

## **Role of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in Socio-Economic Upliftment of Rural People of Assam**

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*In the last few decades, a great deal of interest has been shown by the social scientists and policy planners in the NGO sector and its possible role in the process of development. In this context, we need to analyze how far the NGOs are effective in rural development and what role do they play in such development. In view of the growing importance and greater involvement of NGOs in the development process, it is also necessary to study the impact of the programme of NGOs in uplifting the socio economic status of target groups. Against this background, an attempt has been made in this paper to analyze the working of NGOs for the rural poor.*

**Key Words:** *NGO, Socio-Economics, Upliftment, Beneficiary, Non-beneficiary*

### **Introduction:**

Socio-economic upliftment of the people is the prime responsibility of the government in a welfare country like India. But development of a community is a gigantic task for any government. Most of the development programmes initiated by the government are not fully successful due to various factors such as administrative problems, lack of proper communication with the target groups, lack of availability and improper utilization of fund, lack of sufficient technical personnel, lack of awareness of the people regarding development programmes or projects, monitoring procedures etc. Due to these factors, the government programmes cannot reach the target groups in time and to the desired extent. By comparison, it is argued that NGOs with their advantage of non-rigid, locality specific, felt need-based, beneficiary oriented and committed nature of service have established multitude of roles which can effect rural development (Ramakrishna 2013).

NGO is an organization, which is free from government control. The terms Non Government Organization and Voluntary Organization are used interchangeably. But NGO has a democratic orientation unlike the private sector. Despite the presence of government and private sectors, NGOs are welcomed because they provide an institutional mechanism to cater to different socio-economic development programmes, where the government machinery has no existence and the private sector does not find incentives to garner profits.

Although voluntary action had existed in every civilization, yet its original form was known to exist according to recorded history of India since the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century. The record of the

National Archives shows that the 'Friends in Need Society' was the first workable NGO in Madras in around the year 1850 (Gogoi 1999). Thereafter, more NGOs came into existence particularly after the enactment of Societies Registration Act -1860, Govt. of India.

In recent times NGOs have become a part of a new development paradigm or New World Order in the today's world. NGOs and particularly International NGOs (INGOs) are a part of globalisation as enormous amount of development funds are being channelled or re-channelled through them during the past three decades. The new policy agenda of civil society building and 'NGO-isation' also matches the neoliberal agenda of government roll back and decentralisation (Ghosh 2012: 106).

### **Definitions of NGO:**

It is not easy to define NGO in a simple word. There is no generally accepted definition of NGO and the term carries different connotations in different circumstances. Sociologist, Sills (1968: 362) defined it as "an organized group of persons that is formed in order to fulfil some common interest; in which membership is voluntary in the sense that it is neither mandatory nor acquired through birth and that exist independently of the state".

The World Bank defines NGOs as "private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social service, or undertake community development" (OED 2002: 1).

Most of the sociologists define NGOs as organizations that possess four defining characteristics that enable them to be distinguished from other organizations in civil society. These are: voluntary, independent, non-profit, and self-serving. NGOs are rendering their services with a voluntary spirit for the uplift of millions of poor people in the country. It is generally believed that NGOs have close access to the people and their efforts are very much benefiting rural communities. They must clearly understand that people predominantly require motivation than money, awareness than materials, information than inputs supply, education than doles, empathy than sympathy, guidance than gifts, facilitation than contribution, opportunities than charities. Hence, NGOs must first become thinking organizations.

From the views and definitions quoted above it becomes clear that NGO is a social service and developmental, non-profit, citizen based group that functions independently of government. NGOs are organizations based on local, national and international levels to serve specific issues such as eradication of poverty, protection of human rights, preservation of environment, health care etc.

A good number of NGOs have been playing vital role in rural community development, besides government interventions. Realizing that the government alone is not able to meet the challenges of the massive and enormous task in the process of rural development, the non-profit, voluntary and NGOs are to be involved in different phases and activities at global, regional and local levels. Thus, in later phases, both the government organizations and NGOs have been actively involved in transforming the lives of rural poor. No doubt, NGOs have been constantly working day-in and day-out to solve the problems concerning children, women, senior citizens, environment etc.

and uplifting the socio-economic status of the poor. However, despite their good intentions, a large number of NGOs find it difficult to sustain their organizations and projects in the long-run (Haider 2013:35-43).

