

Community Management in Rural Bangladesh: Sustainable or Dispensable?

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Abstract

Community management requires ongoing support from an overseeing institution for sustainable development. In case of rural community management in Bangladesh, it is found that implementation agencies shift responsibilities to beneficiaries achieving the convenient concept of community management model without establishing appropriate local management committee. On the other hand, beneficiaries cannot develop the sense of responsibility because of legal, ownership, or community constraints. On this position, this paper will see practices of Bangladesh government projects for rural community development. Following practicing in the community development field, this paper will assess the community management pointing out the problems related to implementation agencies and beneficiaries. Finally, it will focus on solution for radical change needed if community management systems are to be sustainable. Secondary sources are used to develop this paper where data are analyzed through article review.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, Community management is now increasingly used to refer to the need to increase sustainability and coverage by creating institutional supports for community-managed services, using a learning approach including all relevant stakeholders. However, do institutional supports ensure community management in a sustainable way? This paper makes an attention to a critical examination of community management in Rural Bangladesh and attempts to question the widespread faith placed in community management, to determine whether, and under what conditions, it contributes to sustainable rural services and whether there is alternative solution that is largely being ignored at present.

However, the position of this paper is “rural community management is not sustained because of two reasons. One is that implementation agencies shift responsibilities to beneficiaries achieving the convenient concept of community management model without establishing appropriate local management committee. On the other hand, beneficiaries cannot develop the sense of responsibility because of legal, ownership, or community constraints.”

This paper outlines a reader map. To examine the rural community management of Bangladesh, this paper will first present theoretical background highlighting the differentiation between Community Participation that is a prerequisite for sustainability and community management that is not rather it requires ongoing support from an overseeing institution for sustainable development. Developing theoretical knowledge, this paper will turn from theories to its practices of Bangladesh government projects for rural community development. Following practicing in the community development field, this paper will assess the community management pointing out the problems related to implementation agencies and beneficiaries. Finally, it will focus on solution

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Community Management and Sustainable Development: Theoretical Perspective

The concept of involvement of community people in governance system is introduced in the 1970s, in later, in the 1980s, it is available as community participation approach in decision-making and maintenance when neoliberal governance is stimulated under the new classical counter-revolution development theory that turns community participation approach into community management in the late 1980s and 1990s (IRC, 2003). Community management can be viewed as a form of community participation (Wegelin-Schuringa, 1998), but there is a strong need to distinguish between 'community participation' and 'community management'. Community participation broadly means the community to benefit from a development project is involved in information, sharing, consultation, decision-making, and initiating action. A community itself can stimulate community participation, or by members of a community to determine whom, what, and how issues are decided and to provide an avenue for everyone to participate in decisions that affect their lives (Guijit and Shah, 1998). Therefore, an essential component of community participation is to define the community. A community is likely to be defined by the area, this is not necessarily the same as a pre-existing community defined by village, ethnic, or family groups. Many communities benefiting from a development project will be made up of people of different families, clans, ethnic groups, religious groups, and socio-economic groups (DeGabriele, 2002). Therefore, it should not be taken for granted that a group of people has the internal resources, common interest, or sense of solidarity to either initiate action or sustain the management of a facility (Peter and Robert, 2006). Community participation in a development project enhances the future sense of ownership, but ongoing motivation is required for continuing participation (Batchelor et.al, 2000). This is of key importance; just because a community has participated in the planning process does not mean that it will sustain participation in ongoing service delivery. Services that are not to be managed by the community should still follow on from effective community consultation and participatory planning (Peter and Robert, 2006). Therefore, it conceptualizes that Community participation is a prerequisite for sustainability, i.e. to achieve efficiency, effectiveness, equity, and replicability, but community management is not. Community management is a bottom-up development approach whereby community members have full responsibility, authority, and control in managerial, operation, and maintenance responsibility for their development projects (McCommon et.al, 1990). However, despite the blanket application of community management of rural development projects, the sustainability of such interventions remains woefully inadequate (Hazelton, 2000). The reasons for low levels of sustainability related to community issues are limited demand, lack of affordability or acceptability among communities, perceived lack of ownership, limited community education, and limited sustainability of community management structure. Unless sustainability levels can be vastly improved, the rural development targeting to halve the proportion of people without sustainable access will not be achieved (Carter, 1999).

