



CIVIL SOCIETY PARTNERSHIPS PROGRAMME
National Seminar and Workshop on
CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS, EVIDENCE AND POLICY INFLUENCE

Report of the
National Seminar and Workshop on
Civil Society Organisations, Evidence and Policy Influence

24-25 July, 2005, BRAC Inn, Dhaka

Organised by
Unnayan Onneshan – The Innovators
and
Overseas Development Institute

August 2005



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Executive Summary

The second national seminar and workshop of the CSPP South Asia Regional Consultation was held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 24th and 25th July 2005, in collaboration with Unnayan Onneshan – The Innovators, a centre for action and research for development. The two-day event included a half-day seminar followed by one and half day workshop.

Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has been looking at the links between research and policy for several years. It is now beginning a process of identifying, developing, distributing and delivering tools, research and training support that can help research providers access the policy process. The programme is designed to strengthen the capacity of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) through research base and other forms of evidence to promote pro-poor national and international development policies and practices.

The Unnayan Onneshan – The Innovators aims to contribute to innovation in development through research, advocacy, solidarity and action. It searches for solutions to endemic poverty, injustice, gender inequality and environmental degradation at the local, national and global level. The philosophy and models of the centre for research and action focus on plurality, participatory and sustainable development and seek to challenge the narrow theoretical and policy approaches derived from unitary models of development.

The objectives of the seminar and workshop were to provide a forum for representatives from research organisations and NGOs to discuss the opportunities and challenges for CSOs to use evidence to inform policies, learn about the world wide research and practice in this area, share experiences about on going activities and identify opportunities for collaborative work.

The seminar began with a welcome speech by Jakir Hossain from Unnayan Onneshan, then Major General Anwarul Kabir Talukder (Retd.) M.P., Minister of State, Ministries of Finance and Planning, Government of Bangladesh, presented the inaugural speech. John Young and Naved Chowdhury then gave a presentation on ODI, the Context, Evidence and Links (CEL) Framework, Tools for policy influence, and Implications for CSOs. A case study from Bangladesh was presented by Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir, describing corrosion of small rice farmers in the context of price hikes and the experience in policy advocacy to protect the farmers. A discussion session followed the case study presentation.

In the following workshop Naved Chowdhury and John Young explained more comprehensively the RAPID Context, Evidence and Links (CEL) Framework and Tools for Policy Influence, and the Civil Society Partnership Programme (CSPP). Jakir Hossain presented the second case study from Bangladesh focusing on Poverty and Employment in Bangladesh PRSP at the workshop. This was followed by a presentation by Naved Chowdhury showing how the CEL framework can be used to analyse the political context, evidence and links. John Young explained how to influence policy using the RAPID framework and practical tools. Following this session participants were divided into three groups, who presented four case studies and analysed their case studies using CEL framework.

This report presents key points of presentations, group work and subsequent discussions.

THE SEMINAR

Inaugural Session

Jakir Hossain opened the seminar by briefly introducing the purpose of the meeting. In his welcome speech he introduced the Overseas Development Institute and Unnayan Onneshan. He spoke on the role and capacity of the CSOs in influencing policy and referred to the vital role that CSOs can play in influencing policies and programmes which have direct bearing on development in general and poverty reduction in particular, as innovators in service provision, as advocates with and for the poor and as builders of capacity. He highlighted the need for long cultivated connections with stakeholders such as public sector officials, politicians, business leaders, NGOs, trade unions, women's groups and educators to advance pro-poor agendas.

In his inaugural address Major General Anwarul Kabir Talukder (Retd.) M.P., Minister of State, Ministries of Finance and Planning, Government of Bangladesh, acknowledged the importance of participation of CSOs in the policy-making process. He mentioned how people's participation was ensured in the process of formulating a country's PRSP. He expressed the view that without relevant information, critical analysis and inputs, no one can take part and contribute to the policy process effectively.

Referring to the UK and other democracies, where CSOs extend support to policy makers with critical inputs, he told the participants that Bangladesh needs to develop such a mutually beneficial culture to make Bangladesh's policy-making process more democratic and participatory. He spoke about the high value of ODI's partnership programme in facilitating the process of building capacity for the CSOs in Bangladesh, to enable them to extend support to policy-makers with critical inputs in the domain of policy-making. He regarded ODI's endeavour for partnerships as a valuable contribution to the overall process of democratisation and development in Bangladesh.

