

The Unheard Soliloquy of NGO-Employees in Bangladesh: Some Empirical Findings

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Abstract

This research explores, collects, collates and disseminates the suggestions and recommendations of the NGO-employees in Bangladesh. The highest number of the NGOs is operating in Bangladesh than any other country with the similar geographical size in the world. This study follows the multi-stage sampling techniques. Bangladesh consists of 7-administrative divisions and the NGOs are selected from each division. From each division a district, from that district a single thana and from that thana an union (the lowest administrative division) is nominated for the semi-structured interviews. Out of NGO-Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) enlisted 2445 NGOs, 14XNGOs (7Xlarge and 7X small NGOs) are purposefully selected for the interviews. Total 54-semi-structured interviews consisting of top, middle and lower levels based on salary grades (18X interviewee from each grade) were selected for the interviews. The content analysis technique is used to analyse the semi-structured interview transcriptions. The study finds that the respondents mainly suggest for cooperation and coordination between the vital stakeholders (16.67%), restructuring the rules and regulations (16.67%), accountability and transparency (11.67%), rectifications of NGOAB activities (8.33%), education and training (8.33%), welfare and wages (8.33%) etc. The implementation of the recommendations of the NGO-employees may help to improve the NGO-operations in Bangladesh. Future researcher may carry out similar operations in a different country.

Key words: NGOs, NGO-employees, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

The NGO-employees are the soldiers who actually fight the battles in the NGO sector. They are constantly trying to combat the miseries and poverties of the beneficiaries. The word 'NGO-employees' does not mean 'NGO field workers' only, rather it includes all the NGO-employees who are engaged and dedicated for the dignified services of the NGOs. They are one of the prime stakeholders in the NGO sector. They are the judges who may rightly identify the problems and difficulties they encounter in the day to day operations. It is imperative to hear their unheard suggestions and voices, which may help to rectify and formulate new NGO strategies and operations in Bangladesh. Again, 'NGO' does not mean only the microcredit NGOs, rather they include all kinds of NGOs. This study makes an endeavour to obtain the recommendations and suggestions of the various levels of NGO-employees working in Bangladesh. This study is presented in the following order: (1) section one addresses the preliminary issues (ii) section two is briefly reviewing the literature (iii) section three exhibits the research methodology (iv) section four presents the analysis, findings and discussion while (v) section five concludes the study.

2. Literature Review

The NGO activities started operating in Bangladesh after the liberation war of 1971 (Devine, 2006; Karim, 2008). CARE first started its operations in the East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in 1949. It may be noted that the NGO-operations got momentum in Bangladesh after 1971. Due to the devastating cyclone of 1970 and the bloody liberation war of 1971, made the country socially and economically inactive. Many NGOs came forward to help the people by providing medicines, food and shelters. Gradually huge number of NGOs started concentrating in Bangladesh.

The expansion of the NGOs has made them a powerful and strong industry in Bangladesh. They could earn an inseparable entity in the Bangladeshi culture. The NGOs have put more concentration and efforts on employment and income generation, micro-credit, formal and informal education of children and adults, health, nutrition, family planning, establishment of democratic processes at the grassroots level, women's rights, environment, poultry and livestock, water supply and sanitation, human rights and legal aid (ADB, 1999). So they could reach the doorsteps of the people with new hope. (Ahmad and Townsend, 1998). It is important for the NGOs to earn the trust and confidence of the illiterate and ill-informed people of remote and inaccessible areas (Panda, 2007). At present NGOs have a wide range of functional coverage; microcredit (Gauri and Galef, 2005; Nawaz, 2011), empowerment/income generation (Buckland, 1998), education, (Ahmad, 1999), health and nutrition (Mahmud, 1998), environment (Begum 2008), natural calamities/disaster management (Rahman, 2000), human rights and legal aids (Zaman, 2003), water and sanitation (Rammelt and Boes 2004), poultry and

livestock (ADB, 1999), agriculture (Lewis, 1997), relief and rehabilitation (Rahman, 2000), and advocacy (Haque, 2002).

Najam (1996) identified beneficiaries/clients, donors/patrons and the NGO itself/employees as the most important stakeholders in the sector. The NGOs interact with many stakeholders such as government, political parties, other NGOs and social organisations, religious institutions, NGO Affairs Bureau (in case of Bangladesh only), banks, human rights organisations, clients/beneficial, donors etc.