Organizing Self Help Groups (SHGs) has emerged as a popular activity of NGOs during the last two decades. The members of SHGs are direct beneficiaries of NGOs. The main activity of the SHGs is thrift and credit. NGOs trained them in different vocations and established linkage with the Banks to start micro enterprises either in groups or individually based on their interest and visibility of the vocation.

NGOs have been engaged in enterprises like mushroom cultivation, poultry, goattery, processing of food, vermicompose, and other non farm self employment activities such as handicrafts (traditional dress making, jute bags, bamboo work, embroidery etc). Under the support and guidance of NGOs, beneficiaries gain or benefited from these income generating activities. In recent years, some NGOs have started working with Panchayats in the rural areas, playing the role of educators and trainers. Every effort in this direction makes the state more dynamic.

The aims and objectives of most of the NGOs from Assam are to develop human resources, form self-help groups with people below poverty line, arrange financial assistance and rehabilitation of weaker sections of society, preserve environment, impart education and training to women and children, solve unemployment problems through agriculture, horticulture, farming, fishery, handloom and textiles and to hold seminars, workshops, public meetings in order to develop work culture in rural areas.

Keeping in mind these aims and objectives, let me now review the performance of some selected NGOs from Assam.

### **Objectives and methodology:**

The main objective of this paper is to study the impact of different activities undertaken by 15 selected NGOs from the three districts of upper Assam namely Jorhat, Golaghat and Dibrugarh on socio-economic upliftment of rural people through generation of employment, income and improvement of standard of living of the beneficiaries. The major hypothesis of this study was: NGOs cannot be considered as an effective alternative independent institution in promoting more responsive and sustained approach to development activities for accelerating rural development. To test this hypothesis, 5 NGOs were purposively selected from each of the three district and a total of 15 NGOs were included as sample for the study.

The following criteria were followed to select these NGOs:

First, NGOs registered under the Society Registration Act XXI 1860 or equivalent enactments of the state of Assam were selected. Second, the NGOs, which were at least five years old from date of registration, were included as our sample for study. Data were collected from the field in between 2011 to 2013.

In order to carry out the impact assessment study, 30 per cent or 450 beneficiaries of ongoing projects of all the 15 NGOs were randomly selected from a comprehensive list of 1500 beneficiaries. On the other hand, samples of 20 non-beneficiary respondents were selected as respondents from the functional area of NGOs each of the three districts. Thus, a total of 510 respondents were selected for the study. In this study, 'beneficiaries' are identified as those who intended to benefit from NGO activities, the primary stakeholder of a development or a humanitarian intervention, usually in a state of poverty, marginalization and vulnerability. Non-beneficiary means those who were not directly involved with NGO activities.

Both primary and secondary data were collected for the study. To collect primary data interview schedule and observation method were applied. The secondary data were collected from annual reports of NGOs and from various books, magazines and journals.

In this study, different parameters like income, expenditure, consumption standard, housing, sanitation, drinking water, health and medical and education of the respondents are used to analyse the impact of NGO activities on their beneficiaries and non beneficiary respondents.

### **Findings and Discussion:**

The study revealed that a large number of such organizations are also registered as small Youth Club, Sports Club, Yubak Sangha, Mahila Samittee, Self Help Groups etc., Regarding the areas of operation, majority of the NGOs have performed their activities in block and district levels. It was also found that apart from the statutory executive and advisory committees, the size of general body of these NGOs vary from 31 to 61 members.

From the profile of 15 NGOs, it was found that all NGOs were working in the areas of socio-economic development such as promotion of education, health, environment, awareness, wage employment, women and child welfare, and income generating activities. People have accepted these NGOs and have a confidence that its activities will have a long-term positive impact.

### **Activities of NGOs:**

**Entrepreneurial activities** included mainly production oriented economic activities such as agricultural activities (33.33%), Khadi and handloom Production (26.67%), dairy, fishery, poultry, duckery, piggery etc (20%), bamboo craft, bee-keeping, pickles making (13.33%), and allied activities such as grocery, tailoring, knitting and embroidery etc (6.67%).

**Social welfare activities** mainly included health camp (26.67%), relief and rehabilitation (26.67%), sanitation (20%), women and family counselling (13.33%), old age home, crèche etc (13.33%)

**Educational Programmes** included marketing of agricultural and SHGs product (33.33%), motivation scheme in agriculture (26.67%), school education (20%), adult education (13.33%), and exhibition (6.67%).