Community Development in Rural Bangladesh: History & Existing Professionalism

Through the liberation of 1971, it was expected Bangladesh would, with a newfound political freedom, move towards the dream of *sonar Bangla*; where poverty would soon become anachronism. Nevertheless, after three decades, a large segment of population is not functionally literate in its truest sense. In the field of health, it has high infant mortality rate-79.9 deaths out of

1000 births, 70% of the children under five underweight, approximately 75 percent of the workforce is involved in agriculture, and 15 percent and 10 percent are employed in the service and industrial sectors (World Bank, 2005). This statistical setting indicates that the dream of *sonar Bangla* remain into the dream and it is lagging behind in the race for development. Facing deteriorate circumstance, in the early 1980s, concentrating rural development programme of Bangladesh, government undertook *community participation approach* as a new development panacea (Peter and Robert, 2006). Government adopted this approach in this sense that it will promote savings for those who have been identified as being most desperately in need of them and shift the burden of resource provision away from the public sector towards communities, including communities in greatest need themselves (Carig 1993). Based on this approach, in the late 1980s and 1990s, Bangladesh government took several numbers of development projects making a concentration on the areas of rural infrastructures, fisheries, water supply, and sanitation development. Nevertheless, it found most of the projects incomplete and further initiatives did not take to extent these projects on a sustainable basis (Mobin, 2003). In practice, this new development approach is neglected by management consultants inclined to concentrate on the more prestigious and familiar high-level management in which they are anyway more competent; by central government staffs who often glad to have escaped from the field; by field staff themselves since they have not been trained in the development of management procedures. On the other hand, because of complexity and inaccessibility of rural development, these practitioners like consultant, or senior government servants moved themselves to fall back on abstract thought, which lead away from reality. It also encourages the design and propagation of ideal models, which are not only unattainable but also liable to impair rather than improve performance (Chambers, 1993). Recently, several NGOs do work with participatory basis but it does not mean that they can make coverage. However, it realizes that rural community development projects in Bangladesh suffer to run projects on a continuous basis because of the lack of properly ensure the system of community management (Peter and Robert, 2006).

Community Management in Rural Bangladesh: Sustainable or Dispensable?

The concept of community management is developed predominately in the west as a policy to encourage community participation in municipal planning (Reuben and Otuya, 2005). Generally, a urban society constitute a 'Para', which might develop some cohesiveness for their own interest in the community. On this light, community management with urban people was admirable. However, over the two decades, community management has become the prevalent model for management of rural services throughout the Bangladesh, although rural society constitute with many 'Para' in where lot of families (paribar or gusti) existed expanding complete or incomplete patrilineally household (chula) and homestead (bari)¹. In this culture, Bangladesh government and NGOs are adopting this concept in this sense that it will revolutionize the rural life into fast growing urban centres! (Reuben and Otuya, 2005).

¹ <http://asiarecipe.com/banculture.html>

Considering cultural, institutional, historical context of Bangladesh, it found that Bangladesh does adopt these policies to attract foreign fund and like other developing countries, this country has undoubtedly a tendency to idealize foreign communities and to view them based on simplistic cultural differences rather than to judge them by our own standards and values (Pilger, 2002). However, it needs to explore the implicit problems associated with community management.

Community management usually relies on the formation of committees, which are responsible for all management issues related to services in the community. Sustainability of rural services depends on existing community management structures, such as community co-operatives, development committees, or traditional leadership structures rather than set up a new committee. Moreover, there is an essential role of the implement body and enable the community implementation agencies to facilitate the formation of an appropriate management body and enable the community to take care of its system after they have left (Peter and Robert, 2006). However, in Bangladesh, it is observed that implementation agency construct or implement some activities as a part of a project and then leave the project area after several months and years without establishing appropriate management committee.