ODI Presentation

Following the inaugural addresses, John Young and Naved Chowdhury introduced ODI's Civil Society Partnership Programme (CSPP), and outlined the lessons learnt from the South East Asian and African consultations held recently under the CSPP. Naved Chowdhury began the ODI presentation by introducing the objectives of the seminar and stated that the seminar was intended to provide a forum where policy-makers, practitioners and civil society organisations can share, discuss and learn more about how civil society organisations use evidence in policy processes.

John Young continued the presentation by introducing ODI's Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme, which aims to improve the use of research and evidence in development policy and practice through research, advisory work and case studies. Highlighting the challenges in the process of policy influencing, he cited examples of the relevancy of policy research on African agriculture. He advised that although the linear logical model consists of some consecutive sequences such as identifying the problem, commissioning research, analysing results, choosing options and establishing and implementing policy; in reality the whole life of policy was a chaos of purpose and accidents – not at all a matter of the rational implementation of the so-called decisions through selected strategies. Declaring that research was more often regarded as the opposite of action rather than a response to ignorance by many policy-makers, he identified RAPID's analytical framework as effective in maximising the impact of research on policy and practice. He explained the framework's interrelated factors: political context, evidence and links along with external influences; highlighted some case studies, in particular the Animal Health Care in

Kenya case; and emphasised the need for CSOs to understand the political context, to carry out credible research, communicate effectively and develop a good network with other CSOs. Mentioning the SMEPOL project, he also presented some practical tools and showed the importance of using these tools in influencing policy.

Addressing the current state of CSO activism in Bangladesh as well other Southern parts of the world, Naved Chowdhury cited some opportunities and challenges for CSOs. For example, he presented how results of household disease surveys in Tanzania informed a process of health service reforms, which contributed to a dramatic reduction in infant mortality; he also presented how the HIV/AIDS crisis in Thailand and South Africa deepened because of the reluctance of the governments to implement an effective control programme, despite clear evidence of what causes the disease and how to prevent it spreading. The presentation also provided information on guiding principles for an equitable and participative partnership programme, based on a number of key lessons drawn from CSPP consultations across Africa and Asia. He informed the participants that the legitimacy and credibility of CSOs are continuously being challenged by the government and there remains a lack of trust between CSOs and government. Highlighting the need for authentic and up-to-date information, he opined that CSOs need to understand the policy process and the context of policy-making and that proposals put forward by CSOs should be feasible and practical to influence the policy-making process.

Bangladesh Case Study: Evidence and Policy – Lessons Learnt, Opportunities and Constraints

In sharing Bangladesh experience on evidence and policy, Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir made a presentation on an issue of importance for day-to-day lives in Bangladesh – small farmers and their vulnerability. Making a presentation on Undercutting Small Farmers: A Grassroots Insights of Rice Trade, Titumir said that the farmers lose at least Tk. 9166 crore every year in the domestic trading networks, which amounts to one fifth of the share of agriculture in the gross domestic product. He showed that a trader appropriates Tk. 5000 for the produce of one acre of Boro rice, while a farmer receives only Tk. 4500. He stated that the study showed 'for producing Boro rice in one acre of land, a farmer has to spend Tk. 10500, but by selling it on the local market he gets Tk. 15000, making a profit of Tk. 4500. But the consumer has to pay Tk. 15000 for the said quantity of rice, providing the middlemen a profit of Tk 5000'.

The case study showed that the middlemen played a key role in this price setup and that the high cost of inputs, fertiliser, irrigation and poor access to formal credit system are the reasons behind the price hike. As a result, farmers are being marginalized and losing their share in the national wealth, which in turn is leaving their livelihood asset and tenural security vulnerable and causing polarisation. In this regard, the government could take appropriate measures to maintain the stability of the market price of essentials, he said, and declare a fixed rate. In order to bring changes in the policy arena based on the evidence of price hikes and farmers share, the Unnayan Onneshan is advocating for a Rice Agreement which can offer rice farmers the opportunity to sell their whole crop of rice to licensed mills at a fixed price.

Rashed Titumir also drew attention to the government support to agriculture, which is less than two percent of the total output in agriculture, although the permissible amount is 10 percent under WTO rules. This is creating a difference between importing and exporting countries trade, with exporting countries enjoying a higher amount of government support. The difference would be 25 to 40 percent, considering the exporting countries output in relative comparison, he cited. He showed how India was dumping their products in the Bangladesh market by utilising their export policies. Based on this evidence, he proposed

another policy option to fund the Net Food Importing LDCs to provide financial support, at least to the de minimis level under the WTO mechanism. Unnayan Onneshan is advocating internationally to establish a compensatory fund for food importing for least developed countries.

