

# LEADING THE WORLD NGO Movement in Bangladesh

The Daily Star

Special Supplement

December 30, 1995

## Where the World Emulates Us

by Mahfuz Anam

There is no question that Bangladesh is the world's leader as far as NGO (Non governmental organisations) movement is concerned. In terms of number of organisations, extent of coverage throughout the country and percentage of the total population covered by their activities, the NGOs of our country have a record unmatched anywhere in the world.

While our image in the country of nations remains one of poverty, over population and natural disaster; through the work of the NGOs, we have been able to project another image of Bangladesh, one of creativity, self help and social commitment. Our NGOs have become models for the world to follow. Compared to all other types of international gatherings, when there is one dealing with peoples' initiative for development, it is to our NGO leaders that the world listens to. Topping over dozens of Presidents and Prime Ministers and hundreds of world leaders who attended the UN World Conference on Women in

Beijing last September, it our very own Prof. Mohammed Yunus who was the centre of attention of more than 34,000 delegates from all over the world. The New York Times wrote in its op-ed page that Md. Yunus was the biggest attraction of that World Forum.

It has been the creativity of the Bangladeshi NGOs, just as much their success, that has attracted global attention. It is not only the fact that Grameen Bank has been able to reach and service millions of its borrowers, but the fact that it questioned the conventional wisdom of global banking and literally put on its head, all existing theories of banking, that caught the imagination of the world leaders and development workers. Today Grameen Bank model is emulated in many countries in all continents - and the number is rising. The World Bank itself has changed its approach to poverty alleviation, much of it due to the work of Grameen Bank.

BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), known as the biggest NGO in

the world, has been a pioneer of non-formal primary education. Its model is now being applied in many Third World countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Unicef, the UN Children's Organisation has adopted the BRAC model for its global education programme. Policy makers, including ministers, and educational experts are constantly visiting BRAC schools to learn and replicate it in their own countries.

Then there are many others like Proshika, ASA, Caritas, UCIP, GSS, Nijera Kori, etc. whose successful work have attracted the attention of development experts from all over the world.

In the health sector the work of Gono Shastha Kendra has been pioneering. Modeled on the Chinese barefoot doctor concept, it was one of the first NGO in any Third World country to reach primary health to the rural people. It was also among the first to focus on the rights of women, and bringing them into the centre-stage of development activities.

It is our view that in their own country - Bangladesh -

the NGOs are a slightly misunderstood lot. Their donor dependence is one aspect of their work which agitates the public mind. The argument is very simple - if there is donor money, there must be a donor agenda, and

if there is a donor agenda, it cannot be to our own national interest. There used to be a lot of merit in this argument in the post Second World War era. In the height of the Cold War there used to be a lot of Western money coming in

through private channels which were camouflaged under this or that development work but were actually meant to pursue a political agenda. There was also the issue of imposing Western model of development on us. Much of the ideological content in foreign assistance has decreased enormously. About imposing the Western model, the free market ideology has been adopted by practically all governments, including our own. As for dependence on donor money, why blame the NGOs alone. Is our government any less dependent?

The most important thing to consider is what the donor fund is being used for. If it is for our development, as the case is for most NGOs, then where is the problem? Critics of NGOs rather naively think that donors are sitting with money, waiting for convincing local partners to launch some sort of scheme not necessarily for our benefit.

The truth is that donors operate in what can be called 'The Market place of Need' where our NGOs have to

compete with ideas, competence, accountability, capacity to deliver, relevance and thrift so that donor money is actually diverted to our country.

Our government has also been a bit ambivalent about dealing with NGOs. At first it ignored them. Then when the NGOs became a successful grassroots movement, there were attempts to suppress them. Now is the phase where the government is learning to live with them. What we hope is that government will make a sincere and thorough evaluation of the work of NGOs, take administrative actions where ever necessary, then extend a hand of genuine cooperation to the rest of them. It is to the cooperative phase that we would like to graduate to. It may be said that government, at the present moment does cooperate a lot. We know, and commend the government for it. But this partnership can be made much more fruitful and widespread.

Just ask the question that if countries from all parts of the world can come to learn

development work from our NGOs, then there must be something extraordinary in their work which we need to look into, and perhaps replicate in a massive scale to make the desired impact on our poverty situation. At the moment government has its own development projects, and NGOs have their own. Much can be gained through well planned cooperation between government and the NGOs.

