

Integration of Rights Based Approach with Micro Finance: a sustainable human development approach of COAST Trust

RBA with Micro Finance:
a humanistic response to market fundamentalism

Background

COAST is a people centered¹ non-government development organization (NGO) that has been working in the coastal areas of Bangladesh since 1984. At present COAST is working with 97,610 poor families who are being supported with revolving credit of US \$ 5.24 millions. The annual operating cost of the organization is US \$ 2.16 millions in 2009-2010 while, it belongs fixed asset of US \$ 0.22 millions. COAST maintains a reasonable standard in governance through ensuring high degree of participation, transparency, accountability and gender sensitivity in policy and practice level, all information are available in www.coastbd.org. Since 1995, along with enhanced level of income and asset building for the coastal poor, COAST has re-organized a process to integrate rights based approach (RBA) with its micro finance (MF) program to enable poor families to claim their rights and entitlements from the state-run service providing agencies. Those programs are running from the surplus income out of a progressive micro finance operation. This paper is just to brief our experiences on the integration of Rights Based Approach with micro finance program.



How we perceive development: is it about building assets only or promoting human dignity

Our idealistic, yet different, position on development approach is based on three premises i.e., (a) Development cannot be defined mere based on income or asset building, such an approach of development could not ensure “human dignity”, nor could assure enjoyment of universally recognized human rights or citizenry rights as defined in the state constitution. People must beware about their rights and entitlements and should be supported to realize those. (b) Micro finance should not be considered just enhancing competition for surplus or profit what the so called market fundamentalists are promoting since long by the name of “free market” economy, micro finance should not be a complementary mechanism to the free market economy rather it should serve people in the realization of overall welfare and wellbeing of the people and society, finally (c) A development program should not completely dependent on external funding for long; funding dependency creates all sort of dependency including intellectual dependency, which is counter productive. Therefore, micro finance could be the way that an organization could support its beneficiaries with other programs to help them in claiming their rights and entitlements.

¹‘People centered’ means participation of people/ beneficiaries is facilitated in all level. It does not mean that beneficiaries control the organization; management is lying with board that represents people. It should not be misunderstood that it is a “people organization”.

With this perceptions, COAST followed the below steps in the integration of rights based approach in the micro finance program i.e., (i) integration of the rights of people, including participation of member participants (beneficiaries), in organization's governance process and (ii) integration of rights based programs with other development programs, especially with micro finance, so that people could realize their legitimate rights and dignity as human being along with their enhanced income.

People's rights in organizational management

We believe that COAST is a 'people centered' organization; it has to be accountable to public, so it is striving to create possible space of participation of the people and people's representatives in the governance mechanism. In this backdrop, the organization trained its staff on two declared values (February 1999) i.e., (i) Rights to participate in decision making: *"We think that the person who makes or implement a decision and the individual who is influenced or affected by the decision have the rights to express respective opinion before the decision is made"*, and (ii) Relation and accountability: *"We try to keep good relationship with all but without compromising our values and organizational interest. Since we are people centered, we do not have any hesitation of being accountable to anyone for our activities."* Taking this in view, (i) we have developed an information disclosure policy that discloses all the information, except of personnel information related to disciplinary action (ii) we officially encourage cross communication- anyone can communicate with other; in this regard we maintain all contacts numbers and e-mail addresses available and printed in our diaries and in website; we gave

passbooks to every member participant which are printed with the mobile numbers of high officials, including contact number of Executive Director, if anyone does like could communicate directly even with the Executive Director, (iii) we developed a complaint response mechanism. All staff and member participants are trained on these policies for implementation.

Within the organization, we developed regular meeting system to allow all staff members to participate in high-level management, planning and decision making process. Board of Trustee is the highest policy making

Micro macro linkage in policy advocacy

Embankment maintenance through promoting settlers right: 3.5 million poor could be resettled with better livelihood.



During 1996 – 1998 COAST implemented a project of Water Development Board of the government of Bangladesh. The project was to ensure regular maintenance of the coastal embankment by the settlers beside the embankment, usually the poor and landless people. The concept was that the usufruct right of the adjacent land of the embankment would

be given to the landless people who would ensure regular maintenance of the embankment in return. Such an approach of embankment maintenance would save huge maintenance expenditure (it was taka 17000 per kilometer per year from the government, but if this project concept is followed then it will be taka 1700 per kilometer per year) of the government, also would serve the poor families in enhancing income through using slopes and adjacent lands of the embankment. Under this project a total of 480 families were rehabilitated who also were given 372 acres of land. COAST officials faced threats, harassment, including legal cases, from vested quarters in the struggle of establishing poor people's usufruct right on the land.