Discussions

Following the presentations, a lively discussion took place which highlighted a number of issues. While some participants expressed that the quality of research and information was important for policy-making, a good number were of the view that whether evidence will be used or not by policy-makers depends on a number of interrelated factors such as credibility of research, settings of policy-making and internal and external influences. Some participants talked about the unavailability of reliable information to be used for policy making and policy change. Several participants were of the view that in many instances the government mistrusts the CSOs and sometimes treat them as subcontractors instead of equal partners in shaping the country's policies; as such they are not very willing to use researchers and information provided by the CSOs. The Government has also questioned the legitimacy of the CSOs in providing critical analysis and information.

Some participants called for strong linkages and continuous communication between diverse stakeholders to bridge the perceived knowledge gap between researchers and policy-makers in order to influence the policy process. The issue of policy literacy was also raised. While there is a lack of capacity of CSOs to undertake credible research and provide practical solutions, the political context makes evidence based policy influencing more difficult. The importance of CSOs in knowing how policy is prioritised and monitored in the policy making process was stated.

Many participants talked about the political context under which policies are shaped and modified. It was stressed that in spite of some demand for research and information from different government departments, the information provided by the CSOs is not used as the culture of collaboration and cooperation has yet to be developed. In addition, participants opined that it is not always possible to publish research reports despite availability of credible research because the result of the report may lead to problems for the government. Participants voiced their concern about the PRS process where the government, in the name of participation and country ownership, had only used induced participation through thinly spread consultation with select stakeholders. The case of the policy on women being modified recently without any consultation with any stakeholders was cited as an example of policy-making divorce of any evidence. The government adopted the policy in 1997 in line with Beijing Platform for Action with substantial contributions from different women's groups, while the recent shift of position in the policy has been a step backward in terms of women's empowerment.

The issue of external influences was also raised, in particular, the role of international financial institutions and the WTO in shaping not only the macro-economic policy but also the sectoral policies in Bangladesh. Many of the participants felt that the linkages for policy uptake were much more dependent on a variety of factors including interests groups and connections with policymakers through other means, including business connections.

THE WORKSHOP

The Workshop on 'Civil Society Organisations, Evidence and Policy Influence' began on the later half of the day following the seminar and was attended by participants from different civil society organisations including NGOs, CSOs, trade union organisations, and research organisations (see Annex B for the list of participants). After the participants self introductions John Young and Naved Chowdhury introduced the RAPID Context, Evidence and Links Framework, Tools for Policy Influence and Implications for CSOs. To explain the political context John Young focused on strengths of resistance, the policy-making process and opportunities and timing for input into the formal process.

Bangladesh Case Study : Poverty and Employment, Lost in the Queue

A second case study entitled 'Bangladesh: Poverty and Employment, Lost in the Queue' was presented by Jakir Hossain. While the Bangladesh economy has been exposed in a good many positive characterisations, the case study showed that the indicators of economic and social progress were falling short of the verdicts of the enthusiastic commentators. While there had been a modest decline in poverty, there had also been increments in inequality. The study showed that while the poverty reduction rate has been one percentage point a year since the early 1990s, the overall Gini index of inequality increased from 0.259 to 0.306 during the same period. The rate of unemployment and under-employment has increased due to insufficient job creation and the young educated workforce are being victimised with the process. Mentioning formal economy increases and informal economy decreases with the development of an economy, he showed that in Bangladesh this system has not been working. Figures show the labour force to be 18.82 percent in the formal sector and 80.82 percent in the informal sector. The study showed that the poor lag behind in employment in both farm and non-farm sectors, and at the same time, the right to work, the right to just and favourable conditions of work and the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living are missing in current policy.

Jakir explained the ideology and policies underpinned the PRSP as external influence to current policy regime. He mentioned that from mid-1980s Bangladesh's economy had taken a different route following the dictates of the Bank and the Fund that includes liberalisation, deregulation, public expenditure cuts aiming at boosting up the economy and integrating into the global economic circuit. Explaining the reflection and continuation of those in the PRSP, he was of the view that PRSP did not discuss investment clearly because of the belief that the open market strategy would be followed. So he argued that if anyone would like to define her/his role in influencing policy and forwarding pro-poor agenda, s/he has to comprehend the reality from the perspective of existing policies and strategies propagated and imposed by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs).

The case study showed that existing government policies are not adequate to address the issues, and some alternative directions were proposed including an employment guarantee act for evidence led poverty reduction strategy. Jakir mentioned that the Unnayan Onneshan was engaged in influencing for policy uptake in favour of an employment guarantee act for establishing workers rights and ensuring their economic security through: (a) constituency building with women organisations and trade union movements; (b) input to specialised agencies in the form of advisories and research output; (c) networking with the international organisations for changes in the meta narratives; and (d) working with the media through dissemination of information and monthly sharing meetings.