22,000 NGOs are working in Bangladesh (Devine, 2003) with different objectives and activities. Their activities may be put into two broad categories - NGOs with advocacy roles, to promote human rights, and those working with the socio-economic development of the people of Bangladesh. Development NGOs are flexible in nature, nearer to the poor and innovative in problem solving (Lewis and Madon, 2004).

Poverty, hunger, unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, diseases, environmental degradation (Ahmed, 2004), political disturbances (Karim, 2002) and natural calamities are the common phenomenon in Bangladesh. In the majority of cases, the government does not provide an economically solvent life to its people. Due to the failure of the government's development programmes and the unchanged socio-economic conditions of the people, a strong NGO sector is felt to be necessary for a better way of life for the poor. At present, thousands of NGOs are working across the country with a view to changing the lives of the poor.

This study is unique in nature as so far the issue of this study is not addressed by any literature. Ahmad (2003) finds the opinions and views of the microcredit NGO-field workers in the context of Bangladesh. However, it may be noted here that his study is limited to the microcredit NGOs and their field workers only. So from this point of view this study is adding value to the existing literature by including all kinds of NGOs and all levels of employees. Further, from methodological point of view this research used the context analysis technique to analyse the data. Context analysis technique is hardly applied by the researchers (e.g. Ahmad, 2003) for similar studies.

3. Research Methodology

For the purpose of interviews the whole Bangladesh is geographically divided into seven administrative divisions. From each division a single district, from the selected district a single Thana, from Thana an union and from the selected union randomly selected for interviews (e.g. multi-stage sampling as described by Saunders *et al.*, 1997). Out of listed 2445 NGOs (excluding the cancelled memberships) 14 NGOs out of which (i) 7- large NGOs and (ii) 7- small NGOs were purposefully selected for the interviews. Total 54-semistructured interviews consisting of their top, mid and lower levels based on salary grade (18 from each) employees were selected for the semi-structured interviews.

Qualitative data are very attractive and rich in nature (Miles and Huberman, 1994). There are many qualitative data analyze techniques. (Jankowicz (2005) finds "the main technique associated with semi-structured interviews is called content analysis" (p. 270). Now-a-days content analysis technique is favourite to the academics, commercial researchers and communication practioners (Neuendorf, 2002). For this study all interviews (recorded and interview notes) are transcribed. This research makes an endeavor to extract final emerged themes from the study. This study follows the procedural guidelines to tabulate and present the content analyzed data from Jankowicz (2005, p. 272-73.). Jankowicz (2005) suggests the steps of the analysis (see enclosed Table-1).

Three coding sheets were prepared for coding. To validate and cross check the coding of this study, two coders were requested. They were provided with the hard copies of the coding sheets. At the first stage this researcher used symbol tick (✓) in a sheet (original sheet). Coder-A and Coder-B used symbol stars/cross (* / X) and circle (o) in their coding sheets respectively. Now the differences of coder-A and coder-B from this researcher are transferred to the original sheet. Coder-A and Coder-B's percentage agreements are calculated separately as suggested by Neuendorf (2002). [add up number of cases that were coded in the same way by two coders and dividing by number of cases. In this study above 90% coding is matching with this researcher. Minimum 80% matching is normal and accepted (Riffe, Lacy and Fico, 1998). In this study the matching rate is upper. So others may obtain the similar results.

4. Findings and Discussion

It is clear from the table that the lion's share of the percentage of suggestions and recommendations are related to cooperation-coordination (16.67%) and rules and regulations (16.67%) related. Accountability and transparency (11.67%) related recommendations and suggestions are occupying the next position. There are a number of recommendations and suggestions related to NGOAB (8.33%), training & education (8.33%) and NGO employees' welfare and wages (8.33%) related. A number of recommendations and suggestions are obtained from the interviewees are shown in Table-2 (see enclosed table).

The relevant suggestions of the interviewees are appended below:

(i) Rules and Regulations for the NGOs

Ahmad (2001) urges to replace and modify the existing State Rules, Acts and Ordinances and suggests evaluating the weaknesses and strengths of the regulations with a view to formulating flexible and effective rules and regulations. In parallel to this, some of the interviewees also have the similar views of formulating friendly rules and regulations and to bring the NGO activities under an effective legislation. Highlighting the importance of a regulatory framework for the NGOs in Bangladesh, an interviewee comments,

“All NGOs should be brought under a regulatory framework....A regulatory framework would be fruitful for the country [Bangladesh], NGOs and the beneficiaries...”

