Cooperative Antagonism in Development Research: A Perspective From Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT: Development research in Bangladesh creates friction in projects among various stakeholders—donors, NGOs, managers, researchers or the poor beneficiaries. Research is an element of power relations among the contending actors. The mutually reinforcing relations of power between different actors determine the quality and outcomes of research. All the contending actors’ aims may be to serve the poor by promoting development in order to alleviate poverty, but cooperation between them becomes a source of antagonism that can seriously hamper the promotion of local knowledge issues, which become lost in the ensuing differences of opinion and aims.

KEYWORDS: development research, NGOs, project manager–donor relations, Bangladesh

Introduction

It is only since 1990 that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have started to appreciate the value of socio-economic research in Bangladesh. Development research is a broad term that includes various kinds of research and training plus monitoring and evaluation. Research, in general, has contributed to development strategies, especially with projects that are funded by donors. Often both researchers and managers cooperate to gauge the impact of development, but such attempts at cooperation may generate contentious relationships between the two.

There are three stakeholders considered in this article—the donors who finance projects, NGOs that implement these projects and the poor people, who are expected to be the beneficiaries. Development researchers often face a dilemma as they fail to decide whose interest they are addressing in their research reports. In theory, research is expected to improve the quality of project management in such a way that it contributes to improving the life of the poor. In reality, it acts in response to donors’ expectations of the project. This dilemma has implications for the quality of research itself. To understand the dilemma, this article attempts to discover how researchers interact with NGO managers and how managers relate to researchers. I propose to explore the rhetoric and reality of development research in Bangladesh in the light of my experience while working as researcher, trainer and manager for the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and other NGOs. BRAC is unique since it is one of the few organizations in the development community of Bangladesh that not only sustains large research wings, but also tries to use research findings to enhance the quality of programmes and projects.

Development research follows three phases. The first phase is negotiation with interested parties—researchers, development managers, beneficiaries etc.; the second is data collection;
and the third phase, following agreement, is to analyse these and produce a report. The latter may be difficult due to the researchers and the NGO managers having different aims, which often result in disagreements. Little attention is paid to the interactive dynamics between those involved, which ultimately dictates the final form of the reports (Sillitoe et al. 2005). The quality and the outcome of development research, I argue, is not so much determined by the quality of findings, analysis and skills of the researchers themselves, but also by the power relationships between the researchers and NGO managers. These relationships have implications for the quality and direction of the research itself, and affect the chances that indigenous views will feature. In addition, development aid sets the agenda that defines the ‘development language’ which has also come to dominate development research (Mikkelsen 1995: 27).

Development Research and Its Context

The overall status of research in NGOs, except for a few, large, national and international NGOs, is low as they do not fully comprehend its value. In most cases, they employ overseas consultants to evaluate projects. Even if the evaluations are good, the research recommendations are rarely implemented. For the few NGOs which have a research wing or unit, they tend to engage researchers in the following three areas:

- Monitoring of progress of projects and compiling annual reports.
- Development of baseline surveys to measure the impact and change caused by the projects at some later stage.
- Carrying out evaluations at the final phase of the project cycle or when projects complete their life cycles. In some cases, such research is carried out during projects.

Development research requires international cooperation. Since donors finance most of the Bangladeshi NGOs’ activities, research is donor driven, and heavily drawn toward impact studies as donors want to know the impact of projects that receive financial support from them. The bilateral donor government is accountable to its own taxpayers. Moreover, impact studies allow donors to gauge not only their projects’ activities but also the performance of NGOs which will inform the selection of suitable partners for future development interventions. The donor–NGO relationship places demands on NGOs to continually adapt to new activities. They have to justify projects by providing continuous feedback to donors through suitable proposals, documentation, and monitoring and evaluation reports that feature some element of research.

Although development research is biased towards impact studies, a gradual shift is taking place from assessing project impact to focusing on the various aspects of intervention and an improvement in project delivery. By 1990, research and evaluation work, which previously put emphasis on project management and logical frameworks, has shifted towards a new emphasis on stakeholder analysis and participatory approaches (Cracknell 2002: 48). In Bangladesh, on the contrary, development research has changed from assessment of project impacts to research aimed at poverty alleviation (Chowdhury and Bhuiya 2004). Poverty expands the scope of development research, making demands on development practitioners, managers and beneficiaries to become stakeholders in the research process (Ahmad 2002).