Time has come, we think, for the people of Bangladesh to take a more serious look at the work of the NGOs. Our village people know about the work of NGOs, from their own experience. So we address ourselves to the urbanites, especially to the policy makers, business leaders, intellectuals, administrators and community leaders who, we think, still has much to learn about the stupendous work that our NGOs have done. This special year end supplement is The Daily Star's effort to inform the public about one area where we have, quite unknown to ourselves, become among the leaders of the world.

Total registered NGOs	-	966
Local " "	-	848
Foreign " "	-	138
Total Number of employees	-	1,19,666
" " "local"	-	1,19,201
" " "foreign"	-	465
Total Number of Projects	-	2,380
Total " "Districts covered"	-	61
Total " "Thanas"	-	400
Total " "Villages"	-	40,000
Number of non-formal schools set up	-	30,000
Number of students enrolled at present	-	10 lakh
Number of adults education centres	-	48,000
People received adult education so far	-	20 lakh

Source : NGO Bureau

## NGO Movement is Making Effective Contributions to Poverty Alleviation

Interview of Dr Qazi Faruque Ahmed, Chairperson of ADAB and Executive Director of Proshika Manobik Unnayan Kendra

been exportable items and being replicated in many parts of the world. In spite of many limitations NGOs in Bangladesh are much well coordinated that NGOs in other parts of the world.

DS : What are the present state of GO-NGO relations. How closely are the two sides cooperating ?

QF : GO-NGO relation has not been smooth and it has witnessed many sudden turns and jolts. However, in the last few years it has stabilized and moving somewhat in the positive direction. There are now two important initiatives namely "GO-NGO relation study" and "Institutional Strengthening for Government-NGO Cooperation." These are underway and are expected to increase knowledge and greater appreciation of the issues involved for a healthy GO-NGO relations. If recommendations of these initiatives are implemented we might expect a very fruitful and effective GO-NGO relations which will be helpful for a substantial positive impact in poverty reduction.

DS : How do you respond

to the criticism that NGO activities in Bangladesh are too dependent on donor funds? Is this dependence increasing or decreasing? Please elaborate.

QF : NGOs are providing development services to the poor communities in Bangladesh who can not purchase the services and neither funding from Government for these services are available. Therefore, NGOs has to rely on donor funding for carrying out their tasks. On the other hand, NGOs feel that poor in Bangladesh have a right to access international communities resources as much as the rich of our society who claim a major share of these resources. However, NGOs have been making efforts to make their activities sustainable in terms of reducing their dependence on foreign funds. As a result dependence is decreasing and in the future NGOs will be much more financially self-reliant than they are now.

DS : There are occasional complains about NGO activities. Do you take disciplinary actions from ADAB against

guilty NGOs? What supervisory role does ADAB play?

QF : Through ADAB NGOs have developed a "Code of Ethics" which is now mandatory from all NGOs to follow. This serves as the basis for disciplinary actions against any offending NGOs. ADAB's ability to play much more effective role in this regard will increase if government recognizes formally, ADAB as the apex organization of NGOs.

DS : What according to you. Is the future of NGO movement in Bangladesh ?

QF : NGOs movement is already a vibrant sector making effective contributions to poverty reduction and sustainable development. NGOs are expected to make even greater effort and contribution in the future. NGOs, as part of the civil society and non-partisan actor, should be able to make an important contribution for establishing participatory democracy. NGOs in alliance with other actors in development should be able to eliminate poverty by the beginning of the 21st century.



The Daily Star (DS) : What are some of the major success of the NGO Movement in Bangladesh ?

Dr Qazi Faruque Ahmed (QF) : The NGO Movement started soon after the independence of Bangladesh and it has been growing ever since. It has been able to demonstrate its relevance and effectiveness as its has developed very practical, innovative and replicable models of social mobilization, adult and primary education, environmental regeneration, collateral credit, family planning and health service delivery and disaster management. All these activities have cumulative positive effect on reduction of poverty in Bangladesh. NGO movement now covers about 40,000 villages and slums and is energized by active participation of 3.5 million poor households. Empowerment of women in bringing about positive changes in their live and livelihood has been another important achievement.