In the similar voice, an interviewee adds,

“...government has to come forward. Proper legislation for the NGOs and its application has to be ensured....”

About the necessity of policy for the microcredit NGOs, a CEO of an NGO informs,

“...Our beneficiaries are the poor and the needy people of the society. They are going to Grameen Bank, ASA or ADAMS [Association for Development Activity of Manifold Social Work] for money. They do not have money. So they will avail loan facilities from all NGOs. We need to understand that a poor man is encircled with the poverty circle. We should not blame them. There are some internal problems of credit programmes in Bangladesh. This problem is policy related....The policy on which the loan is given is not correct, especially in case of microcredit...”

(ii) Recommendations/suggestions Related to Cooperation and Coordination

A number of interviewees recommend for cooperation and coordination between the activities of the donors, NGOs, the government and the beneficiaries with a view to smooth functioning of this sector. An interviewee suggests to coordinate the activities among the NGOs to prevent duplication of work with a view to saving the resources. It will also prevent the beneficiaries to have multiple memberships. Ahmad (2003) acknowledges the views of the interviews.

Some of the interviewees specially recommend for superior coordination and cooperation between the NGOs and the Government. An interviewee recommends for a ‘supplementary and complementary’ roles with each other for faster prosper and progress. Begum’s (2008) opinions are parallel to this findings. Begum’s (2008) recommendations include the collaboration between the Government of Bangladesh and the NGOs. She continuously by claiming that such collaboration brings positive impacts towards removing the weaknesses of the Government and the limitations of the NGOs. Highlighting the importance of good relationship between the NGOs, donors and clients an interviewee remarks,

“If all the bodies that is NGOs, donors, clients, and the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh can maintain a good relationship then it is very much possible to develop a trustworthy atmosphere of knowledge transfer among them”

The requirements of a coordinating body between the NGOs is felt by an interviewee,

“We want to work. We need coordination. At present there is no coordination among the NGOs. Earlier there was coordination among the NGOs and there was an apex body for this. ADAB [The Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh] was the organisation for this purpose... There may be duplication of work in the same place. If the works of the NGOs are duplicated, there would be wastage of resources. We do not want such duplication of works....”

(iii) Accountability and Transparency

Many researchers (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Hashemi, 2002; Rahman, 2006; Mahmud, 1998; to name a few) emphasize on the NGOs’ accountability and transparency. Similarly, in line with the literature some of the interviewees have recommended for the establishment of monitoring cell, controlling the NGO activities, making the NGO operations transparent to the beneficiaries etc. About accountability and transparency an interviewee suggests,

“Government should monitor the activities of the NGOs. There should be a monitoring cell. They should observe the activities of the NGOs for the interest of the people, for the interest of the society and for the interest of the country. I think that this is very essential. There should be monitoring system for knowledge transfer also”

With the similar voice an interviewee recommends,

“...There should be some monitoring system of the government to check the NGOs’ funds which they receive from the foreign government....”

(iv) Recommendations Regarding NGOAB

At present NGOAB is performing the functions like providing one stop service to NGOs in respect of registration and processing of project proposals, approval of NGO projects, fund releases, permission for appointment of foreign expatriate consultants and fixation of their tenure, examination and evaluation of reports/returns submitted by the NGOs, coordination, monitoring, evaluation and inspection of NGO activities,

collection of fees/service charges levied by the government, inspection of field level NGO activities and examining their accounts, Liaison with the donors and the NGOs, formulation of reports on NGO activities and take appropriate measures, enlistment of chartered accounting firms for auditing of Accounts of the NGO, approval of proposals for one-time grants and other matters relating to NGO Affairs (e.g., NGOAB, 2011). The NGOAB is also having number of limitations. For example, it is reported that the NGOAB is having 67 authorised staff out of which 15 Class-I Officers (e.g., Class-1 Gazetted officer), three Class-II (Gazetted/non Gazetted) officers and 49 other employees to perform its activities. Six posts of one Assistant Director, two Assignment Officers, one Assistant programmer and two office assistant positions have been lying vacant for the last ten years (Arzu, 2009). It is difficult to perform those activities with the limited manpower strength. However, the organisation does not have flexibility to deviate from its legitimate duties and responsibilities of providing services to the NGOs. In this regard, NGOAB should take necessary measures (like simplification of foreign donation procedures, 'to enable NGOs to prepare budgets and implement projects within the time limit of financial year, if the report about a particular NGO is satisfactory, then the NGO could be given clearance for other projects in the same year without further investigation by the NGOAB' (Ahmad, 2001) to improve the efficiency of the NGOs. The interviewees of this study recommend number of additional responsibilities for the NGOAB. They suggest (i) to have a strong control of the NGOAB over the NGO sector of Bangladesh (ii) to have more manpower of the NGOAB to perform its activities (iii) to have proper monitoring system in order to ensure the proper utilisation of funds by the NGOs (iv) to involve in knowledge transfer and training activities.