ODI Presentation

The second day of the workshop started with a review of day 1 by John Young. This was followed by a presentation by Naved Chowdhury showing how the CEL framework can be used to analyse the political context, evidence and links that contributed to the evaluation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Approach during the late 1990s. He showed that awareness of a problem with the international development policy in late 1990s, failure of SAPs, mounting public pressure for debt relief, diverging agendas for instances in UK for poverty and in USA for governance acted as political context around PRSP. Evidence used to advocate for PRSP included long term academic research, applied policy research and Uganda's PEAP. Based on this evidence, the World Bank, IMF in line with SPA, Bilaterals and different NGOs were able to establish the idea of PRSP in September 1999. John Young then explained how to use RAPID's framework and other practical tools including force field analysis, stakeholder analysis and SWOT Analysis. Mentioning the Indonesia experience in livestock services, he explained communication strategy and network mapping outcomes.

Group Session

Participants were asked to select case studies from the Bangladesh context and use the framework to analyse them in groups. The participants divided into three groups and presented four case studies, then the groups were asked to analyse the respective case studies using the CEL framework, to identify key factors that enabled the CSOs to influence policy and provide input to the CEL framework. Four case studies were: 1) Bilkuralia Case: Establishing Rights over Khas land for landless; 2) Ensuring 50 competency in primary education after grade V; 3) Plan of Action for children: Incorporate children voice; 4) PRSP: Disaster Risk Management.

Presentation of Group 1

Group 1 presented a successful movement of civil society in Bilkuralia, Pabna, where a CSO in partnership with local people and local political elites were able to recover Khas land from the land grabber and distribute it to the landless people by registering the land in their names according to the land policy of the government. Local awareness of the issue, support by the local political elites and the presence of a champion named Rana Master helped to influence the political context against powerful elites and vested interest groups of government who occupied the land. People had the information on the land, i.e., they were able to recognise the land as Khas land and they also had information that a case was filed on that piece of land in 1960. Existing laws on Khas land also acted as evidence in favour of the issue. In addition, it was mentioned that a successful experience of another area – Ghugudaho, Pabna, inspired the movement for establishing land rights for the landless.

Based on this evidence, Group 1 presented how local people, with the help of a CSO, successfully solved the problem. It was explained that the farmers union first raised the issue in 1993 and in 1994, a CSO named ALRD was involved with the movement. ALRD mobilised local people, other local and national level NGOs and lobbied with the government. Some leftist parties also supported the movement. As a result, they were able to put a memorandum to the government. On the basis of this, the government investigated the matter and published a report, which strengthened the people's voice and subsequently, the government announced the land as Khas land by enlisting the land in the land policy.

Presentation of Group 2

Group 2 presented a case of advocating for a policy to ensure 50 competencies for all children after grade V in order to achieve quality primary education. Using the CEL framework they identified the context as: low performance of teachers; lack of monitoring and supervision; lack of a systematic approach in primary education, thus students were not doing better in secondary and tertiary levels of education. They found evidence of best practice in NGOs and community based schools in different reports by different organisations (DFID, CAMPE etc.). The practice at Shibram School in Gaibandha was highlighted as a successful model of a community based school. Based on this evidence, they proposed how to carry out best practice in all primary schools, especially government schools in the community, in Union Parishad Standing Committee and at the national level. They focused on the importance of a School Management Committee (SMC) and emphasised the need for increased resource allocation through PRSP, National Plan of Action and the Second Primary Education Development Programme.

Presentation of Group 3

Group 3 presented two cases: the first case was Plan of Action for children: Incorporating children's voice; and the second case was PRSP: Disaster Risk Management.

Group 3 firstly described the context of the issue of incorporating children's voice in the national plan for action. The group reported that the grounds for promoting children's right were: ratification of a UN convention on the rights of children in 1991; ILO convention 182 to eliminate the worst form of child labour, 2001; and international pressure for a National Plan for Action for children. At the same time, constitutional rights for children, Children Policy 1994, a national consensus on the issue of children, the threat of child labour and child trafficking acted as a domestic issue to raise the concerns over incorporating children's voice in the National Plan for Action. The group mentioned the statistics on children by BBS and research reports on issues around children by various organisations and media which were used as evidence to advocate for the issue. Based on this evidence, memorandum were submitted to the parliament by the CSOs. To advocate for the issue CSOs had built networks nationally and internationally with various NGOs and development partners. They arranged children's forums and organised a children's parliament to raise the children's voice. Media also worked to spread the message and CSOs lobbied with the ministries of Women and Children Affairs formally and informally. In addition, they had been able to mobilise grassroots people. As a result, government incorporated children's concerns (insecurity in the family, in school, child education, their protection) into the national policy.

