

Regulatory framework for NGOs

They made significant contribution to social development

It is time we got serious about NGOs. Since their inception in 1971 with the birth of Bangladesh, swathed in international sympathy for the new country, when a new idiom of developing from the scratch rent the air, the NGOs have come a long way. There has been enormous growth in the sector. It has delivered much-needed service to the teeming poor outside the reach of government's organised development efforts. It has made significant contribution not only to the socio-economic uplift of communities but added value to the positive image of Bangladesh as well.

Thirty-five years of the evolution of Bangladesh in certain respects and that of NGOs are almost interchangeable phrases. They merit far more attention today than anytime before. Adhocism cannot do with the sector anymore. It has been hamstrung and stifled by interminable NGO bashing, credible allegations of politicisation and even political victimisation. The NGO community has been divided, even though the mainstream remains steadfast in its noble commitments.

In this context, the entire gamut of NGO activities better be brought under an autonomous regulatory body comprising government, NGO and civil society representatives. The virtue of an independent regulatory framework as distinguished from an appendage to an administrative authority like the NGO Bureau lies in keeping the sector immune from the buffeting of political changing of guards. Accountability is the key word. Prof Younus has even voiced demand for a micro-finance regulatory body.

Towards having a broad-based regulatory framework, the government will be well advised to set up an independent expert body with representatives from all relevant sectors to look into the whole question of making the NGO operations transparent, strictly according to mandate and, above all, ensuring financial accountability across the board. Financial disclosures must be mandatory for all NGOs.

While all of this is happening, namely the expert committee getting ahead with their work, all NGOs led by the leading ones should make voluntary public disclosure of their funding, income, assets and liabilities through newspapers. This will help allay misgivings about mismanagement, wastage and duplication in financial spending. From that vantage point, the rest of the agenda can move ahead.

Journalists on the run

Such threats must end

It sounds incredible that when people in power are grabbing every opportunity to talk about press freedom and human rights violation, journalists continue to be hounded by their hired goons. In a latest development, three newsmen of Kushtia had to run away and find refuge in the capital to escape the wrath of a local ruling party lawmaker. These correspondents of some reputable national dailies and a satellite television channel of the country have been given death threat by the lackeys of the lawmaker for exposing their corruption and crimes that included extortion, grabbing public work contracts and public and private property, among others. They are known to have brought the allegations in a joint statement at a press conference at Dhaka Reporters Unity on Wednesday.

It would be saying the least that there have been many incidents of atrocity on working journalists in recent past. We observe a spate of arrogance of power in the shape of influential people putting out threats on journalists from what used to be innuendoes. In most of the cases criminals having connections with people in power were involved in the vendetta missions against the newsmen. No wonder the tendency has fed on the frequent media bashing by the ministers and MPs whenever the pen of the journalists became too strong to be challenged in any other way.

When journalists are maimed or killed at the instruction of vested groups for writing reports on their misdeeds, it speaks of outright cowardice and moral bankruptcy. We strongly urge upon the relevant authorities to start a proper investigation into the allegations of the Kushtia newsmen. We also feel it is time the lawmaker in question came out with a statement on the charges brought against him.



ZAFAR SOBHAN

STRAIGHT TALK

The NRBs are a superb resource whose talents are not being utilised. These are people who want to and can be of immense assistance to the country's development, but there is no policy or structure in place to facilitate this. As is often the case in Bangladesh, it is not that we do not have the resources, but that we are making pitiful use of the vast resources we do have at our disposal.

work as tenured university professors and bankers, as IT professionals and doctors, as lawyers and social workers. They own restaurants and grocery stores. Even those pursuing more humble avocations such as driving cabs or selling fruit are often able to do quite well for themselves and their families.

Having spent almost my entire adult life in North America, I have come across countless fellow Bangladeshis in the most improbable places and doing the most improbable things. By and large, the NRBs are another success story, of whose achievements and accomplishments we can and should be proud.

Let me define my terms. Most migrant workers are on temporary work visas and will eventually return home. In contrast, the NRBs are Bangladeshis who have, for the most part, emigrated and settled abroad, and are living and raising their children there.

However, even those Bangladeshis who have scrimped and saved and sacrificed to get out of the country often retain a fondness for the homeland that they have worked so hard to leave.

They read Bangladeshi newspapers on-line, celebrate February 21, eat in Bangladeshi restaurants and shop at Bangladeshi stores, and remain keenly interested in what goes on in their home country.

Many are very successful. They

The Chinese foreign investment boom has largely been led by the overseas Chinese community which is very wealthy and influential, and to this day the majority of foreign direct investment in China, ushering in huge changes in the country and economy, has been provided by the overseas Chinese.

