



Center for Development Communications DEVCOM

# Consultation Report

## “Recent Crisis and the Urgency of New Strategy for the NGOs in Bangladesh”

Held on: July 27, 2020

### Background

Bangladesh has been an integral region with untrodden aid opportunities for several international NGOs since the wake of liberation war. While working to provide relief and rehabilitation through agendas, these NGOs gradually pedaled their way to serve a nascent aid industry in the making, of Bangladesh. Their wings had spread to scout for growth opportunities in social protection, climate change, health and nutrition, gender equality and women empowerment, humanitarian crisis response, migrants’ rights and countless other development issues. That paved the way for many local heroes to enter the now esteemed development sector. With more than 2510 registered NGOs under the Government of Bangladesh, these protagonists have created a ripple of network securing partial success in joint advocacy and coordinated programmes.

### Introduction

While most of the development practitioners are directing efforts to create a sustainable world by serving the marginalized and disadvantaged communities, the development sector itself is changing rapidly with a shift in roles of donor agencies and decline in funding prospects. Despite the universal transformation in aid agendas, scopes for the NGOs in Bangladesh lie in many spheres. New targets set by the SDGs need to be achieved by all the signatory countries. In Bangladesh, this latitude can be used to unite the efforts of the government with those of the local NGOs. The growing crisis of displaced population from Myanmar has opened up a new era of interventions for humanitarian response to prevail. However, the COVID-19 situation has created further crisis for the NGOs, as donors are working towards reducing their capacity along with changing their mandates. This is when the local NGOs of Bangladesh, a recently declared lower-middle income country, need to start lessening their donor dependency. By being aware of and adapting to new strategies in alignment with the existing course of development, our local NGOs have the potential to rethink their own mandates and redesign their business models.

DEVCOM designed the consultation on “Recent Crisis and the Urgency of New Strategy for the NGOs in Bangladesh” with an objective to identify the current development drift, explore new opportunities and recognize the direction to move forward for the local NGOs of Bangladesh. With 79 participants, divided by expertise but united by goals, from various corners of the development world, this consultation gave rise to an intensive and critical dialogue session which was held in a cloud meeting platform, Zoom, on July 27, 2020.

### Speakers

**Ms. Rina Roy**, Director Program, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)

**Ms. Sheepa Hafiza**, Human Rights Activist



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**Ms. Nazia Haider**, Programme Manager-Safer Migration, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC

**Ms. Lima Rahman**, Chief of Party, Save the Children Bangladesh

**Ms. Nobonita Chowdhury**, Director, Gender Justice and Diversity, BRAC

**Mr. Syed Saiful Haque**, Chairman, WARBE Development Foundation

**Ms. Afroz Mahal**, Dhaka and Country Portfolio Manager, Plan International

**Mr. Tony Michael Gomes**, Director, World Vision Bangladesh

**Ms Rahnuma Salam Khan**, Deputy Chief, MoEWOE

**Mr Shakirul Islam**, Chairman, OKUP

**Mr. Towfique Ahmed**, Divisional Head, Barisal, UNICEF

**Mr. Asif Munier**, Migration Analyst

**Mr. Hassan Imam**, Managing Director, DEVCOM

## Participants

Government representatives, UN Agencies, International NGOs, NGOs from District and Divisional level, Development Practitioners and Media Personnel joined the Consultation.

## Discussion on the consultation

The consultation was initiated by the managing director of DEVCOM, presenting a deck with the manifestation of all the participants. After highlighting a synopsis of the NGO community in Bangladesh, some internal and external emergent concerns were shed light upon, which later garnered critical attention. Among the recent growing concerns, a major weight was borne by the alarming shift in focus of donor agencies and decline in funding, not to mention the exacerbating impact of COVID-19. Addressing all these challenges, DEVCOM pointed out an array of factors which can be turned into opportunities for growth in a crisis. NGOs in Bangladesh serve as a close-knit fraternity making their existence more accessible and reliable to the distressed communities. Moreover, the government's commitments at the global level can be supported by a coalition with the local NGOs. Besides, these local NGOs have a country wide coverage with access to untapped, vulnerable zones which are difficult for the administration to reach at times. Being the voice of the most-at-risk population, our local actors exhibit key traits of transparency and accountability for which the international agencies seek partnership opportunities here. These scopes can be given shape by exploring changes in four fundamental domains – Governing Body, Management, Programme Operations and External Affairs. Focusing on building staff capacity, exploring new areas for program planning, developing innovative strategies for fundraising, mobilizing local resources and strengthening media relations with a crisp brand image, the participants were given an idea to operationalize their enterprise and business models and keep up with the changing world.