DS : What are some of the major failures?

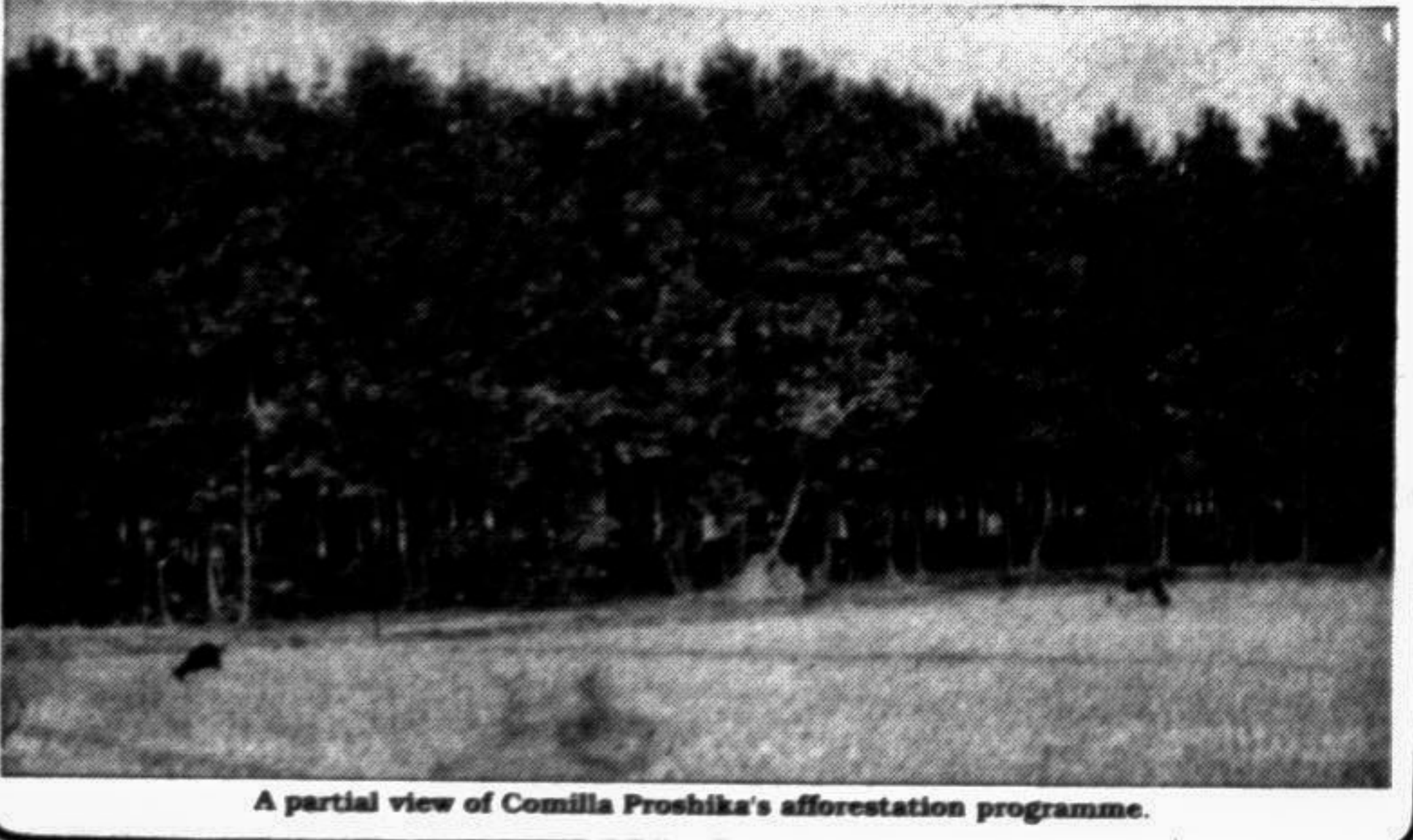
QF : NGO movement includes many diverse actors and coordination among them has not been ideal. NGOs relation with other civil society organizations has been inadequate. NGOs require voluntarism and spirit and professionalism in its activities, but many NGOs have not been able to combine these two elements in their staff development. NGOs are aware of these problems and though ADAB have taken remedial measures.