India and Pakistan are two other examples of countries whose non-resident communities have played a significant role in domestic affairs.

Much of the funding and intellectual support for the BJP in India came from the NRI community, which is every day becoming more and more integrated into the mainstream of Indian life.

The NRIs have led India's foreign investment boom, and they have been at the forefront of the transfer of technology and import of expertise and management skills that has made India what it is today. Even the opening up of the economy can in part be credited to the influence of the NRIs.

The Indians have been very smart about this. They even have a Ministry of NRI Affairs. To help facilitate the re-integration into the country. If you want to invest or come back home with your family,

the ministry is there to help you with the process.

Less remarked, but equally interesting, is the impact of the non-resident Pakistanis on Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan has gone Indian one better by bringing in as prime minister not one but two NRPs who had spent the vast bulk of their adult lives outside Pakistan.

The main economic impact of the NRPs was felt after 9/11, that precipitated an exodus of talent and funds back to Pakistan. The Pakistan economy was the beneficiary. The recent boom in the housing and financial markets can largely be ascribed to this phenomenon.

Bangladesh needs to do the same thing. We need to bring in the NRB community as our development partners. Many NRBs would like nothing more than to reconnect with their homeland. Their financing could precipitate an investment boom. Their skills could be crucial to building the economy.

We need to set up a Ministry of NRB Affairs to tap into their talent, their expertise, their management skills, their money, and, most importantly, their patriotism.

If NRBs want to return home,



New York NRB shows that Bangladeshis never leave home.

there should be a ministry to facilitate this, to help them find a the right spot for their talents, a place to live, good schools for their children, preferential banking and tax arrangements.

We need to roll out the red carpet for them if we want their skills and their cash. One idea would be to create some kind of a foundation whereby NRB funds can be targeted and channelled, both into the private and the public sector.

Finally, the NRBs deserve a seat at the table. Many are highly trained professionals with experience and ability. They are educated and open, and creative and progressive in their outlook, and have much to offer..

Most importantly, they often remain fiercely patriotic and want more than anything else to be involved. They can help kick-start not only our economy but our

society as well.

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As is often the case in Bangladesh, it is not that we do not have the resources, but that we are making pitiful use of the vast resources we do have at our disposal.

Zafar Sobhan is Assistant Editor, The Daily Star.

Dear politicians



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

CROSS TALK

Dear politicians that sixth sense is becoming real. All these years you have hunted with the hunter and run with the prey. Now people are coming after you. It does not matter if you are in the government or opposition. They will find and hunt you down. Meanwhile, it is your chance to think. Did you have to be so pathetic?

So raise the walls around your houses. Get passports for your spouses and children. Make sure you have got visa for each of them. Start shredding all evidence and do not leave any paper trail. Take enough cash with you and carefully choose a country for asylum. Some countries will send you home, if you are wanted in your own country. Consult your physicians. Stack up sleeping pills, antacids, enough bandage rolls and ointments. Keep the medicine chest ready. Trust me, it will come handy one day, maybe soon.

Bad news! The magic of your word may not work anymore. In less than six months, many of you will be out of office, some not re-elected, some not given party tickets! Soon you will be former MPs, a bunch of Wizards of Oz bereft of their wonder machines.

Yours familiar world of power and popularity will recede into the dense fog of oblivion.

Some of you will not give up, and will try to stay afloat in the political waters. You will sit on school committees, mosque committees, neighborhood this or neighborhood that, hoping to return to power in the next after next elections. You

will look for opportunities to appear on TV or in the newspaper like a sinking man clutching at anything. You will frantically squeeze into public forums, trade associations, any other bodies, societies or organized platforms. You will spend money to buy your sphere of influence or the semblance of it. You cannot live without influence like fish cannot live without water.

Sadly, most of you at some point will live in the afterglow of your erstwhile past and will never return to the limelight again. You will grow old, fall sick, some will recover to live longer and others will succumb to fatal illness or natural death. You will leave behind your wealth, property, children, and memories of your days in power like embers smouldering in the ashes.

Some of you will get bored, womanize, drink, and litigate, vegetating in the feckless life of a prolonged twilight. In fact, your ill-gotten wealth will keep you locked in an absurd state. You will be neither powerful nor powerless, neither remembered nor forgotten, neither public nor private, neither common nor uncommon, neither loved nor hated. All these contradictions will run in your blood,

pulling you in two opposite directions. You will speak, nobody will listen.

Politics makes strange bedfellows, but it also makes you lonely when you are not a hotshot. So many people have come and gone, so many leaders, so many minions, and so many ministers catapulted to glory and then thrown into the abyss by fate. Every life has a purpose that exceeds its physical dimensions. You have lived your lives in quiet desperation, all your efforts directed at physical gratification, power, affluence, comfort, fame, all driven by the romantic construct of your selfish imaginations.

