

Rural Development Policy and Administrative Patterns in Bangladesh: A Critical Review

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Abstract : The study examines the current framework implementation of rural development policy and administrative pattern in Bangladesh. Majority of the people in Bangladesh live in rural areas where problems of unemployment, inequality and poverty are common. Bangladesh has been undertaking rural development programs both at the government and non-government organizational levels. However, within the existing framework, rural development policies and poverty reduction programs in Bangladesh have been unable to significantly benefit the target population. Though government and government agencies are playing an important complementary role in the rural development sector, their roles are not completely positive. To focus attention in development policy and action, this study identifies weaknesses and suggests potential areas for improvement in effective rural development in Bangladesh.

Key words: 1) Rural development, 2) Government Policy, 3) Administrative pattern

I Introduction

In developing countries, rural areas remain outside the mainstream information channels, and the central government authorities therefore have insufficient knowledge of their conditions (CIRDAP, 2000). Furthermore, even when available, this information is not sufficiently utilized as a tool by planners and decision-makers in formulating their national development plans. Despite rapid urbanization, for the next several decades the majority of the world's poor will remain in rural areas where the levels of poverty are typically greater. Although there are some positive changes in respect of farm productivity and rates of overall economic growth in some developing countries, the extent of poverty, lack of land and unemployment has become increased in many developing countries (Alain et al., 1999 and FAO, 1999).

In Bangladesh, growing attention has been paid to rural development during the past two and half decades. The socio-economic milieu problems have prompted policy makers to take up specific rural development programs to improve the quality of life of the vast majority of rural poor who have not benefited from the general development programs

(IDB, 2001). Over 80 percent of the people in Bangladesh live in rural areas where problems of unemployment, inequality and poverty are common (BARD, 1996 and IFAD, 2001).

For Bangladesh, rural development is essential, because the entire country is a large village with only 6 metropolitan cities and 64 towns. Rural areas are the root of development for developing countries like Bangladesh (Todaro, 2000). Bangladesh has been undertaking rural development programs both at the government and non-government organizational levels. The programs have different sectoral and program components such as rural co-operatives, credit, irrigation, livestock, fisheries, rural industry, area development, infrastructural development, input distributions and training. Each component, however, does not necessarily cover the entire rural regions but is initiated in some selected areas. Within the existing framework, rural development policies and current administration patterns in Bangladesh have unable to significantly benefit the target population (BARD, 1996 and Rahman, 1995). To improve the effectiveness of rural development, it is necessary to conduct study reviewing and current framework of rural development strategies in Bangladesh. Specifically, the study aims to -

- Identify the weakness of rural development policy;
- Examine the current administrative patterns;
- Suggests potential areas, for improvement in effective rural development in Bangladesh.

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The paper is structured as follows: Section one shows the significance and objective of the study. Section two describes the meaning and conditions for rural development. Section three presents the study materials. Section four describes the historical background and current framework of rural development policy in Bangladesh. Section five presents current government administrative patterns and rural development bodies. Section six shows NGO intervention in rural development. Section seven identifies the weaknesses of government and concludes the discussions with some recommendations.

II. The Meaning and Conditions for Rural Development

There is no universally acceptable definition of rural development. Generally, the objective of rural development is improvement in the economic and social sectors. The main objective of rural development is to bring about overall improvement in quality of life, both economic and social (Rahman, 1995). The concept of rural development is to improve the vicious situation of rural areas by a multi-sectoral approach such as economic vitalization, employment increase, education, health care and social welfare (CIRDAP, 1997). If the major objective of rural and agricultural development in developing countries, the following five components are necessary (Todaro, 2000) : (1) Appropriate government economic policies; (2) Modernizing farm structures especially land reform to meet rising food demands; (3) Supportive social institutions; (4) Creating an effective supporting system; and (5) Changing the rural environment to improve levels of living.

Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD, 1996) agreed that the contemporary issues in the field of Rural Development are: (1) Poverty alleviation; (2) Strengthening rural infrastructure; (3) Decentralized decision making; (4) Increasing production and employment; (4) Modernizing farm structure and land reform; (5) Development of human resource; (6) People's Participation; and (7) Collaboration between government and NGO.