An interviewee recommends that the NGOAB should give registration to the valid NGOs only. He quotes,

"...We sometimes get the information that clients are victimized by bogus NGOs. NGOAB should prevent that because such incidents have adverse impacts on our activities as well. That also affects their trust on us. In that case, government should scrutinize the NGOs' validity and ability before giving the registration approvals"

An interviewee proposes that NGOAB should be more people oriented. He remarks,

"NGOAB can play a role of a mediator here and side by side NGOAB should have a wing for the capacity development of these grass root organisations [NGOs]. So that they [NGOAB] can be more people oriented [by engaging the employees of that wing for the NGOs and their beneficiaries]"

An interviewee thinks that NGOAB should impart training and should transfer knowledge to the NGOs. He suggests,

"...I think that they [NGOAB] should participate in knowledge transfer activities. If they could have given some suggestions it would have been fruitful. We do not know about the accounts and they should give us some orientation training. We need to share many things with them"

(v) Recommendations on Education and Training

On the basis of his intensive studies on the Bangladeshi NGO-employees and fieldworkers, Ahmad (2002, 2003, and 2007) emphasizes on the training and education. Similarly, highlighting the importance of the training of the field workers, an interviewee states,

"....If they [donors] impart more training to the fieldworkers, they will be more developed. They should also arrange refreshers' training programmes. It is like oil. It will ensure the extension of knowledge, transferring of knowledge and also help to develop the fieldworkers"

Some of the interviewees give importance of the education and training to the local leaders.

Highlighting the importance of such training a CEO notes,

"....Educating and training for the local government leaders [is necessary] [may be taken as examples]. Local government leaders do not know 'what is NGO?', 'what they are doing?', 'what is empowerment?' and 'what is de-sustainable [unsustainable]?' So if you educate the local government leaders specially in the Thana level and district level and the parliament members, it would be a great help for the NGOs working in these areas...."

(vi) Welfare/ wages of the NGO-Employees

Ahmad's (2003) studies mainly reflect on the fieldworkers' personal and professional problems in Bangladesh. Highlighting various problems of the NGO fieldworkers, he recommends for a proper Human Resource Management for them and the formulation of policies for the staff welfare. All most similarly, a number of interviewees recommend for pay increase and to ensure their welfare. 8.33% of interviewees recommended for the increased wages and privileges. In this regard, an NGO employee laments with a heavy heart,

"We, the fieldworkers supervise the beneficiaries' welfare. Side by side our welfare should be also looked after. The salaries, payments and bonus we receive are not sufficient in the present context. The field workers' side should be also taken care of. If they are given the payments in the present market rate, I believe, the field-workers would be more dedicated and work more wholeheartedly. I think this side should get due importance"

With the similar voice an NGO-worker remarks,

“...If government looks after the welfare of the field- workers then the NGO- works would be expedited/improved...”

(vii) Some Miscellaneous Suggestions

In a different context, Jasimuddin and Zhang (2011) recommend for web-based technology for knowledge transfer and storage. Corresponding to the ideas of Jasimuddin and Zhang (2011), an interviewee recommends for knowledge bank and computerised systems from where the beneficiaries can draw their required knowledge. An interviewee suggests employing specialists for the NGOs in order to provide suggestions to the projects of the beneficiaries. An interviewee recommends for knowledge bank or computerised systems for the NGOs. He suggests,

“...If we can open some knowledge banks or computerised systems there [NGO project area] then it would have been productive. We have some projects where we could arrange some computerised based knowledge...So the clients can come here and take their required knowledge. I think government should support these sorts of activities and projects...”