You are a disgrace for the nation, a moral affront to why it was created. You talk about liberty, freedom, martyrs and people, but bite your tongue, you do not mean them. Your sole focus is money; the blood and flesh of people are the grist to your greed mill where lives are crushed to turn ranking causes into spanking cash. Some of you are obviously lucky, returning to power again and again in your seasonal treks from party to party. You believe in power. But there is no power in your belief.

Politicians, you are shameless.

Your children are fattened by ill-gotten money, your house shines like an ivory castle in the moonlight of grief where millions squirm in the heat, grope in the dark and drink water full of filth. You junket all over the world, your family goes on holidays to distant lands, but your national airline is going bankrupt, denied landing on foreign airstrips.

It is disgusting to listen to you these days in meetings, seminars, roundtables and on TV screen. You fight like alley cats, attacking each other like frantic warriors, telling lies, even worse, repeating them, in complete disregard for our intelligence. You sit in the opposition. In effect, it is all the same. You run this country like a joint stock company, sharing profits at the year end. Show me one politician who has not gained and I shall show you thousands of people who have lost.

Let me bring a joke from another country. What is the sixth sense that was developed within a Soviet

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan is a banker.

The OECD and globalisation



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM

writes from Madrid

LETTER FROM EUROPE

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the threat of communism as an alternative system virtually disappeared in most of the world. Even China, which politically remained communist, adopted capitalism as its economic system. So, what happens to an organisation, when it loses its raison d'être? Does it commit hara-kiri or reinvent itself? The OECD will try to address this issue at this month's ministerial meeting.

On May 23, this year's ministerial meeting of the 30-member Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) will be held in Paris. This meeting is going to be a crucial one for the future of this organisation.

The OECD was formally established in 1961 to succeed the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC), which administered the Marshall Plan, responsible for the miraculous recovery of post-war Europe. The OECD's objectives were to promote economic growth in the West, help the developing nations

which were coming out of colonial subjugation, and to help expand free international trade. In short, the OECD's fundamental goal was to function as a bulwark against communism and to ensure the success of free-market economies at the height of the Cold War.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the threat of communism as an alternative system virtually disappeared in most of the world. Even China, which politically remained communist, adopted capitalism as its economic system. So, what happens to an organisation, when it loses its raison d'être? Does it commit hara-kiri or reinvent itself? The OECD will try to address this issue at this month's ministerial meeting.

Hara-kiri or reinvent itself? The OECD will try to address this issue at this month's ministerial meeting.

Globalisation has so far produced a mixed bag of results -- an unprecedented economic growth and at the same time a widening gap between the rich and the poor. In the words of the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, globalisation has created "massive levels of inequality and poverty."

It has until now been characterised by free movement of capital, liberalisation in the movement of manufactured goods (the WTO has over the last fifty years managed to cut tariffs on industrial goods and services in which the rich nations have a comparative advantage, from 40% to 4%), destruction of local industries in

the developing countries, all sorts of protectionist barriers like agricultural subsidies and tariffs to obstruct the movement of agricultural products from poor countries to the rich, import quotas on textiles from the poor to the rich, and ever increasing restrictions to impede free movement of labour from the poor to the rich countries.

In all this, the West's role has been shameful and hypocritical.

Until very recently, the burden of this unfair distribution of wealth created by globalisation had been borne principally by the poor nations, but now the industrialised countries, which have so far reaped the benefits of globalisation through their control over the IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO are also facing the challenges of globalisation.

As pointed out by another Nobel laureate Paul Samuelson, faster technological advances in countries like China may soon erode the current competitive advantage of more advanced countries. China is currently spending vast sums of money on research and development.

This combination of low wages and high technology in some emerging countries is already creating problems in the US and Europe. As the technological gap between the rich and the poor narrows and as the West's monopolistic control over international organisations loosens, there will be growing insecurity and inequality among workers in the rich countries.

According to a report published recently in the New York Times, in

do so in an equitable manner, it needs broad-based support from the rich and poor countries alike.

Until now the OECD has been a Western-oriented organisation. China, according to a report published recently by the OECD itself, "could overtake the US and Germany to become the largest exporter in the world in the next five years."

Yet China has not been invited to join the OECD. Brazil, Russia, and the oil-producing countries of the Middle East are also in a similar situation. The OECD should not commit hara-kiri but in order to function as an effective international organisation, it needs to reinvent itself and admit new members like China, Russia, Brazil, etc. as equal partners.

The writer is a columnist of The Daily Star.



Donald J. Johnston, Secretary-General of the OECD.

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