III. Study Materials

The present study put emphasis on rural development strategies in Bangladesh, and the role of government in those sectors. Rural development programs in Bangladesh are mostly operated by the local government units such as *district, thana*

and *union* levels. Various government agencies are also involved in rural development programs. The current study focused on three major government agencies, such as the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD), Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) and Grameen Bank.

Information for this study gathered from multiple sources. Most data were collected from various administrative agencies such as the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), Ministry of Planning Commission, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistic (BBS) and Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB). The researcher also visited to the *Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific* (CIRDAP) headquarters to collect information. CIRDAP is an autonomous regional intergovernmental institution established in 1979 by the countries of Asia and the Pacific region at the initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations with support from the government of Japan and the Swedish International Development Agency.

Various publications and study reports were also collected for this study. Several local government branch offices, and their activities were observed. All the information gathered will be considered in forming an opinion about present and future prospects, and will also be used for policy and planning focus.

IV. The Evolution of Rural Development Policy in Bangladesh

The history of modern rural development policy in Bangladesh may be divided into three periods, namely the British, Pakistan and Bangladesh periods. The present study focuses on the Bangladesh period.

1. British and Pakistan Periods

Bangladesh was a part of British India for about two hundred years (1757-1947). The colonial rulers were primarily concerned with law and order, administration and revenue collection in the rural areas. During the second half of their rule, some state interventions were made to redress the suffering of the rural people. The measures taken, through enactment of certain laws, are reflected in the following legislation (IDB, 2001) : (1) The Chowkidery Panchayet Act of 1870 ; (2) Land Improvement Act of 1883 ; (3) Agricultural Disaster Loan Act of 1884 ; (4) Local Self-government Act of 1885 ; (5) Bengal Agricultural Debtors Act 1935 ; and (6) Cooperatives

Societies Act 1912, 1940.

The legislation measures could not, however, improve the situation of rural areas. With the partition of India in August 1947, Bangladesh became a part of Pakistan and remained so until independence was declared in 1971. During this period, several programs were introduced directed at rural development. The first comprehensive program of rural development was planned and introduced in 1954 (BARD, 1996). It was a community development program formally known as Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) program. The V-AID program was suddenly discontinued in 1961 before it could be introduced in most parts of rural development. The most significant achievement in rural development during the 1960s was the *Comilla Model*, developed through an intensive method of pilot experimentation, introduced by the BARD. The *Comilla Model* provided an institutional approach to rural development with emphasis on people's organizations as the center of development and decentralized rural administration authority for planning and implementation of development programs at the *Thana* (sub-district) levels (IDB, 2001).

2. Bangladesh period: Since Independence

Since independence (1971), various government agencies have been undertaking rural development programs. Rural development in Bangladesh has been accorded the top most priority in the government development strategy aimed at qualitative change in the life pattern of rural people. The government has adopted a number of policies to reduce poverty in rural areas.

The *First Five Year Plan* (1973-78) aimed to reduce poverty. To achieve this objective, the plan adopted a strategy of expansion of employment opportunities for the unemployed and under-employed (Hye, 1996). The First Plan was also directed towards the rehabilitation of war-affected women and their children. In the *Two Year Plan* (1978-80) emphasis was placed on the field of agricultural-based rural development programs, creation of organizational networks through Bangladesh Jatio Mahila Sangstha (Women's Association) and infrastructure building at the district and thana levels (Rahman, 1995).

The *Second Five Year Plan* (1980-85) focused on local-level organizations as an essential element in the strategy for comprehensive rural development and poverty reduction programs (Uddin, 1996). It was proposed that the local level gov-

ernment organization starting from village to the district level should have both vertical linkages and horizontal linkages with other organizations, viz. cooperatives. The Plan stressed the role of local government and local-level planning. The Second Plan also emphasized on food production and essential social consumption such as mass literacy and basic health.

