

Bangladesh Development Forum 2003

Background Paper from Local Consultative Subgroup on NGOs

Bangladesh has achieved international recognition for the innovative development work pioneered by Bangladeshi NGOs, particularly in the fields of non-formal education and micro-credit. In that context, the Subgroup wishes to congratulate the Government on recent actions taken to facilitate the working environment for NGOs, such as eliminating the proposed one percent service fee and streamlining the NGOAB registration process.

Consultations between the GoB and donors with regard to NGOs have increased and intensified in the past year. Two meetings were held between LCG members and the Cabinet Committee to discuss what was known of the proposed NGO Guidelines. There have also been productive meetings on this topic between the NGOAB Director General and the LCG Subgroup on NGOs. The Subgroup appreciated providing input to the concepts, and understands that certain NGOs were also consulted. We look forward to reviewing copies of the full report and NGO Guidelines, which have not yet been shared with either NGOs or donors.

To further improve GoB-donor dialogue and enhance NGOs' contributions to the Government's poverty reduction program, we would like to express certain concerns about developments in donor-GoB-NGO relations in Bangladesh, and identify priorities for discussion at the upcoming Bangladesh Development Forum.

1. Investigations into NGOs

The Subgroup is concerned that the investigations into five NGOs (Proshika, PRIP Trust, IVS, BNPS, CDS) discussed at last year's Bangladesh Development Forum, and a sixth (ADAB), are still ongoing. To date, the duration of the investigations ranges from 10 – 17 months.

The current situation is preventing access by the 6 NGOs to over 700m Taka in donor funds. This has halted the above NGOs' activities, depriving their poor beneficiaries of much needed support. For example, the suspension of Proshika funds has denied access to education for 130,000 adult literacy students and 39,000 non-formal primary education students. Similarly, BNPS' lack of funds is denying loans to 18,000 women, and affecting an additional 8000 family members. In the case of CDS, hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries have been cut off from health services and rural enterprise activities. These and other suspended activities could undermine Bangladesh's efforts to meet the Millennium Development Goals, particularly in poverty eradication, education, health and other sectors.

The Subgroup would, therefore, appreciate a definite timetable from the Government on when these investigations will be completed, enabling donor funds to be disbursed and activities to resume.

We are also concerned about the implications of such lengthy delays for wider donor support for NGOs in Bangladesh. We would appreciate receiving Government assurance that any future investigations into NGOs will be conducted swiftly and transparently. This will prevent a repeat of the current situation where committed donor funds are sitting idly, awaiting a decision on whether they will be released, while the poor of Bangladesh languish without much-needed support.

2. Changes in NGO regulations or legislation

As stakeholders and Development Partners with the GoB, the Subgroup members look forward to reviewing the full NGO Guidelines and continuing to share ideas on any future regulatory or legislative changes before they are introduced.

The Subgroup respects the Government's desire to clarify NGO activities and GoB-NGO relations. However, we would appreciate clarification on what is meant in the I-PRSP by the need to "democratize" NGOs as the term is often used in documents following a proposal to exert stronger Government control over them.

We share the Government's belief that NGOs have a considerable role to play in development and poverty reduction in Bangladesh, and that it is not a government's role to control or interfere in NGO activities. These are not limited to service delivery, but rather include a full range of legitimate NGO activities, e.g. advocacy, microfinance, promotion of human rights and democracy, and election monitoring.

3. Role of NGOs in Poverty Reduction

It would be helpful to know the Government's vision of the role of NGOs and civil society in reducing poverty and how to maximize coordination to achieve results. With regard to GoB-NGO-CSO relations, we would appreciate hearing the Government's plan for consultations with NGOs, the private sector, elected local government representatives, trade unions, research institutes and civil society generally. Of particular interest would be the GoB plans for consultations in advance of preparations for the full Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP).