

Redefining partnership: The Need for a holistic approach for effective development partnership in Bangladesh

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The current, changing global context for poverty reduction and development cooperation must be situated against a backdrop of economic recession, changing policy approaches, uncertainty, climate change, conflict and security. Global leaders have been emphasizing partnerships for development effectiveness, with a focus on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) within policies to implement poverty reduction. As the 2015 deadline for achieving the MDGs is only one year away, the United Nations (UN) has been undertaking a process to craft a Post-2015 Development Agenda, which highlights sustainable development in terms of poverty reduction in all its dimensions.

While various awards — the South-South Award, the MDG Award, the Global Diversity Award, and the FAO Food Award — have recognized Bangladesh's seemingly noteworthy progress in achieving MDGs, this success has not resulted in meeting people's expectations in all sectors. The Honourable Prime Minister said in a speech at the 68th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in 2013, "So, we need to be united... [on a] development agenda that would fulfil our aspiration of building a just, prosperous and sustainable world where no person or nation is left behind."¹ However, one of the important reasons for continued failure in fully achieving the targets of the MDGs is the lack of true partnerships among the different development actors.

The UN and world leaders have been making an effort to create a post-2015 development agenda

that is truly inclusive. The ongoing discussion about the new agenda takes into consideration the challenges, lessons, experiences and achievements of the MDGs. The framework has stressed the importance of a new form of global partnership between developed and developing countries, including South-South Cooperation (SSC). The idea of a global partnership for development was first envisioned at the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000 when Member States agreed "to create an environment — at the national and global levels alike — which is conducive to development and to the elimination of poverty."²

This idea was manifested in MDG 8, Develop a Global Partnership for Development. A recent 2013 Report published by UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda, titled, "A renewed global partnership for development," set out the gaps and weaknesses of Goal 8. The Report found that it lacked "a strong normative foundation, as it failed to integrate international human rights commitments, including the duty of international cooperation for development established by the UN Charter and affirmed by the Declaration on the Right to Development."³

Meanwhile, the "Millennium Development Goals: Bangladesh Progress Report 2012" argues that real global partnership for development has yet to emerge, which is mostly due to problems regarding the expected cooperation from the developed donor countries (represented in the OECD Development Assistance Committee), as promised in the MDGs.⁴ Indeed, Bangladesh has

been facing significant development challenges, which include unstable economic growth, gaps in achieving the MDGs, low employment rate, rising inequalities, food insecurity, inadequate social protection, insufficient infrastructure, adverse impacts from climate change, and inadequate Official Development Assistance (ODA). These challenges have led to a decline in economic and social development in Bangladesh.

Yet Bangladesh has also achieved remarkable progress in terms of gender equality, primary education and infant mortality rate, compared to other developing countries. The country has also achieved approximately 6% annual economic growth during the past decade. However, the World Bank indicates that despite this strong track record, about 47 million people are still below the poverty line, and improving access to quality services for this vulnerable group is a priority. There are also many people who could fall back into poverty if they lose their jobs or are affected by natural disasters.⁵ The Household Income

and Expenditure Survey (HIES) of Bangladesh points out that in 2010 31.5% of the population live below the poverty line and cannot afford the nutritional requirement of 2,122 calories per day.⁶

The flow of ODA for development cooperation in Bangladesh is still challenging. According to the Bangladesh Progress Report 2012, “between 1990-91 and 2010-11, disbursed ODA as a proportion of Bangladesh’s GDP has declined from 5.6 percent to 1.6 percent. During this period, per capita ODA disbursement fell from US\$ 15.75 to US\$ 12.01.”⁷

Table One points out that among donors to Bangladesh, only three countries — Netherland, Sweden and Norway — have fulfilled their commitment to provide more than 0.7% of their GNI as ODA to the developing countries. It seems that ODA performance for the majority of OECD countries remains distant from their commitment in MDG Goal 8. It is also important to note that Goal 8 is necessarily linked to the achievement of the other seven MDGs.

TABLE 1: Net ODA Received by Bangladesh from OECD Countries, 2010-2011

Country	ODA received by Bangladesh from OECD countries (US\$ million)	GNI of OECD countries in 2011 (US\$ million)	Total ODA provided by OECD countries (US\$ million)	Total ODA as % of GNI of OECD countries	ODA received as % of GNI of OECD countries	ODA received as of total ODA from OECD countries
1	2	3	4	$5=(4/3)*100$	$6=(2/3)*100$	$7=(2/4)*100$
Canada	13.91	1,570,886	5,084	0.32	0.0009	0.27
Denmark	13.10	335, 102	2,057	0.61	0.0039	0.64
Germany	48.05	3,617,712	13,329	0.37	0.0013	0.36
Japan	120.02	5,739,473	10,039	0.17	0.0021	1.20
Netherlands	0.33	829,013	5,969	0.72	0.0000	0.01
Sweden	11.55	502,451	5,005	1.00	0.0023	0.23
UK	96.69	2,370,444	13,039	0.55	0.0041	0.74
South Korea	54.47	1,038,981	1,259	0.12	0.0052	4.33
Norway	5.87	440,185	4,196	0.95	0.0013	0.14
Total	363.99	16,444,247	59,977	0.36	0.0022	0.61

Source: Cited in Bangladesh Progress Report, 2013, Bangladesh Planning Commission

During the period of 1990-91 to 2010-11, the total ODA received by Bangladesh was US\$10,811.2 million (see Table Two), out of which the transport sector received the highest share, followed by power, water resources, the health, and education sectors. During this period, total disbursement for important MDGs sectors such as education, health, social welfare and labour have shown rising trends. These MDG sectors, along with agriculture and rural development, received nearly 51% of total ODA outlay.⁸

Generally, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and its Development Partners (DPs) work together in the Local Consultative Group (LCG) mechanism. The LCG, however, is yet to play an effective role in terms of “development cooperation activities at sector level. Development Partners (DPs) are divided among themselves by the scale of their programme and considerable aid fragmentation.”⁹ To this end, it may be possible to say that the influence of a donor-driven approach is still very much alive in programme implementation, which is contrary to country ownership. Similarly, DPs feel more comfortable using their own aid management systems, even though strengthening institutional capacity prioritized in their own development agenda.

Since the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008, partner countries and donors have been making efforts to strengthen and improve their aid relationships. As a result, a Joint Cooperation Strategy (JCS) emerged in Bangladesh in 2010. The strategy aims to establish an ‘accountability mechanism.’ The Government of Bangladesh and the DPs have taken various joint initiatives to strengthen their relationships through the JCS. The JCS core document outlines a joint vision for aid effectiveness in Bangladesh and contains corresponding partnership commitments by both the GoB and the DPs. Policy level commitments are still in the process of being translated into practical changes through the formulation of a JCS action plan. Despite serious commitment on

the part of the Government and its development partners, producing results towards development effectiveness remains a challenge.¹⁰ Such slow progress is an indication that a true partnership has not been in place between the parties.

The Global Partnership for Effective Partnership for Development Cooperation (GPEDC), which was launched in 2012, emphasizes “the important role of other development actors, including SSC between emerging and developing

TABLE 2: Disbursement of ODA in Major Sectors during 1990-91 to 2010-11

Sector	Total disbursement (US\$ million)	% of total (rank)
Agriculture	668.9	6.19 (7)
Rural Development and Institutions	603.3	5.58 (8)
Water resources	1,260.3	11.66 (3)
Power	1,607.3	14.87 (2)
Oil, gas and mineral resources	566.8	5.24(9)
Science and technology research	0.6	0.01 (17)
Transport	2,198.1	20.33(1)
Communication	215.4	1.99 (12)
Industries	314.3	2.91 (11)
Education and religious affairs	867.5	8.02 (5)
Sports and culture	0.5	0.00 (18)
Health, population and family welfare	1,019.3	9.43 (4)
Social welfare, women’s affair and youth development	32.6	0.30 (14)
Labour and manpower	0.7	0.01 (16)
Public administration	211.7	1.96 (13)
Physical planning, water supply and housing	810.2	7.49 (6)
Mass media	16.1	0.15 (15)
Private sector	417.6	3.86 (10)
Total	10,811.20	100

Source: Cited in Bangladesh Progress Report, 2013, Bangladesh Planning Commission

economies, international organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs) and other non-state actors, including the private sector.”¹¹ SSC and Triangular Development Cooperation (TDC) could play a potential role in the emerging development scenario.

SSC is understood to be characterized by partnership and solidarity for development, rather than development assistance or aid. Sharing a common development experience, developing countries have valuable lessons, skills and expertise that can benefit other developing countries.¹² In terms of SSC, the role of India and China is especially important for Bangladesh. Bangladesh expects that SSC will bring significant progress in sharing development experience, transferring knowledge and strengthening horizontal partnerships as part of effective development cooperation between the Low and Middle-Income Countries (MICs) in the South.¹³ However, it is evident that both China and India do not often exhibit the principles of SSC in their roles in Bangladesh. Geopolitical tensions may affect the practices of SSC and TDC.

Ideally, SSC should not be approached along the lines of traditional relationships with northern donors. But SSC is also open to criticism. Mohammad Asif-uz-Zaman, Additional Secretary of the Economics Relation Division, states in a paper titled “A country level stocktaking of ODA from the Emerging and Southern Donors” that “some Southern contributors have been criticised for not taking sufficient account of human rights when providing assistance to programme countries.” He also focuses on TDC in the same paper:

Triangular development cooperation, whereby Northern donors finance projects or programmes executed by Southern countries has to date focused primarily on technical cooperation as

Southern countries are seen as having more relevant expertise and experience to meet developing country needs. While triangular cooperation forms a significant part of some Southern countries assistance programmes, its overall volume is not known due to lack of data.¹⁴

In Bangladesh, the role of CSOs, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), is very vibrant. These organizations provide a large number of aid/grant channels for development resources into the country. The 2011 High Level Forum’s Busan Outcome Document (BoD) recognizes the contribution of CSOs as effective development partners. The BoD denotes that CSOs promote “rights-based approaches, in shaping development policies and partnerships, and in overseeing their implementation.”¹⁵ CSOs in Bangladesh, for example, engage in development through service delivery, providing humanitarian assistance and offering policy advocacy and research.

CSOs intend to play a significant role as effective development partners in contributing to the achievement of the MDGs. They have been crucial in the promotion and shaping of the Post-2015 development agenda at the country level. However, at the same time, CSOs have to face a series of challenges relating to the shrinking space for social movements and civic activities in many countries around the world. In particular, CSOs who work on democracy and governance issues face pushback and repression from those who have powerful and influential stakes in the status quo when CSOs openly criticize them. These conditions pointedly indicate the lack of true partnerships between CSOs and government and powerful stakeholders. It should also be noted that international organizations enter into partnerships with other local and national CSOs for service delivery activities. However, their

approach is often not one of true partnership, but rather, more of a cliental approach. It has therefore been the CSO experience that the partnerships among CSOs, donors, and government cannot be relied upon to achieve their expected goals and objectives.

CSOs have also addressed their own governance, accountability and effectiveness as reflected in the Istanbul Principles and the International Framework for CSO Development Effectiveness. But in many countries, such as Bangladesh, NGOs have increasingly become subject to criticism about their roles and functions, levelled at them by the government, political parties, professionals and the general public. At the same time, NGOs also have taken the chance to criticise donors and government for their authoritative roles with the NGOs. In fact, NGOs occupy a very difficult position in public life, as constraints from donors and government are increasingly affecting their political participation on issues affecting governance, human rights and democracy. Indeed, a true partnership will only be realized when it breaks through the hurdles facing all types of civic actors in development.

Recent years have seen the UN heavily promoting and investing in partnerships to engage private companies in achieving sustainable development.¹⁶ In light of failed commitments and declining ODA in the aftermath of the fiscal crises in North America, the European Union and Japan, partnership with the private sector is increasingly a strategy by donors to increase financial resources for development.¹⁷

The role of the private sector in Bangladesh is noteworthy, especially for achieving economic growth. The Government of Bangladesh has promised to increase the GDP growth rate to the magical double-digit of 10% by 2017.¹⁸ Achieving this level of GDP growth requires facilitating a high level of local and foreign investment in the

economy. The Government adopted the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) approach in its budget for the 2009/10 fiscal year as a new alternative for stimulating economic development. However, there has been no clear direction as to who would implement PPP projects, and who would lead or supervise. A level of mistrust is evident between the public and private sector. Moreover, the private sector may not pay attention to the high cost of project implementation, as development programs are financed with public money and therefore excessive costs may become a burden on the people. Another major challenge for the Government is the establishment of a public institution for the preparation, implementation, and control of PPP budgets. There is also lack of clarity and hesitation regarding the means by which the Government will finance infrastructure development through a PPP initiative.¹⁹

The 2013 General Assembly of the United Nations reiterates that national ownership will be a fundamental condition for the achievement of the post-2015 development agenda. National efforts will also require assistance through international support and an enabling international policy environment for the development of the country. The ambition for the post-2015 agenda necessitates the mobilisation of all resources, public and private, domestic and international, and their effective deployment for reducing poverty and inequality. Renewed partnerships will be key in order to mobilise new public and private resources and take advantage of different contributions by stakeholders, especially in the areas of research, technology, innovation, finance and human capacity.²⁰

To conclude, it seems evident that while the idea of partnership is given rhetorical significance, in practice partnerships are neither emphasized nor translated into concrete actions. This failure has contributed to the lack of success of the international community to fully realize the targeted goals embedded in the MDGs. However,

experience suggests that working through true partnerships with mutual understanding and respect for common interest among all relevant stakeholders is essential to achieving complex socio-economic goals. The post-2015 development framework must emphasize building true partnership in practice, in order to realize a just world without poverty and inequality.

Endnotes

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