## Expert's opinions

After the presentation the speakers were welcomed to join plenary and put forth their opinions, centered on how this crisis can be tackled. Some valuable insights gathered from their speeches are as follows:

According to Ms. Nazia Haider, Programme Manager-Safer Migration, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC –

*'The concept of localization, adapted in 2016 by the SDC, which stems very much from humanitarianism, is the strengthening of local people and organizations so that they can effectively and efficiently deliver their services and work. The Swiss government calls it localization of the SDGs and promote it because it's an efficient process, ensuring the unabridged transfer of aid money from international donors to the local level NGOs, eliminating the loss due to various channels involved in between. When we work with sustainability we expect action from local actors and not just CSOs, NGOs or local government institutions. Only then we can achieve localization which will leave a meaningful impact. So it is a sustainable approach to development. The GDP of a country is not sufficient to determine its status of being 'middle-income' but the organizations that represent it, also needs to fit the label. Localization requires the following key parameters – good leadership, a vision, digitalization, partnership and coordination.'*

Ms. Nobonita Chowdhury, Director, Gender Justice and Diversity, from BRAC focused on organizational dynamics–

*'As development practitioners, instead of competing with each other if we work in partnership using our competencies and diverse capacities, we will be able to tackle many of these challenges which will also avoid duplication of the same work. The new normal is all about collaborating and working together.'*

Ms. Afroz Mahal, Dhaka and Country Portfolio Manager, Plan International highlighted that safeguarding policies for all the NGOs need to be more available, considering the current trend of development.

Dr. Nizam Uddin Ahmed emphasized on the need of partnership and digitalization -

*'The COVID 19 situation is not going to end soon, which means, the organizations which are working as development partners and linking with others need to understand the new normal in our terms. The model of funding and partnership will change in the new normal which means implementation of digitalization in each organization is imperative.'*

Mr. Tony Michael Gomes, Director, World Vision Bangladesh raised awareness on the importance of initialization-

*'As an organization, we have a strong mindset of depending on donor funding/agencies. If we want to communicate our needs and achievements with the government, we have to be braver and step forward.'*

Ms. Rina Roy, Program Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) –

*'If we want to create impacts, we have to reduce our cost and increase dynamism wherever possible in our organizations.'*



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Ms. Lima Rahman, Chief of Party, Save the Children Bangladesh covers the need of policy framework for employees –

*'Besides adapting to the new normal, in a world post COVID-19, we have to enact policies for staff wellbeing and carry out surveillance of public health specialists.'*

Ms Rahnuma Salam Khan, Deputy Chief, MoEWOE, shares that the government is looking forward to partnering with NGOs to foster development -

*'The lack of ideation in the public sector can be filled in by the NGOs if they share their innovation and ideas and work in coalition with the government. NGOs and field administrators should propose the government, with their data analytics capacity to work together in program implementation.'*

Ms. Sheepa Hafiza, Human Rights Activist identifies the void in our policy implementation–

*'COVID 19 has shed light on some very critical images which include our inability to continue paying our development workers, our ineffective communication of how the virus can be transmitted, and not to mention, our lack of integrity. Are we being able to establish our values of knowledge, behavior and transparency equally in the field as we state them in our vision and mission? Human Resource policies will have to be reframed keeping the new normal in mind.'*

Mr. Syed Saiful Haque, Chairman, WARBE Development Foundation –

*'NGOs are working unitedly in the sectors of health, education, poverty and even with the issues of domestic violence. We have to prepare ourselves to work for the funding that will be soon dispatched for achieving SDGs. We have to be innovative, diplomatic and dynamic when working for sustainability.'*

Mr Shakirul Islam, Chairman, OKUP, added to Ms. Nazia's conception of localization–

*'For the grassroots level organizations, accessing institutional funding through bidding becomes difficult, that is where the implementation of localization will help. Donor agencies should keep in mind that local NGOs need funding not just to develop communities but also investments to develop their own capacity, which ultimately will help in building communities better.'*

Mr. Towfique Ahmed, Divisional Head, Barisal, UNICEF, talks about strengthening government relationship with local actors –

*'The new era of COVID-19 has opened another window to rethink the dynamics of relation and potential of cooperation between NGOs and Govt.'*

Mr. Asif Munier, Migration Analyst –

Summarizing the entire plenary, Mr. Asif Munier, enumerates the aspects brought up by speakers from their perspectives. He says, proactive partnership among NGOs, INGOs, UN Agencies, Government and even private sector can be seen but the layers of coordination among them need to be defined more accurately. He states, how innovation, capacity building, thinking out of the box, localization, and organizational skills development are all adequately important for local organizations but these NGOs need to realize where their niche is. Directing efforts in what they are best at than grabbing any opportunity that lies ahead is more fruitful as that will encourage diversity and avoid duplication of aid



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work. With good leadership, internal policies and standards of the organizations need to be set in a framework to attract donor funding. However, before chasing the fund, a development organization should determine where their expertise lies and on which ground will they efficiently be able to let that seed grow. Recapitulating the urgency of documenting all the ground-breaking work that these local actors perform, Mr. Asif stresses on how the digitalization of good practices alike will be equally acclaimed in the new normal. At the end, he says that being inclusive is as important as being objective for rights-based organizations, resonating the moto of SDGs which is 'Leave no one behind'.