In 1999, with support of the development partners, Bangladesh government had made a considerable investment in developing rural infrastructure through the Rural Infrastructure and Community Development Project (RICDP). However, this project created some community structures but completed before some of its important activities were fully completed. Owners of structures like fishponds, poultry farm developed under the project do not know the future. It is investigated that the local government division, LGED did not constitute the steering committee, which was supposed to give guidance and leadership towards achieving objectives. Moreover, local coordination (Upazilla level) committees also not constituted which could provide link with the local government institutions (Mobin, 2003). Participatory role of the local agencies was necessary for the continuation of the activities of the project; this very important initiative was neglected.

Community management became a convenient concept for shifting responsibility for ongoing O & M. By handing over the service facilities to them to manage, agency was able to abrogate responsibility with a clear conscience (Peter and Robert, 2006). In 2000, government took another project on water supply, sewerage, and drainage. An inter-ministerial project implementation and coordination committee was formed to guide and help smooth operation of the project. Nevertheless, committee did not response timely depriving the project of needed support and leadership. The project suffered from lack of effective monitoring by the authorities especially project director and local consultants. They were available in the project areas but not aware of any suggestion or advice (Mobin, 2003). Community management became problematic because of the lack of transparency and accountability of implementation agency, which hampered flow of correct information from the project.

On the other hand, in case of community people, it seems that after handing over the service facility to them to manage; they will lead to the effective community management automatically. Nevertheless, practically, community people become reluctant to management the project in the long term. Although they do participate for a while initially because of the attraction of incentives but it is observed in implementation phase, agencies have very little interest to provide incentives

in the long term (Peter and Robert, 2006). Since development workers do not ensure any kind of responsibility after handing over the project to community people, sometimes they face some technical problem in case of transparency especially in credit management. They are become distrusted in their own community and finally the committee break down hampering the management (Reuben Ajayi and Otuya, 2005). They are also too poor to replace the major capital items. However, the key problem associated with the beneficiaries is the sense of responsibility, to realize their ownership (Peter and Robert, 2006) and it is very difficult to establish such sense or ethics of rural people in rural society. Community management will be effective when people have same interest in the community but in the rural area, in case of ability to pay, it may vary greatly in the community and the fact that each household is to contribute the same amount may be seen as unjust by some. In case of location selection for services especially water supply, it is observed that service installed on land which belongs to an individual or the government, resulting a widespread perception that it does not truly belong to the community (Peter and Robert, 2006). Alternative, it can say that since rural community in Bangladesh covers a vast geographical position, the location of the facility is unlikely to be equidistant from all users and hence true equity is impossible to achieve. Thus, it understands that ownership is a complex issue requires in depth consultation to understand.

Potential solution: Provision of institutional support

Since Bangladesh government has already adopted this approach and many investments are involved into such kind of projects, Bangladesh government should take steps to strengthen the local government system in the rural setting, especially in the union parisheds (Ups). The UPs can provide ongoing support to help preempt many of the problems associated with community management and to find solutions to them by working in partnership with communities. Such support might include regulation of management committees, developing sustainable and transparent incentives for committee members, refresher training for exiting members, training of new members, consultation with disenfranchise groups and individuals within communities, conflict resolution, and designation of committees as legal entities. Provision of technical expertise by such an institution is also essential to ameliorate complex technical problems that are beyond the management and financial capabilities of the community. Given supports, the committee members will be accountable not only to the implementation agencies but also to their own community. However, besides government, an NGO or stakeholder group can fulfill this role through partnership.

Conclusion

In answering the question ‘Rural Community Management in Bangladesh: Sustainable or Dispensable?’, although community participation remains indispensable for sustainable rural service provision in Bangladesh, community management does not. In some cases, it is indeed dispensable, because there is alternative management model that can be effectively applied. That is not to say that community management should be discarded in all situation, but rather it can only become sustainable with appropriate institutional support, which is currently lacking in rural government of Bangladesh. To sustain this model, greater agency accountability and greater government accountability are needed in the ongoing provision of rural services. There is a need

for realism rather than idealism when working with rural communalities in Bangladesh. Recognition of community heterogeneity and the rights and preferences of individuals is paramount to this. Current misconceptions relating to ownership need to be challenged. The differences between communal and individual ownership must also be understood. Finally, unless such an approach is taken, use of the term community development in relation to rural services will remain rhetoric rather than reality.

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