



Sustainable Partnership with local organizations: Principles and Practice

It is quite a long discussion and debate about the policy and practice of partnership with the non-government organizations in Bangladesh in the development interventions and humanitarian response. While the local and grassroots CSO and NGOs demanded for a partnership with dignity and criteria-based approach, the donor community pledged to establish an accountable, equal and transparent partnership for development and humanitarian works in the Grand Bargain and Charter4Change commitments. Unfortunately, those are yet to be implemented.

Some cases are brought here to identify the reality of the partnership practices on the ground and based on what few essential recommendations could be drawn to address.

Local organization to respond to Disaster an island

Mr. Mukul (pseudo name), Executive Director of a local small NGO, is a person from an island situated in the Bay of Bengal. On 1st August 2019, he was informed that around 10 villages of that island have been submerged by recent flood and around 10 thousand families who took temporary shelter couldn't cook food for couple of days. The villagers kept calling him for relief. However, big national level NGOs have been working in the island but hardly sought by people for help. Another national NGO recently got disaster related project in the island from an UN agency, but the affected people didn't know about that.

The flood-affected local people felt that a circular ring embankment could save the Boro rice and that would cost around 12,000 USD. Having no hope or commitment from the big national NGOs running microfinance in the island, and on the demand of the islanders, the small local NGO pledged to provide the money to start immediate work to save the rice. Having no confirmation from where the money will come or having no project or disaster response program, that NGO has done this only because of the responsibility it had to the local people as a local organization.

Demand-driven activism hardly encouraged

Mr. Saiful (pseudo name) is an activist from student life and has been watching the activities of the IFIs and their conditionalities impacted the poor people of Bangladesh. He wrote articles in newspapers and was eager to publish books on it. He was quite enthusiastic to carry this forward to bring necessary change in national policies to deal with the IFIs in favor of the poor. In order to get financial support for research, publication and advocacy, he established an NGO and started fund applications.

Within couple of years he got frustrated and stopped fund application. One I-NGO who started funding to his organization postponed fund. He complained that he was asked to change the language of the books and also some content which were against the IFIs. He felt undignified as he was expected to be fully loyal to the fund giver. He considered this as a sort of domestication of his resistance. He found that the other partners of that INGO had to comply with the same unwritten conditionality of fund.

His Master's Voice approach hardly ensures transparency, accountability and free from conflict of interest

Bangladeshi civil society organizations have been renowned for being human rights defenders at local level and raise advocacy on local issues without any funds. But a kind of corporatization imposed on them almost stopped those voluntary approaches. This has resulted fragmentation in the NGO sectors. NGOs are hardly interested to go against deviations of democratic institutions, though it was their mandate.

International agencies used to appoint value based leadership in their country office to play the role of animators to promote the pro-people local organizations. They had a practice of fair and competitive partner selection. They supported local organizations to raise advocacy issues for democracy and pluralistic society. Unfortunately, that practice is changed. Now they pick partners according to personal choice and there is no policy of disclosing the selection process. There is no declared complaint response mechanism either. One INGO used to have only 9 staff in their country office in Bangladesh and promoted

15 sustainable CSO/ NGO who are working well now. The same INGO now have 60 staff but hardly promotes organizations like that.

Now they have more corporate staff in the leading positions more focused on completing projects in time. They hardly have any localized partnership policy with long term vision, criteria-based, free from conflict of interest of the staff involved in international agencies with a practice of transparency and open competitiveness. It means they hardly have any goal for partnership for bringing some change in the local society. Instead they want loyal partners like "his master voice" in no way to challenge them.

For the sake of real result of the interventions of international agencies, as being implemented by the local partners, they need to establish and declare a partnership policy appropriate for the local context. They also need to establish a complaint response mechanism so that anyone can issue a complaint against their work and process. Since their existence is for serving the local need, they need to be evaluated time to time by the local agencies.