The *Third Five Year Plan* (1985-90) promised greater impact and had a more realistic approach to poverty reduction, particularly in the rural areas (Hye, 1996). It emphasized rural development as the vehicle to distribute the benefits of planned development to the largest number of citizens. The most distinguishing feature of this strategy was to approach rural development issues from close proximity at the micro-level within a holistic framework. The Third Plan also focused on functional literacy, skill training and new technology for the target groups.

The *Fourth Five Year Plan* (1990-95) focused on poverty as one of the most pressing problems in rural areas. To reduce poverty, the plan stated the following main objectives to be achieved in the rural development sector (BARD, 1996 and Hye, 1996) :

- To reduce rural poverty by means of increasing gainful employment and income opportunities on a sustained basis through expansion of the productive sector;
- To facilitate agricultural development through institutional support;
- To promote participation of rural women in development activities.

The strategy for rural infrastructure development under the *Perspective Plan* (1995-2010) is under continuous review but includes the following (BARD, 1996 and IDB, 2001) :

- Improve basic physical infrastructure, facilitate social and economic growth in the rural areas and better integration between rural and urban markets;
- Strengthen local government institutions and local resource mobilization to promote local level development based on participatory planning;
- Plan for rural infrastructure development activities on the basis of *Union, Thana* plan books and maps and involve representatives of the Union Council and other local government institutions;
- Undertake studies and pilot projects for the development of non-motorized rural transport and provide the sector with knowledge in rural transport development.

V. Current Administrative Patterns and Rural Development Bodies

Figure 1 shows the administrative set-up of government in Bangladesh. The president is the head of the state. The government is headed by the prime minister. Legislative power is exercised by the parliament. Bangladesh has a 330 member parliament called “Jatiya Sangsad”. The entire country is broadly divided into six divisions (regions), namely: Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Barisal, Sylhet and Khulna. There are 64 districts, 460 thanas and 4472 unions, which are the units of local government.

In Bangladesh, rural development programs are mostly op-

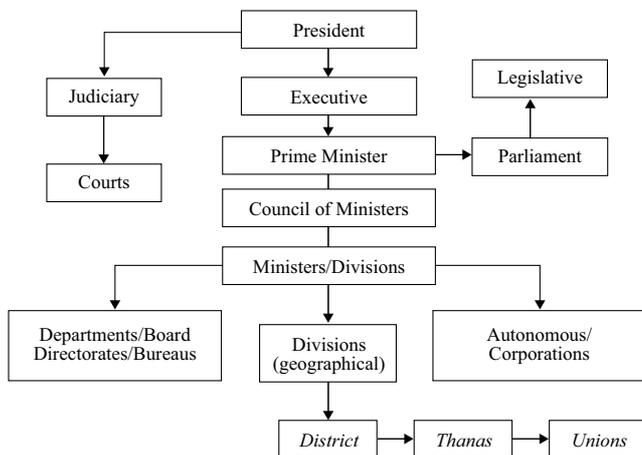
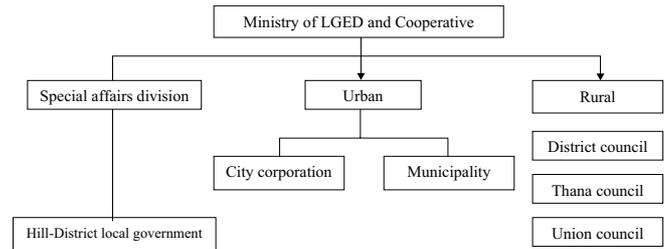


Figure1. Administrative Structures of Government in Bangladesh

erated by local government. Government agencies such as BRDB, BARD and Grammen Bank have been conducting several kinds of rural development research and activities. Local government units (*District, Thana and Union levels*) are usually responsible for rural development activities, though policy and planning are formulated by the central government (Habibullah, 1996).

The structure of local government is shown in Figure 2. The three Hill District Local Government Councils were created in 1989 by three separate acts. This legislation was enacted to grant autonomy to the ethnic minorities living in these regions. The lowest administrative unit is the union and each union comprises 10-15 villages. Several unions form a thana and several thanas form a district.

