard. Thus, GO–NGO partnership should be evaluated in line with the principle that such partnership is not an end in itself and it should be assessed in terms of whether it contributes to people's empowerment and development in Bangladesh.

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