The additional case described the incorporation of the disaster management issue into PRSP. Though Bangladesh is affected by various disasters every year, some activists with the support of donors had carried out some research work on the issue. They submitted the report to the Economic Relation Division and convinced the government to incorporate the issues of concern for disaster risk management in the PRSP.

Key Findings from Group Discussion

- Civic activism in Bangladesh has increased in recent years. The activism is however to be armed with apparatus and instruments for change-oriented engagements, especially making inroads into the authority of policy elites and power brokers. Evidence originating from CSOs is often challenged or not taken seriously due to its qualitative focus. While there is a need to find innovative qualitative research methodology for robustness of information, there is a lack of analytical capacity, particularly in quantitative research

methodology. There is a lack of capacity of the CSOs in terms of providing practical solutions to a problem. Capacity building of CSOs in terms of research and information gathering, methodology and communication are required.

- In a partnership programme with government, NGOs are always treated in a subcontracting manner rather than as equal partners because of prevailing mistrust between NGOs and government. Civil society is fragmented, reflecting the confrontational political culture of Bangladesh. Steps have to be taken to build up trust between NGOs and government through long term collaboration and sharing of ideas and concerns.
- Attitudes and approaches of the people towards the government machinery have to be changed to influence the government in shaping policies and programmes. The CSOs and government tend to think as opponents. It is essential to initiate processes for engagement by civil society on policy design, implementation and outcome, which are to be independent of the donors as well as the government. Such exercises will provide the basis for encouraging civil society as a stakeholder to identify policy alternatives and to build support for particular policy options. Such processes will serve to establish a degree of *ownership* over the policy agenda.
- The development experiences in Bangladesh demonstrate that unless policy changes originate from domestic discourse and are designed with stakeholder participation, it is hardly possible to ensure successful implementation of the policies. CSOs need to be more transparent and accountable to people, not to donors. The shifting of focus of their work to be in line with the donor agendas jeopardises their credibility. CSO's participation in any work should be prioritised according to the country context and people's concerns rather than the donor's concerns, otherwise it will not be possible to raise peoples' voice to influence public policy.
- Research reports should be available for the general people and reports need to be published in easier language and reader friendly formats. There is a need for a systematic exercise to identify potential supporters and opponents for any particular policy changes sought. The packaging of information and effective communication are important for bridging between grassroots, researchers and policy makers.
- Policy literacy is important for CSOs; at the same time the capacity enhancement of the government to grasp the information provided by the CSOs in order to translate it to policy is required. Absence of informed discussion on important public issues severely jeopardises the credibility of public policies, limits their acceptability and undermines their efficacy. In order for policies to be sustainable, it is important to recognise the need for making the process of policy formulation more inclusive and democratic.
- The continuous link between people-researcher and policy makers is essential for any policy uptake. For any evidence to be considered for changes in policy, all stakeholders' participation needs to be ensured.
- There is a need to cross-check information before putting forward evidence to policy makers, especially if there are two institutions conducting a survey in the same area, using same tool and achieving with different results.

Way Forward

At the end of the workshop, participants provided some recommendations on how ODI can support CSOs:

- Providing financial and technical support for research initiatives by CSOs on a long term basis and on a basis of equal partnership;
- Organising training for building capacity of various stakeholders involved with policy and advocacy. ODI can initiate capacity building through long term collaboration with local

CSOs for in-depth training programmes and workshops on policy analysis and tools, research methodologies and communication strategy;

- There is a need for the exchange of information and knowledge through not only electronic media but also in other forms of communication. ODI in partnership with local organisations can organise more similar workshops in different regions in Bangladesh;
- There is a need to strengthen existing networks among institutions working to influence policy and ODI can facilitate such process;
- Organising staff exchange programmes with CSOs in Bangladesh;
- Conducting research in collaboration with the CSOs in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir thanked the participants for their valuable participation in the seminar and workshop, and expressed gratitude to them for their presentations in the group sessions, for taking part in the discussion and for their valuable recommendations. He hoped that the suggestions of the participants would enrich the experience of the Civil Society Partnership Programme and would show the way forward. He encouraged the participants to get in touch with the organisers so that they could move together to articulate and change towards a pro-poor agenda in development policy and praxis.