

ABSTRACT

Facilitating development at the local level in Bangladesh has stimulated its volunteer spirit. Grassroots initiatives supported by non-governmental organizations and undertaken by local volunteers have led to a better understanding of legal rights, health and environmental issues, and economic concerns. This article describes the work done by the Centre for Development Services to empower the citizens of Bangladesh.

Grassroots Organizing in Bangladesh

Omar Faruque Chowdhury

When I was a student at Dhaka University in Bangladesh I studied social work. I was required to do field work in the community. I visited households and learned firsthand about poverty and despair. The experience inspired me to work to help alleviate the causes of human suffering in Bangladesh.

BANGLADESH

India borders Bangladesh on the north, east, and west. Myanmar (Burma) is on the southeast. To the south is the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh was under British rule until 1947 when it became part of Pakistan. Bangladesh achieved its independence from Pakistan in 1971 after nine long months of armed struggle. During the war more than 1 million Bangladeshis died.

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country of 112 million. Hindu, Christian, Buddhist and other local belief systems are practiced by 10 percent of the population. Before 1971 communal riots were common, but since independence they have been few and short-lived.

After independence there was a need to provide repatriation services, relief, and rehabilitation to displaced persons. Services were provided by many local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen committees. Before this time, these activities had been provided by mullahs who supported the norms and values of the Koran. Mosques and madrassahs (schools for religious instruction) were built by the wealthy to assure their spiritual well-being and eternal peace, but secular schools and hospitals were not. The poor and illiterate—most often the women—suffered.

After 1975, the non-governmental organizations changed their focus from relief to development. They grew in number and have played a key role in national development. As they have gained in strength, NGOs have been targeted by religious leaders who say the people no longer heed their (the mullahs') advice, that women now work with men, that purdah (the seclusion of women) is no longer being strictly maintained, that there is less interest in religious instruc-

Omar Faruque Chowdhury is executive director of the Centre for Development Services in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He works to effect positive change in society by providing need-based support, technical assistance, and oversight to urban and rural populations through partnerships with non-governmental voluntary organizations. He consults with the government of Bangladesh and attends international conferences on health and social welfare.

tion, and that people are willing to pay for secular education rather than learning through the institutions of organized religion. Opposition Islamic fundamentalists have burned hundreds of non-Muslim schools and mother/child health centers, a jihad (holy war) was declared against a poor people's rally held in Dhaka in 1996, and NGO leaders have been called agents of the Christian faith. Muslim fundamentalists tell the faithful that receiving direct or indirect services from an NGO that is headquartered in a predominantly Christian country will result in their forcible conversion to Christianity. It is a goal of the organization the author represents, the Centre for Development Services, to counter these extreme views and educate people about their rights and responsibilities in a civil society and improve their lives.

THE VOLUNTARY EFFORT IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh has a history of traditional volunteering that springs from the norms and values of our culture. Examples of volunteering include neighbors helping in childbirth as well as cooking and feeding members of the baby's family, contributing labor, tents, furniture, and cooking utensils at weddings, and, teaching the illiterate. We want to preserve these traditions, carry them forward, and expand into a new era of volunteering.

The Centre for Development Services is a national support and umbrella organization. We believe in:

- The participation of people in planning and controlling their lives.
- The creation of local level organizations to sustain the development process.
- The encouragement of self-reliance and the use of local resources.
- Local and national volunteerism.
- Strong, participatory leadership.
- The stimulation of human potential toward self-actualization.
- Facilitating the connections between people working with the same goals

and philosophy.

- Learning from experience.

Among the programs with which we are involved, in partnership with other NGOs, are village-level legal assistance training, small rural initiatives, a rural development program, and a media campaign. We closely monitor and evaluate our programs and continually assess their impact.

Legal Assistance at the Village Level

The objective of the project (started in 1991) is to develop and create an awareness of the law and human rights (especially among women), offer free legal support, stop exploitation, and develop a local institutional framework for the mediation of disputes. Most of the people in the project areas are illiterate and ignorant about the law and have had no access to legal aid organizations. We serve these people through door-to-door visits and mass meetings conducted by local people of influence who volunteer their time and are trained to deal with the issues. We get youth involved, and train local mediators. Women are encouraged to participate as mediators and they work closely with the female population in their communities. Training is given on legal rights, family law and family court, how to mediate disputes, and issues around health. The Centre for Development Services has a good record of helping local people who have felt disenfranchised settle pending cases in courts of law.

Small Rural Initiatives

The aim of this program (started in 1989) is to support existing community groups that have been working efficiently for their socio-economic improvement. The program gives small grants and seed money to start income-generating activities as well as mobilizing untapped resources and potential within the community. The objective is to promote entrepreneurship and empower the poor. The financial support comes from a number of

non-governmental organizations who sponsor efforts in agriculture, animal husbandry, textile production, and clothes manufacture. Local volunteers, who have completed 11 years of schooling and are committed to community development, are trained to identify those in their communities who qualify for this program. To accomplish this, they use a survey developed by Centre for Development Services.

Rural Development Program

This is a social laboratory project started in 1988. Local leaders in four model villages have been trained to help build a sense of community responsibility and increase the capacity of citizens to organize and become aware of how to regenerate and sustain safe environments. The project has been influenced by the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction in the Philippines and by the Sarvodaya Movement of Sri Lanka, a program that focuses on village reawakening. Adult and youth villagers encourage each other through volunteering and sharing their labor. Through the program, home gardening has been encouraged to give women income, organic fertilizer has been introduced, sanitary latrines have been made available at minimal cost, and malnourished children and mothers have been fed.

Media Campaign on Various Social and Environmental Issues

The Centre for Development Services has produced written materials on legal aid as well as films that have been telecast in Bangladesh almost daily and feature well-known television and film personalities. Film topics include divorce, early marriage, prostitution, gender issues, health and family planning, wages, social rights, voting, mediating disputes, and environmental issues such as pollution and degradation of air, water, and land resources. The materials are used for training by other NGOs and the government of Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

The Centre for Development Services, in partnership with other NGOs, organizes community meetings and holds discussions with individuals on human rights, the rights of women, the evils of exploitation, the causes of poverty, and the impact of religion on daily life. We help individuals join together to volunteer to solve problems. We train local youths in leadership skills so they can volunteer in their communities. We network nationally and locally with other NGOs.

Through self-help and the sharing of community resources, we have constructed primary schools and community centers with the people's labor and on land provided by them. At the centers both men and women sit together and discuss solutions to problems within their communities. We hold forums to raise our voices against fundamentalist Islamic thinking.

Our mission is to enhance the capacity-building of NGOs to work in both urban and rural settings, to effect positive change in society by providing need-based support, technical assistance, and oversight, and empower the poor.

We participate in an exchange/internship program. Volunteers from the International Development Exchange of San Francisco, which supports rural communities in the Third World, have come to Bangladesh to work with us and one of our colleagues went to San Francisco to work with them. This gave us an opportunity to get to know one another and educate ourselves about community needs in each other's countries. We have conducted similar exchange programs with Pakistani and Nepalese NGOs.

Our goal is to live in a congenial society that affords opportunity to all through citizen-level action carried out at the grassroots by our communities' educated and trained volunteer citizens.