**Training activities were conducted** mainly related to pickles/toy making, food processing,

fruits preservation etc (33.33%), entrepreneurship development (26.67%), cutting, tailoring, weaving (26.67%), improved cultivation practices (13.33%).

**Awareness activities** included health and medical awareness (26.67%), awareness of local govt. (26.67%), awareness of drinking water and sanitation (20%), maintenance of peace and environment awareness (13.33%) etc.

### **Source of Fund:**

All NGOs received funds from government projects, national and international NGOs and funding agencies such as Central and State Social Welfare Board, NABARD, CAPART, RGVN, RMK, World Bank, Action AID, Oxfam. During the course of field work, it was learnt that annual budget of as many as 9 NGOs was estimated at above Rs. 3.1 lakh and less than Rs. 25.0 lakh. Most of the NGOs made payment to their office and field staff in the range of Rs 2000 to Rs. 6000 per month.

### **NGOs role in people's participation:**

This study shows that the reasons for increasing peoples' participation in NGO activities are - formation of SHGs, promotion of savings habit, empowerment of grass root level people and upliftment of social status.

The study reveals that out of 450 beneficiaries, 270 (60%) felt that they are now more self reliant in their day to day activities, while 285 (63.33%) realized that their regular earning is increased which they attributed to their participation in NGOs programmes.

Another important finding of the study is that 300 (60%) respondents participated in the training programme organised by the NGOs on harvesting of high yielding varieties of different seasonal crops cultivation which was of 13-21 days duration. As many as 95 (21.11%) respondents actively participated in the training programme on diary, poultry and fish farming which were of 21-30 days duration.

In various food processing training such as traditional food, snacks and sweets, pickles making, fruit preservation etc, a total of 190 (42.22%) respondents participated. The duration of the training programme was 11-17 days. As many as 180 (40%) respondents participated in the training on weaving, 80 (17.78%) respondents participated in candle and soap making training and 110 (24.44%) respondents attended training on knitting and embroidery and 215 (47.78%) respondents participated in health awareness training programme organized in their localities. All the training programmes were organised by the selected NGOs in their localities through their expertise as well as experts from Agriculture department, medical department, Blocks, DRDA etc.

Another notable finding is that all the NGOs became successful in popularizing the concept of SHG among poor rural women. All NGOs helped the SHG members in establishing bank linkage programmes and 13 (86.67) NGOs arranged finance for their beneficiaries through banks and other financial institutions. Majority i.e. 11 (73.33%) NGOs provided free training in different

productive fields. Regarding people's participation in various programmes organized by NGOs, the opinion of majority i.e., 12 (80%) NGOs were satisfactory. Significantly, only 2 NGOs viewed that the people's participation level was most satisfactory. Only one NGO officials reported unsatisfactory comment towards people's participation in their programmes.

### **Demographic characteristics of beneficiary and non-beneficiary households:**

It was found that 280 (62.22%) beneficiary households were nuclear and 170 (37.78%) were joint in nature and in case of non-beneficiary households 97 (64.67%) were nuclear and 53 (35.33%) were joint in nature. Majority beneficiary and non-beneficiary households' size were upto 5 members with 2395 and 857 members respectively.

Among the 450 beneficiary households, a total of 1449 population were found as working population engaged in different occupations such as agriculture and allied activities, business, services etc. In case of non-beneficiary households, it was 447. The number of working population both males and females were found here in agriculture and allied activities for both beneficiary and non-beneficiary respondents.

Regarding age profile, it was found that 140 (31.11%) were in the age group of 20-40, 190 (42.22%) were in the age group of 41-50, and 120 (27.11%) were in the age group of 51 and above. In case of non-beneficiary respondents, 83 (55.33%) were found in the age group of 20-40.

Regarding education level, majority 64.44% of beneficiaries and 61.33% of non-beneficiaries were found to read upto High School Living Certificate level. Regarding marital status, 68.89% of beneficiaries were found married and in case of non-beneficiaries', 56.67% were found married.

### **Monthly income of beneficiary and non-beneficiary households:**

The income levels of households were divided into four groups: a) less than Rs 6000, b) Rs 6000 to Rs 12000, c) Rs 12000 to Rs 25000 and d) Rs 25001 and above. Income of the beneficiary households was found to increase gradually from their income generating activities after involvement with NGOs. In case of non-beneficiary households, monthly income level was comparatively lower than NGO beneficiaries.