1. Local government Units



Note: LGED indicates Local Government Engineering Department
Figure2. Structure of Local Government in Bangladesh

- (1) District: During the institutional history of Bangladesh, the district has been the crucial building block of central government. Development of local government at this level has taken the form of supervised bodies under the control of the chief executive officer, i.e., the Deputy Commissioner, with a narrow functional and financial jurisdiction. Institutional attention to the district-level body has been marked by great ambiguity in policy objectives and this is reflected in long periods of inactivity. In 1976, there was an attempt to strengthen the district-level body, now called *Zila-Parishad* (District Council), by an ordinance which provided for a certain proportion of elected members (Khan, 1998 and Siddiqui, 1995). However, no elections were actually held before another change, in 1982, abolished the provision for elected members. In 1988, there was an attempt to revive these bodies by nominating ruling party members as chairman but the change of government in 1991 put an end to this initiative. The revival of these bodies was again mooted in the *Local Government Commission Reports* of both the post-1991 *Bangladesh Nationalist Party* (BNP) government and the post-1996 *Awami League* (Political Party) government. However, *Zila-Parishads* have essentially existed only on paper since independence.
- (2) Thana : The *Thana Council* was presided over by the chief executive officer at this level, currently known as the *Nirbahi Officer*. The institutional development of the *Thana Council* got an important impetus from the *Comilla Model* of 1960s which significantly expanded rural development functions at this level. In 1982, major change was brought about in the status of the thana-level body, renamed the *Upazila-Parishad* (sub-district council), when provision was made for a directly elected chairman. This provision was abolished in 1991 (Siddiqui, 1995). The post-1996 government has recommended the restoration of direct election but such elections are yet to take place.

(3) Union: This is the lowest tier of local government and currently each union cover an average population of 25, 000. The union-level body has undergone many changes and is currently called *Union-Parishad* (Union Council). These became fully elected bodies in 1962. Among the various tiers of local government, *Union Parishads* have the longest institutional history, dating back to 1870. This continuity in institutional life, however, is built on a very narrow functional and financial jurisdiction as well as administrative subservience to executive functionaries at *Thana* and *District* levels (Hossain, 2000). Notwithstanding these limitations, *Union Parishads* have been the focal point in the local government system except for a period in the 1980s when the *Thana* became the focal point.

2. Government Agencies in Rural Development

BARD is the prime government agency engaged in rural development and poverty alleviation. BARD basically operates by organising the small and marginal farmers into co-operative societies to increase agricultural production through improved methods and also by promoting formal and informal groups of landless men and distressed women to promote income generating activities (BARD, 1996). Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP) was launched in 1972 with a view to replicating the two-tier co-operative system as the main vehicle for rural development. This was based on the “Comilla Model” that evolved through experiments in Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development at Comilla in the 1960s. In view of its success, the program was transformed in 1982 into a nation-wide institution called BRDB. Table 1 demonstrates the role of government agencies in rural development programs.

BRDB is the largest government agency for rural develop-

ment and poverty alleviation, aims to organize rural people through cooperatives and informal groups to provide an institutional framework for the development of the rural poor and disadvantaged groups. BRDB programs have significant and positive impact on employment, income, access to safe drinking water, and acquisition of assets. Since the beginning of the 1980s Bangladesh Rural Development Board has designed some special rural development projects under the names RD -5, RD-9 and RD-12. Landless men and women, marginal and small farmers constitute the target population of these projects (CIRDAP, 2000).

The Grameen Bank (GB) was set up in 1983 to organize the landless and the poor to engage in productive self-employment activities through a group based credit program. The Grameen Bank provides loans in cash to the landless poor, particularly women, to promote self-employment and make them income earners (Islam and Omori, 2003).

VI. NGO intervention and Rural Development

The term *rural development* was in vogue with NGOs who were involved in multi-sector approaches or interventions at the community level (Amin, 1997). In fact, the activities of NGOs began only after a devastating natural disaster that had occurred in 1970 and of course, after the war of liberation in 1971. Initially, the NGOs both national and international were mostly involved in the distribution of food, medicines, blankets, clothes and other necessary supplies among war-affected people. Later they involved themselves in various development activities. The NGOs programs cover almost all sectors of development such as education, nutrition, skill and awareness development, training, employment and income generation, credit and savings, marketing and social development which includes legal education and gender equality (CIRDAP, 1997 and IDB, 2001).