Mr. Maleq Bepary's family is one of such families from Tazumuddin Upazila, who got 1.5 acre of land in 1996 under the project. On 30th March 2010 Mr. Bepary said, "I got a small pond beside my hut where I cultivate fishes that helps us to generate my household income. From the beginning, I was involved with COAST Shomity (Group) where I got scope for savings and credit facilities too. Very beginning of the settlement, we faced resistance from the local elites but, along with COAST, we faced all the hurdles; we, all the settlers, were united in the struggle of establishing our rights on land. Still we are organized and have strong and collective group efforts to face any resistance from vested groups. We fight together for our rights and we maintain embankment slope too".

With experiences from the project COAST in cooperation with the then Institute of Development Policy Alternative Advocacy (IDPAA) of Proshika, conducted advocacy seminar and lobby, and government has included the above concept in its water management policy. It was estimated that there is around 4000 km of embankment in coastal areas, if this concept is implemented then 3.5 million poor families will be rehabilitated who are in fact now living beside the embankment especially in 119 coastal sub-districts of Bangladesh.

This is one of the examples of micro action research for macro advocacy, apart from this through different networks there are several other examples of micro level action research and mobilizations too for macro level policy advocacies. This is one of the prominent features in COAST integration of right based approach in its micro finance program.

body, where Executive Director is reportable. On behalf of the board, Chairperson is the controlling authority of the Executive Director. Board sits four times in years, board meeting minutes and all other meeting minutes are open to all. All the policy documents of the organization are in written form; all the staff members whatever his / her position have access to those documents. We prepare region-wise and section-wise desktop newsletter and distribute these to all internal and external stakeholders including local government leaders. Apart from this, we have the system to ensure consultation of the member participants / beneficiaries during all the stages in project preparation, implementation and evaluation.

Approach of RBA integration

Since 1995, we maintain a core program approach; the concept is that we will not develop the programs or provide services, which are available with the government agencies in the local level where people have legitimate rights. Rather we will develop people's awareness and claimant capacities so that they could inter-act with the local authorities to claim those services. We will mobilize poor people to claim those resources or enhance accountability of the state-run service providing agencies in local government and in grass root level. Core programs will be implemented from a progressive² micro finance income. Non-core programs are fully or partly grant based. Management of the organization is structured in such a way that staff deployment is separated by program in field, coordination being happened only in upper level. If there is no grant, the programs might be disappearing but the beneficiaries and the staffs have integrated with the core programs as best as possible.

Legal endowment fund support

Combating violence against women in sustainable manner

The presence of law enforcing agencies is almost rare in the coastal remote islands where we work. In those remote islands, rate of violence against women are high. Although we have awareness and campaign activities against the violence but it is also imperative to set examples of legal actions with sustained and continuous effort. Experiences show that as poor have little capacity to pay, they hardly able to have access in legal action. On the other hand, having legal support through a 'donor supported project' is a time-being and process which does not guarantee the sustained reduction of violence.



Since 1996, COAST has developed a legal endowment fund with a portion of micro finance income. The interest of this endowment fund spent to provide legal support to the poor families. We developed a policy guideline to ensure proper utilization of this endowment fund in the legal assistance of three types of violation against women, these are (i) acid throwing, (ii) rape and abduction and (iii) minority evictions. There is a standing order by circular that whenever such a case happened, COAST staff must proceed to file legal case and provide necessary assistance to the victims. There is regular monitoring on those cases from field to central level. So far COAST has supported 16 cases, wherein legal verdicts have declared against 3 cases, which has created examples in the locality.

Rawshan Ara Begum (58), wife of Nazir Ahamed of Charumed, Lalmohen, Bhola, is such a victim of acid throwing. He got support for legal action from COAST, and she won the case, the legal verdict in her favor; court ordered 14 years imprisonment of seven criminals along with taka 20 thousand as compensation from each. At present, she is involved with COAST group and engaged in income generating activities.

Taking consideration of experiential learning so far, at present we have following program components or course of action in respect of rights based approach in core programs;

Promoting peoples' organization as alternative power structure: We believe that present power structure of the society is hardly pro-poor. We are trying to build an institutional structure with representational leadership from poor families from grass root to district and organizational central level. This alternative power structure will counter the existing established power structure and will facilitate pro poor resource distribution.