Conceptually and theoretically, development research offers an interdisciplinary perspective to cover a wide range of issues, not only economic but also sociocultural aspects (Sillitoe 2004). Development is subject to ever-increasing new agendas which produce their own problems. Research seems to fall behind projects because researchers are not always able
to evolve methodologies to meet new demands quickly. New and innovative research methods have to be introduced. Former development research methods are no longer applicable to today’s issues (Mikkelsen 1995: 22). Research becomes ever more complicated with an increasing tendency to mix qualitative and quantitative research (Bamberger 2000), participatory research (Chambers 1995) etc. Research now faces real challenges as there are more qualitative projects dealing with good governance, community empowerment, human rights, the role of gender in development, indigenous knowledge etc. (Moser 1993; Marsden 1994; Laws et al. 2003; Sillitoe et al. 2005).

Status of Development Research in Bangladesh

NGOs in Bangladesh have become a part of the institutional framework of international intervention for managing development. They are working in more than two-thirds of the villages of Bangladesh. Over the last thirty years, NGOs have achieved an organizational and management capacity for conducting poverty alleviation and income-generation projects. They carry out diverse activities, but the quality of these activities is not yet properly understood and analysed. One reason could be that demands for project evaluations are not balanced with the in-house research capacity of NGOs. Building up the capacity to conduct research is a relatively new area for NGOs. As NGOs implement an increasing number of new activities, the need to understand the growing complexities in managing development has also increased dramatically.

Since 1975, BRAC has commissioned research that has gradually focused its activities on both health and non-health issues. BRAC clearly understands the importance of research and sees research as an integral part in the process of project formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of various development interventions (BRAC 1994b: 1). BRAC has systematically built its Research and Evaluation Division (RED), but it seems that RED has its client priorities. The primary readers of most of the research reports are donors or outsiders, who would like to know more about BRAC’s impact and successes. RED plays a strategic role in promoting the image of BRAC and it systematically pursues two strategies. The first is to create scope and space for foreign researchers to do research on various projects and impact evaluation, except on the ‘operations research’ of BRAC. The published books and articles of these foreign researchers serve as a mouthpiece for BRAC (BRAC 1979; Korten 1980; Chen 1983; Lovel 1992; Roa and Kelleher 1995; Chowdhury and Cash 1996; Smille 1997; Rohde 2005). The second strategy is to develop a pool of indigenous researchers, primarily for documentation purposes. Until the beginning of the 1990s, BRAC discouraged researchers from claiming authorship of the research and evaluation reports. Later, a teamwork approach was developed that gave collective authorship to research reports.

In recent years, changing conditions for supplying aid has created pressure on the Bangladesh NGOs to open up internal research wings. This pressure originated from Western development agencies with a perceived gradual shrinking of resources. Donors seek to maximize the use of remaining aid funds. They seek more feedback so as to understand the development problems (Cracknell 2000: 28). Bangladeshi NGOs feel the need to increase their research capacities in two ways: first, they are now under an obligation to highlight the impact of their project activities; and second, since 1990, NGOs have started to scale up their ongoing projects or to implement new projects, which have to be justified by producing an objective analysis of them. There is a growing trend for NGOs to recognize the importance of research and the need to produce adequate documentation for the identification, formulation, implementation, monitoring and evalu-
ation of various development interventions (Mannan 2000).

**Relations Between Research and Development Management**

Every year, researchers and managers at BRAC meet to determine research issues and agendas. Although they cooperate as members of the same organization over projects, this cooperation is not without antagonism. An example of cooperative antagonism is given in Table 1, which highlights the dialogue about the determining of research issues.

Table 1 shows the gulf between researchers and managers in their dialogue, although the aim of both is to ensure that development projects yield maximum benefit to their clients. Although development research and development practice differ in purpose, form, content and duration, they have one thing in common—they seek information about people’s lives, and their way of organizing themselves and acting in the wider society and economy (Mikkelsen 1995: 26).2

There are three ways that communication gaps may occur between researchers and development managers. First, NGO managers represent mainstream development and implement projects, but researchers seek to understand issues in assessing and evaluating projects’ performance. When outside researchers offer critiques of NGO projects, they anticipate negative reactions from managers. Second, managers have the idea that the researchers are like auditors whose prime tasks are to find weaknesses in a project. They view researchers as