It was found that monthly average income per household for NGO beneficiaries was Rs 6751.11 in different income groups. In case of non-beneficiary households, it was Rs 4581.66 in different income groups. Income differences in between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries were Rs 1100 in lower income group and Rs 2275 in higher income group.

### **Average income and consumption expenditure of beneficiary and non-beneficiary households:**

From the data on average income of beneficiaries belonging to different income groups and average expenditure for food and non-food items per month, it was found that there is increase in come after involvement with NGOs. The expenditure differences of beneficiaries before and after involvement with NGOs were noticeable.

On the other hand, the average income and consumption expenditures of non-beneficiary households were comparatively lower. From the expenditure differences between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, it was clear that consumption expenditure of beneficiary households was higher than non-beneficiary households. It was Rs 800 for the income group of less than Rs. 6000, Rs. 850 for the income group of Rs. 6000 to Rs. 12000, Rs. 1030 for the income group of Rs. 12000 to Rs. 25000 and Rs. 1120 expenditure difference in between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries for the income group of Rs 25000 and above.

### **Consumption pattern of respondents:**

It was found that beneficiary respondents consumed more food staff per capita per day though it was below ICMR norms. Difference of average food consumption per capita per day in between beneficiary and non-beneficiary households were also found.

Average monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) of beneficiary on food and non-food items marginally increased after involvement with NGOs. Before being NGO beneficiary, it was Rs 704.1 and after being NGO beneficiary, it was Rs 988.3, while it was Rs 862 for non-beneficiary households. Average MPCE of beneficiary respondents was found higher than the average MPCE of non-beneficiaries.

### **Standard of living of the respondents:**

In order to analyze standard of living of the respondents' households, parameters such as housing, sanitation, drinking water, health and medical and education were used.

After involvement with NGOs, the beneficiaries' housing condition was found to improve. A large number of Kachha houses were found to be replaced by pucca and semi-pucca houses. In case of sanitation, pucca and semi-pucca facilities were found to increase. Percentage of households with drinking water from tap and tube well were found to increase while ponds and wells as source of drinking water had declined. With regard to the government medical facilities, it was gathered that a large majority beneficiaries were aware of it.

Regarding education facilities, it was found that preference for government school and college remained almost the same among beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries. But after involvement with NGOs, the beneficiaries were able to admit their children in private schools and colleges also.

It was found that standard of living of beneficiary of NGOs improved after their involvement with NGOs. With the involvement of NGOs, beneficiaries became aware about availing of better education, health and medical facilities. Data indicate that there is a significant difference in the status of beneficiaries after their involvement with NGOs as shown by the result of chi square test. Regarding drinking water, health and medical, housing and sanitation it is evident that the differences are statistically significant at 0.05 level ( $P=0.000$ ) with 2 degree of freedom. Regarding living standard there was no significant difference between beneficiary and non-beneficiary respondents.

From the analysis and chi square test, it may be concluded that the hypothesis of the study, i.e. NGOs cannot be considered as an effective alternative independent institution in promoting more responsive and sustained approach to development activities for accelerating rural development stand rejected. Hence, NGOs can be considered as an effective alternative independent organization in promoting more responsive and sustained approach to improve standard of living of the rural people.

### **Problems faced by NGOs:**

During the course of field work, the researcher also observed the NGOs also face certain problems while carrying out their activities in rural areas. The problems are: inadequate fund, lack of trained personnel, lack of voluntarism and dedication of few members of NGOs, lack of proper transportation facilities in their activity areas, lack of participation of local people and lack of linkage with line organizations, non-cooperation of govt. agencies with NGOs, lack of cooperation from target groups, lack of communication facilities such as fax, email, and internet etc.

### **Conclusion:**

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that the impact of NGO activities on their beneficiary had been positive on following counts: increasing income levels, improving consumption and expenditure patterns, creating awareness about better education, health and hygiene. The earning and contributing members of the family including the beneficiary respondents are now active players in decision making process in their families. From the profile of 15 NGOs, it was found that all NGOs were working in the areas of socio-economic development such as promotion of education, health, environment, awareness, self employment, women and child welfare, and income generation activities. The finding of this study clearly explains the way NGO programmes are useful to uplift the livelihood status of the needy people. The outcome of this study would therefore be helpful for the policy makers and donor agencies to take proactive steps to empower and strengthen this 'third sector'.

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