The basic structures of NGOs and government are different that is given in Table 2. In Bangladesh, the relationship between NGO and Government agencies has not yet been formalized. This is mainly because most policy makers still view NGOs with suspicion. The NGOs also do not appear to have any concerted policy in dealing with government agencies, although some NGOs have worked out a rapport with Local Government Organizations in their

Table1. Government Agencies in Rural Development

Program	Organization	Activity
Credit Support	BRDB's RD-5, 9, 12 and Grameen Bank.	Follow specific credit operational plans with provision for individual/groups loans, savings and other group activities.
Training	RD-5 RD-9 RD-12	Human development, Women issues, skill development, Book keeping and accounting, need-based training. Functional literacy and skill development training. Education and human development, leadership development, private mechanics training.
Support Services	RD-5 RD-9 RD-12	Marketing assistance, Legal support services. primary health care and non-formal education. No support services.

Sources : 1. Personal Communication, 2003, BRDB official sources, Dhaka ; 2. CIRDAP, 2000.

Table2. Basic Structural differences between Government and NGOs

Area	Government	NGOs
Poverty Alleviation and Rural Development	Within perspective of overall national developmental concerns.	Focus on specific poverty alleviation and rural development concerns.
Resources	Capability to generate own resources along with donor assistance.	Mostly dependent on donations, contracts and donor funding.
Management	Guided by rules and regulations with limited scope of flexibility in operations.	Simpler and flexible.
Compliance	Centralized bureaucratic structure with quality dependent on nature of governance.	Effectiveness determined by ability to mobilize target groups at the grassroots level.

Sources : 1 . Annual Report 1996, Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh;
2 . Islam and Omori 2003.

respective areas of operation (CIRDAP, 2000 and Debapriya, 1995). Over the years, the vast networks of NGOs that have developed in Bangladesh and their experience in rural development efforts have created a unique opportunity to push the rural development agenda forward. The government, while providing the general policy direction for development, has also recognized its limitations in bringing about sustained improvements in the lives of the poor through its own efforts. Despite sporadic tensions in government-NGO relations, the NGOs are now accepted and recognized as important partners in development.

One of local government's most important roles is to reach the rural poor and to deliver basic services to assist them and improve their quality of life (Siddiqui, 1995). However, in reaching the grassroots level, the government is often beset with bureaucratic practices that constrain effectiveness in reaching the target groups. NGOs are acknowledged as having a better ability to reach out to deprived community groups with committed staff and field workers who are prepared to live with the people. They can work out their own channels for reaching the poorest. Within the broad framework of the culture and organizations of the village, they are able to devise new structures and methods of work (Islam and Omori, 2003 and CIRDAP, 2000).

VII. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

Rural development is a dynamic process. Needs and priori-

ties change with the emergence of new issues and problems. In Bangladesh, government agencies such as BARD, BRDB and Grammen Bank have carried out successful extension activities over a period of time with well-designed development models and higher potential for better delivery of services. Though government and government agencies are playing an important complementary role in the rural development sector, their roles are not completely positive. The following weaknesses of government were identified in the past and in this present study:

- 1 . The review of the Five-Year Plans shows that the problem of poverty was recognized with all seriousness attaching the highest priority to its alleviation. However, Five-Year Plans have not been able to significantly reduce the rural poverty. Rural-urban poverty gaps in Bangladesh is still high, whereas 84 percent of the national poor live in rural areas, only 16 per cent live in urban areas (BIDS, 2001).
- 2 . The Perspective Plan (1995-2010) is the latest development plan for rural development. This is a comprehensive approach. The approach is still under experimentation. Time has not yet come to say conclusive that the approach is the answer.
- 3 . The Fourth Five Year Plan (1990-95) focused on increasing gainful employment and income opportunities. However, this plan was not provided any specific direction for employment opportunities especially for the disadvantaged groups (such as marginal farmers, landless, poor and women headed households).
- 4 . Though the Second Five Year Plan (1980-85) proposed that the local level government organization starting from village to the district level should have both vertical linkages and horizontal linkages. However, there is no local government body exist at the village level.
- 5 . Local government units (such as district, thana and union) are not properly structured and their functions and resources are extremely meager. Local government is ultimately responsible and subordinate to central government.
- 6 . Local government programs are not very effective at the rural poor household levels. Most disadvantaged groups reported that very few of them got support from local gov-

ernment (Huq, 2000 and Islam and Omori, 2003).