| **Table 1: Dialogue between researchers and managers at BRAC** |
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| **Researchers** | **Managers** |
| 1. Researchers were critical about change caused by the project as it was looked upon with suspicion. Change could mean losing the “old” values in favour of the “new,” which was not always helpful. | 1. Managers were complacent about change and assumed projects always brought change which would help the poor. Thus, managers were interested in expanding projects. |
| 2. Researchers either measured development from an input–outcome perspective or try to capture the process and pathways. | 2. Managers saw development in terms of increasing project coverage and providing services to more poor people by incorporating them into the various projects. |
| 3. Researchers used different quantitative and qualitative indicators to gauge poverty and the impact of projects. | 3. Managers saw that impact was not measurable using the researchers’ indicators. Managers view such indicators as the product of researchers’ preconceived ideas on the project. |
| 4. Researchers were complacent with definition, tables and information. | 4. Managers were complacent with annual target figures and achievement indicators. |
| 5. Researchers discovered “problems” in the projects. | 5. Managers viewed the problems as insignificant. |
| 6. Researchers had more questions than solutions. | 6. Managers viewed the completion or phasing out of a project as working towards the solution of a problem. Managers were better at replying to questions than creating solutions. |
overseers of projects, who have no realistic idea of their operational dynamics. Researchers are forever criticising or tracing faults in projects. Third, managers start their careers in development with little understanding of research techniques and methods, while they experience constant pressure to use research findings to improve the quality of programmes. Development managers may be unable to understand how research could improve programme quality. Researchers, with training in particular academic disciplines, are unable to capture the multidisciplinarity of project dynamics (Sillitoe et al. 2005).

The Problems of Researchers in Development Organizations

Researchers seek to apply research tools and methods they have learnt from a particular discipline to analyse development issues. These are often linear and biased towards a particular discipline and are inadequate to complex development problems (Sillitoe 2004). Furthermore, there are significant methodological problems in evaluating the impact of development projects. Evaluation follows one of two traditions: process analysis or the outcome model. While economists evaluate a project by looking into input and outcomes, anthropologists evaluate projects from process perspectives (Bardhan 1989).

Anthropologists normally work in development with researchers from various disciplines. Indigenous anthropologists usually become junior partners in research teams. Consequently, the indigenous anthropologists in multidisciplinary research teams have to deal typically with (i) a supervisor, who may not be an anthropologist; and (ii) team members, who are not anthropologists either. Moreover, the senior members who are nonanthropologists dictate the direction of indigenous knowledge research. They may undermine such research. However, in a multidisciplinary situation there is a tendency to scale down each individual’s discipline and seek for a ‘fit’ in order to integrate research findings. This often forces anthropologists into simplistic analysis.

There is considerable scepticism about the contribution of anthropologists to NGO research in Bangladesh. First, development professionals are often unsure what anthropologists do. The anthropologist is not necessarily familiar with the research of economists, sociologists, engineers or technologists, particularly the use of quantitative data. Secondly, there are doubts about the transferability (or relevance) of anthropological knowledge of a particular society to elsewhere. Tensions can arise in any multidisciplinary team. What can appear to the anthropologist as a large difference in social status, for example, may appear insignificant to the economist.

The Problem of Managers Not Understanding Research

The acceptance of research by NGO managers and practitioners is important. The impact of research depends on how well NGO managers understand the research and follow its recommendations. Perhaps because of their lack of research experience, managers develop an anti-research, anti-knowledge and ‘know-it-all’ attitude. They are apprehensive of research that opens up new development questions and tend to ignore critical reports. Managers want researchers to justify their actions and praise programmes, rather than offering critiques and highlighting the negative impacts. The problem is that many managers may be good at the implementation of projects, but cannot analyse issues and innovate. Managers not only manage projects, they are also involved in the continuous process of attempting to solve problems on a daily basis. The ability of managers to conduct such analysis may lead to them think that they possess research skills. But they usually come up with a reply, rather than a solution, to problems.

Project staff want immediate solutions to their problems. Managers want to complete any
research within fifteen to thirty days, when to undertake even small qualitative studies requires at least five to six months. Managers may understand figures and statistics but not qualitative data. To them, qualitative data means anecdotes and a few case stories. Researchers are often unable to provide instant solutions, as it requires time to identify and analyse problems, as well as to produce reports and recommendations. Often it appears that researchers take a long time to complete and submit a report. The problem is that by the time researchers have identified and analysed the problem and made recommendations, the managers have already gone ahead with the project and “resolved” the problem and possibly created other new problems. By the time reports are submitted, projects may have changed their focus. Project staff may have changed their priorities and be facing new problems. It is not easy to disseminate the research findings in this environment.

The Field

Managers conceptualize their project activities in terms of ‘the field’. The field is a project activity that has to be understood experientially within changing contexts, where projects are phased in and phased out. The continuous phasing-in and phasing-out of projects changes the context of development. The changing context creates spaces for new projects without questioning what benefit the old project yielded to the target beneficiaries. The development context changes with the life cycles of projects. This changing context, in relation to project evolution, results in the expansion of development space which links transcultural values to poverty-alleviation endeavours. Thus, in ‘the field’, projects evolve with transcultural values like gender, human rights, etc. that seek to engage the poor in achieving development goals. Often researchers miss this point because they participate in most cases in the final phase of a project’s life-cycle. Without having deep knowledge of ‘the field’, when researchers evaluate projects they can create hostility. The hostility managers show towards researchers relates to the notion of ‘the field’. They believe that without comprehending ‘the field’ to its fullest extent it is not possible to carry out research. The longer one engages in field research, the more one gains experiences from participation which allow one to deconstruct theoretical orientations and academic bias.