Demand mediation for legitimate rights and resources: We aware poor families on their legitimate (which has recognized and accepted by constitution and state) rights on the state. We build their capacities, facilitate

² COAST has a policy titled "Giving human face to micro finance" (June 2001). The policy has seven-policy line of actions. Which are; (i) Micro finance (MF) program should be tailored to greater contribution to poverty reduction and social welfare. (ii) MF is not mere a service; it is a socially responsible business. (iii) MF program has to be appropriate to the livelihood activities of the locality. (iv) MF program should be a part of holistic approach of empowering people, i.e., facilitating capacities on realization of their rights as active citizen. (v) Poor have to do savings for their own capital accumulation and to meet the expenses during crisis period. (vi) MF management should be transparent, accountable and participatory especially to its clients, and (vii) there should not be any compromise in respect of maintaining standard professionalism in MF management. Each of the policy contains several indicators.

to place, and negotiate their demand from the government and non-government agencies in the grass root level. It is in fact tailored to minimize gap between policy declaration and policy implementation of the state institutions.

Promote leadership from poor families and facilitating their access:

In line with the concept of building alternative power structure, we deliberately build leadership from the poor families and facilitate them to have their access in formal and informal power structure in all level, especially in local level.

Civil society alliance and issue based mobilization:

In response to the present nature of limitation of political parties in representing people, especially poor people, we promote a non-partisan civil society based on human rights and democratic principles. We build alliance with peoples' organization and civil societies and mobilize them on specific issue based movement.

Macro level advocacy for policy changes:

Above four courses of actions are mostly micro (grass root or local) level works, while we also promote macro level (national and international level) effort for policy changes. We have initiated different networks (www.bnnrc.net, www.equitybd.org) and member of different national and international networks (e.g., CAMPE, INAFI, FANSA, SAAPE, ICVA, LDC Watch, Jubilee South, CIVICUS, HAP I, ADRRN, APRN). In this macro level efforts we have worked on issues like promoting critical participation of civil society in PRSP, demanding democratization of the political parties, promoting critical civil society, in climate financing, visa free South Asia and debt cancellation etc. We have also examples of positive engagement with government.

Sharing the learning which works

Documentation of case studies on mobilization and grassroots leadership

We have the regular monitoring and documentation of social mobilization actions organized by each of the people's organization unit. In every year we prepare case stories of the people organization leaders and mobilization both in grassroots and national level, basically which is for sharing of experiential learning both within and outside the organization.



“Ora Asche” (in English “They are coming”) is such a case stories of 23 women leaders from our working area who are leading others poor families to realize their rights and to get legitimate resources. We have also a documentation title “Trinomule Andolan” (in English “grass root mobilization”) which narrated different issue based mobilization in both micro (grassroots) and macro (national) level. We published these reports in January 2004. Publication of similar reports is under preparation and will be published by 2010.

We also publish such cases in our periodical reports, e.g., especially case studies on (i) Acid victim Rosnara survived and the criminals are convicted, (ii) Civil society mobilization against hill cutting, (iii) Mobilizing duty bearers for human right culture in districts, (iv) MV Nasreen (Ferry) capsized and policy research based campaign for safe river way, these cases are available in our report “Isles and Actions : 1997 to June 2008” (web link http://www.coastbd.org/isles_action_2008.htm). There are some other case stories have also been documented in our annual report title “COAST annual report 2008-09: Living with cyclone and social capital: our strength for adaptation in climate catastrophes”. (Web link http://www.coastbd.org/annual_report2009/annual_report-2009.pdf). These cases are (i) Cyclone Aila in media, (ii) Cyclone proof house to be built along with cyclone shelter, (iii) Forest and hills are disappearing: land grabbers enjoy the blessings of administration in Coxsbazar, and (iv) Candidate's mobilization : A milestone of inspiring the next generation to practice the democratic culture in Bangladesh.

In view of experiential learning, COAST is being integrating above right based program components with its micro finance operation income as a sustainable approach for human development. In addition, the organization believes that this is the way out from market fundamentalism of free market or free profit.

It should be noted that COAST has already in the process of integrating the programs of primary health care, technical assistance on integrated agriculture, legal support in crucial cases to the poor families and disaster mitigation with micro finance income, as it has the long term plan to run those in operationally sustainable way.



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