7. Land reform is often proposed as a necessary first condition for rural and agricultural development in developing countries (IDB, 2001 and Todaro, 2000). However, Five Year Plans and Perspective Plan have not provided any specific policy for the land reform. Given the history of past reform measures in 1972 and 1984, the outlook of land reforms in Bangladesh is not bright. The land reform programs under the *Presidential Order of 1972* did not fare well, although it directed that surplus land recovered from big landowners having more than 33.3 acres would be distributed among the landless and near landless. Only 54,409 acres were surrendered, of which 31,250 acres were taken possession by 1976. As in the past, the quality of land surrendered was very poor and the available lands surrendered were highly fragmented making distribution very difficult (Huq, 2000). As regards the 1984 land reform measures, no figure is available.
8. Several NGO staff members reported that they sometimes faced difficulties working in some areas. In most cases, they accused government agencies of non-cooperation (CIRDAP, 2000 and Islam and Omori, 2003).
9. Government programs are designed by planners, whose main jobs are planning, and who live in the city areas, not in villages. Input from people with village experience is rarely heard and rarely sought.
10. Government programs have elaborate rules and regulations to instruct officials who will guide the poor. These instructions are often designed for administrative convenience rather than to reflect and adapt to the reality of the poor (Islam and Omori, 2003 and Debapriya, 1995).

In spite of some weaknesses of government, since independence things have been improved in the field of rural development in Bangladesh. The problems of rural Bangladesh are numerous, so it is difficult for the government to tackle these alone. NGOs can reinforce and complement government sponsored activities because of their greater flexibility and effectiveness. Therefore, collaboration between NGOs and government is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of efforts in rural areas. Any collaboration and cooperation between NGOs and

government will require some mechanisms to ensure a continuing dialogue. Perhaps the NGO Bureau, Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) and government can, to begin with, form a standing committee to work this out at various levels, as is done in Latin America (IDB, 2001). To support effective rural development, government in Bangladesh may include a planning control cycle that is given in Figure 3. Moreover, successful rural development in Bangladesh may require a strategy on the following fronts:

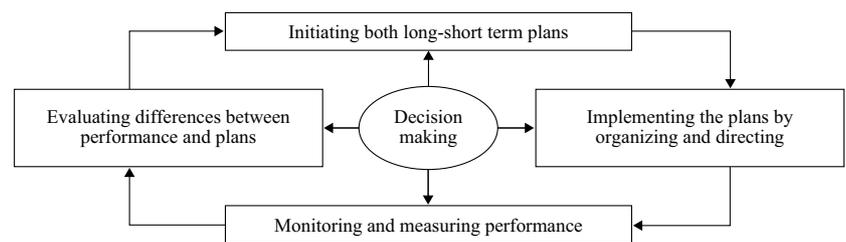


Figure 3. The Planning Control Cycle

- Decentralization of the local administration structure: it is a commonly held view that local self government could result in better performance in terms of effectiveness, equity and efficiency, particularly in developing local infrastructure such as communication facilities, water supply, marketing and other essential services;
- If decentralization of the local administration is on the agenda, it is significant to establish a local government structure at the village level;
- To reduce rural poverty, it is necessary to allocate a significant portion of public resources in favor of the rural agro-related programs and within those sectors which favor disadvantaged groups;
- Land reform is indispensable for rural and agricultural development in Bangladesh. As is done in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan (IDB, 2001). The experience of many countries shows the crucial role of land reform in providing not only a source of income, security and status for the non-land owning rural poor, but also as a foundation for broader agricultural and rural development (Prosterman and Hanstad, 2003).

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