The idea of ‘the field’ creates a boundary between managers and researchers. On the one hand, managers see development from the inside as they learn from daily interaction, but are unable to represent development reality in their reports; on the other hand, researchers see development from the outside, but they comment on development using their own disciplinary biases, which may not reflect the managers’ experience. Managers assess research performances by their exposure to ‘the field’. They have three categories of researchers in mind. The first is the few experienced researchers who have had long experience of and exposure to ‘the field’ which allows them to understand the experience of managers. The second category consists of researchers who locate themselves between the research world and ‘the field’. These researchers understand less about ‘the field’, but make a real effort to develop some understanding of projects and modify their theoretical understanding with field experience. The third category covers the majority of researchers, both indigenous and foreign. They come with their ideas shaped by preconceived abstractions and theories. Visiting the field with such predetermined ideas may result in tensions. Many researchers with positivist ideas fail to capture the learning experiences of managers.

Often priority is placed on Western development theories and assumptions, leading to a confused analysis of indigenous development reality. For example, a North American scholar describes BRAC as a ‘Learning Organization’ (Korten 1980) which has two goals: empowerment and poverty alleviation. The first goal of
empowerment is constructed by combining the ‘conscientisation approach’ (Freire 1972) with Marxist rhetoric of class struggle (DKS 1990: 24–68). The second goal of poverty alleviation is based on capitalist growth models (DKS 1990: 24–68). To operationalize its goals, BRAC adopts the concept of organization development (Lovel 1992: 123), which should lead to a process of institution building (Myrdal 1972; DKS 1990: 177–78). However, it has recently shifted from the institution-building process frame of reference to embrace organizational principles of market economy (Druker 1993). BRAC now terms its former beneficiaries “customers” and others “stakeholders” (BRAC 1994a).

Conclusion

Does research matter from the perspective of Bangladeshi NGOs? Do NGOs use research findings to improve the quality of their projects? The reply is more often negative than positive. Some managers make efforts systematically to undermine the researchers’ capacities to see projects as ongoing processes. A problem is that researchers learn and apply research tools and methods from universities, which may be inappropriate for analysing development processes. Development research requires experience based on interdisciplinary research methods for analysing the complexities of development.

NGOs want research to show the impact of their projects on poverty, but in reality research becomes a strategic ploy to comply with the donors’ paradigm and researchers aim to mirror how the donors think. The implication is that researchers, instead of giving direct feedback on projects to NGO managers, try to produce strategic research articles in order to satisfy the key stakeholders, namely the donors. The aspiration of NGOs to get a favourable research report suggests that donors may use a negative report to stop funding. Thus, pressure is on the researchers to ‘manage’ or ‘filter’ research results in order to serve the purpose of the organization or project so as to gain the donor’s support. Moreover, by focusing on mere impact studies, NGO research ignores important aspects of the development process.

While NGOs have generated new knowledge as a logical outcome of development interventions, there are hardly any attempts to make use of this knowledge, as NGOs have neither the funds nor the capacity to do so. For example, NGO interventions have developed an appetite among people for private initiatives, telling them that they can do things for themselves instead of depending on government. This conversion to an apparent market mentality is never researched.

The problem of research into project evaluations revolves around the question of how effective a project is; but it is much more important to focus on how donors will perceive the project after reading the report. Research then becomes a strategic tool to win the support of donors, and the issue of poverty elimination is sidelined. Strategic research tries to respond to transcultural values regarding poverty alleviation rather than highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the project. A report may highlight a problem in such a positive way that it secures the donor’s funding for a few more years. Researchers’ reports must satisfy, primarily, the purposes of donor agency staff and the NGO managers, as well as those of government officials.

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Notes

1. BRAC is the largest NGO in Bangladesh with more than 100,000 staff providing services to 25 million poor men and women (BRAC 2005).
2. There might be some cases where local people’s knowledge is ignored in favour of scientists’ knowledge (Alam 2001; Sillitoe 2002).
3. Until recently, no universities or colleges in Bangladesh offered any courses on development. From 2002, a few private universities and a public university have started courses in development and management.
4. This is entirely different to what an anthropologist means by the term the field. For managers, the field means either a site in different geographical locations, or the notion of ‘other’ (Gupta 1997).

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