Further, an interviewee proposes to employ specialists for the NGOs. He argues,

“...I think the specialists on NGOs and government can help for the smooth operations of the NGOs in Bangladesh. If the specialists suggest and transfer knowledge about the new techniques of the NGOs it would be helpful”

6. Conclusion and Future Research

NGO-employees are the vital stakeholders in the NGO-sector of Bangladesh. The NGOs’ mission mainly depends on the duties and responsibilities of the NGO-employees (Hasnain and Jasimuddin, 2013). NGO-employees’ knowledge and experience help in overcoming the barriers to the NGO activities in Bangladesh. A huge number of NGOs with multidimensional frontages are in operations in Bangladesh. The NGOs are constantly struggling to develop the socio-economic condition of the Bangladeshi people. The employees of these NGOs are the lifeblood for smooth operations of this sector. It is imperative to take their voices into contingency by the Bangladeshi policy makers and the government. The NGO-employees mainly suggest to formulate the NGO-friendly rules and regulations, to bring all the NGOs under a central regulatory framework, to strengthen the cooperation and coordination among all the stakeholders in this sector, to increase more accountability and transparency in the NGO-activities, to impart more training, to ensure NGO-employees’ welfare/wages, to introduce computerised knowledge bank etc. Future researchers may carry out the similar study in different countries.

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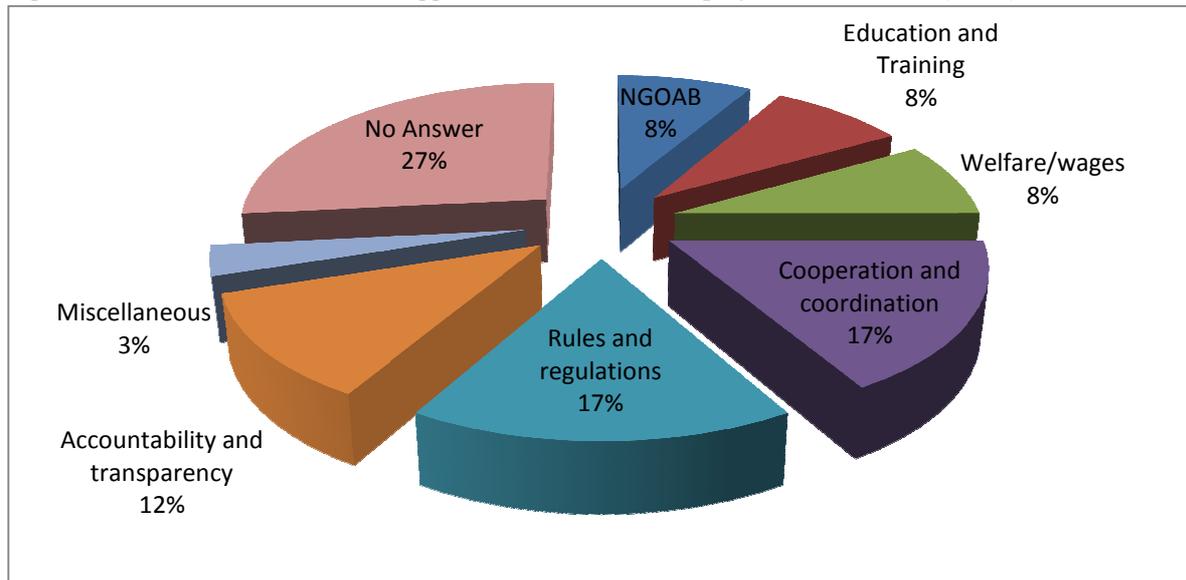
Table- 1: Procedure and guide to tabulate and present content analysed data (Jankowicz, 2005)

1. Sample specification
2. Indicate if stratified and how
3. Indicate how many respondents in each stratum (to provide columns for the table)
4. Prepare the units of analysis
5. Prepare the data
6. Specify the categories
7. Code the data
8. Tabulate the data, calculating percentages, using the total of each column as the base of each column
9. check that total percentages sum to 100 allowing for rounding for rounding error
10. prepare a verbal description of the table, to be used when presenting the table in the project document

Table-2: Content -analyzed Data- Recommendations and Suggestions (N-54)

	Recommendations and Suggestions	n	%
1	Recommendation/suggestions related to NGOAB	05	8.33
2	Recommendation/suggestions related to education and training	05	8.33
3	Recommendation/suggestions related to welfare/wages of the NGO-employees	05	8.33
4	Recommendation/suggestions related to coordination and cooperation	10	16.67
5	Recommendation/suggestions related to rules and regulations	10	16.67
6	Recommendation/suggestions related to accountability and transparency	07	11.67
6	Miscellaneous	02	3.33
7	No Answer	16	26.67
	Total	60	100

Figure-1: Recommendations and Suggestions of the NGO-employees in Pie Chart (N=54)



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