DS : What makes the NGO movement in Bangladesh exceptional compared to NGO movement in others parts of the world ?

QF : NGO movement in Bangladesh is very large, having substantial outreach in terms of covering geographical areas and different sectoral activities. Many of the successful NGO models in education, environmental regeneration, credit delivery and social mobilization have



A model of low cost house for flood-prone areas made by Comilla Proshika for the rural poor.



A partial view of Comilla Proshika's afforestation programme.

## ADAB — a Glimpse

ASSOCIATION of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) is an apex body of local, national and international PVDOs (NGOs) engaged in multi-dimensional development activities in the country. Having its emergence in 1974 as Association of Voluntary Agencies in Bangladesh (AVAB), it had its primary objective of networking and co-ordination among various international aid agencies involved in relief and rehabilitation activities in the country during that period. With laying of greater emphasis on agricultural development and food production, it was re-named as Agricultural Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) in 1976. Lastly, in 1983, through yet another change in nomenclature, the organization was transformed into an association of non-government development agencies working in Bangladesh. However, 'ADAB', the abbreviated name (Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh), remained unchanged.

The vision of ADAB, as developed over the years, is a better life for the underprivileged and under-served members of Bangladesh society and a strong and effective independent sector to help them achieve it. Its objectives include, inter-alia, building up an effective and strong private voluntary development sector, establishing NGO/PVDO (Private Voluntary Development Organization) solidarity, strengthening PVDO coordination, promoting congenial GO-PVDO relations, facilitating and sharing ideas, expertise and experience, building capacity of PVDOs, promoting mutual cooperation among them and helping them avoid duplication of activities/programmes. Coordination, monitoring, networking and advocacy for an enabling environment for the non-profit development sector in Bangladesh has been emerging as the major role for ADAB and it will continue its mission to achieve its goals.

ADAB is registered under the Societies Act of 1860 as well as with the NGO Affairs Bureau under the FD (Foreign Donation) Regulation Act of 1978. As of December 1995 its membership of 754 PVDOs consists of 185 central and 569 Chapter (local) members.

ADAB has the unique structure of serving the local NGOs/PVDOs through its chapters located in 14 greater districts all over the country. It has expanded the scale and scope of work over the years and has currently evolved into the largest umbrella of PVDOs in Bangladesh. The major objective has always been the strengthening of operational,

programmatic and management capabilities of the PVDOs by providing various need-based support services and assistance and by playing the advocacy role for creating an enabling environment for the nonprofit development sector. As mentioned earlier, it has a network of 14 chapters located in the district of Barisal, Bogra, Chittagong, Comilla, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Jessore, Khulna, Kushtia, Manikgonj, Mymensingh, Rashahi, Rangpur and Sylhet. It is also planning to start 3/4 new chapters within the next few years.

The association is governed by an Executive Committee (EC) comprising sixteen elected members representing eight local, four national, two international and two women PVDOs. The EC also includes the Chief Executive (i.e. the Director) as the ex-officio member. Each

Chapter has its own Steering Committee comprising six elected and one ex-officio member which works in close collaboration with the Central Executive Committee.

Major programme areas of ADAB include

i) Coordination, Sector Monitoring, Networking and Liaison focusing on:

-PVDO-PVDO Relations  
-GO-PVDO Relations  
-Donor-PVDO Relations  
-PVDO-Sectoral Network Relations

-PVDO-Civil Society Relations

-Relation with National, Regional and International Agencies/Networks

-Relation with UN Bodies

ii) Advocacy, Policy Lobbying, Linkages and Development Communication with Specific Emphasis on:

-Sectoral Advocacy  
-Public Interest Advocacy  
-Strengthening National

Linkages and Development Communication

-Strengthening International (Regional and Global) Linkages and Development Communication

At present ADAB has 9 programmes and some special programme desks through which it extends its support and services to the doorsteps of its member PVDOs. These are: i) Information and Support Services (INSS); ii) Development of Local NGOs (DLN); iii) Development Communication and Publications (DCP); iv) Training; v) Women's Development; vi) Environment and Social Forestry (ESF); vii) Disaster Preparedness and Management (DPM); viii) Aquaculture and Fisheries Support Programme (AFSP); ix) Computer Support Service; and a special programme desk, the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW '95).

# Happy New Year



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