### Open discussion

Participants took over the floor with their valuable suggestions to the government and donor representatives present in the consultation. Their appeals added some intricate insights to the bigger discussion in play. Most of them emphasized on the need of proactive partnership which should not be limited to only working in the field together but also visible in proposals. NGOs build a strategy, implement it and reach new heights. Contrary to the need of adopting a new strategy, advocates of community development shares that if strategies are changed overnight, the days of progress and labor that the local NGOs have made, would get executed. Thus, donor agencies have a liability to help local NGOs mobilize their resources before changing their track. Denoting to the topic which gave this discussion a new height, one of the activists asked a pressing question. Will the government announce funds to the rights based organizations who plan to build capacity through localization? Advocates working for rights and safety of sex workers reminded us how domestic violence has gone up by a third in this pandemic and sex workers have few to no client to sustain their livelihood on. They urged the government and donor agencies to look into how sex workers who have no work, food or money to pay bills right now, can receive aid. Another important aspect of the relationship dynamics between government and local NGOs was brought up. Both the parties need to break the ice and come forward to collaborate in working out solutions. By easing the process of registration also, government can demonstrate acceptance towards the NGOs.

### Recommendation

After a rigorous exchange of dialogue between esteemed speakers and participants, we have discerned some core issues which the local NGOs and any development organization can focus on to embrace the new normal. The world post COVID may be far from reality but the opportunity this pandemic has given us to reboot our development practices and thought-processes is vital.

- **Proactive Partnership** - One of the recurred topics that was brought up by fellow participants in the discussion was the need of proactive partnership. Even though coalition among government, NGOs and International organizations has existed since decades, now is the time when partnership must be administered at its full capacity. For this, our institutions and organizations driven by development, are required to gather a thorough understanding of what partnership could mean. Regardless of the size of the organization, NGOs and institutions alike need to expand their network and bridge the gap by building capacities through prospective alliance where they see fit. An organization may collaborate with those whose programmes and operations complement their work and together they can create a more holistic impact in order to generate



the desired results. Conversely, if organizations work on diverse issues rather than focusing on the same crisis, then opportunities will not need to be sought after.

- **Innovation** - Innovation solutions can be integrated with the niche area that an organization is skilled at. If these innovative solutions are promoted adequately through the proper and full utilization of social networking platforms, then partnership too will become a step easier. At the same time, public sector and the international agencies are not the only resorts now. Private sector can be a good prospect of partnership given how Corporate Social Responsibilities are reaching new heights. Therefore, effective use of digitalization has stood out notably.
- **Staff wellbeing, benefits and safety protocols** – Speaking from the perspective of employees, these points were mentioned quite a few times in retrospect to the huge attention that our broken healthcare system has gathered during this pandemic. As development practitioners, our responsibility does not end at serving the communities only but also in keeping track of our employees. During a global crisis as such, where the rate of unemployment is at its highest, organizational development can save one from cutting down on their employees. If through programme implementation and investment from the right channels, the internal capacity of these organizations are built, then the crisis of funding can be easily. So NGOs need to determine how to take advantage of a crisis which requires a shift in mindset.
- **Organizational Behavior pattern** - That brings us to our third and most inclusive idea of coping with the new normal. Organizations need to start changing their behavior pattern which is highly driven by international donors. By lessening our reliance on funding from foreign agencies, we should be more strong-willed at approaching our government and striking a dialogue on budget to help the country's distressed communities. The mental turbulence that binds us into thinking about the funding crisis can be broken to seize opportunities of aid that lay around us. In fact, the formation of many small foundations and relief groups during this pandemic has demonstrated that having good policies only does not always guarantee good work.

To recapitulate, if innovation isn't marketed well, then our funding and partnership models will remain unchanged. At the same time, COVID-19 has influenced the digitalization of organizations starting from communication to programme development. So dynamism must be integrated with innovation now. NGOs needs further support for capacity building on sustainable programme planning, skills for local resource mobilization and fund raising, generating new business ideas and developing enterprises.