

QUESTIONING THE PRIORITY: A SUFFERING ARTISAN OR A LIVING BEING WITH A DYING SOUL?

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Abstract: In the rural disaster prone locations of Bangladesh, peoples' lives and livelihoods are vulnerable to many different factors. The poor in those contexts survive in their precarious state by employing a variety of livelihood or survival strategies. In the present globalized era, different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also found to intervene with the aim to improve the lives and livelihoods of these people for a sustainable livelihood. In spite of their aims for 'development', there are many reported incidents that show how different NGO interventions turn out to be 'development disasters'. In this context, the present study used a 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' as the analytical framework as it offers an opportunity to reveal an all round view of the circumstances of the poor. It used case study method. Analyzing a single specific case, the study showed how the artisan's skill of making special items with bamboo chip is used as a means for mass large scale production for livelihood due to NGO intervention. The major findings of the study focus to the field level reality that the studied NGO intervention aimed to promote sustainable livelihoods was destroying craftsmanship and the traditional culture. The study raises question about the priority for the artisan whether sufferings due to poverty but maintenance of the craftsmanship or sustainable livelihoods but dying soul and creative mind. This case specific study draws attention to the broader context where the poor become the victims of NGO interventions.

Keywords: Handicraft; Interventions; Marginalized, Mass production, Sustainable livelihoods.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a low-lying deltaic country in South Asia formed by the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna rivers. More than 230 rivers and tributaries have made this country a land of rivers. Rainfall in neighboring India, Nepal, Bhutan, and China and snowmelt in the Himalayas are major determinants of the flow of water through Bangladesh into the Bay of Bengal. Due to its geographical location Bangladesh has to undergo severe flooding every year. The people living in the river basins are the worst affected by the devastating flood. River basins are areas of new land formed through a continuous process of erosion and deposition associated with the major rivers that run through the country. People started living in the river basins as population increased and the importance of river basin areas is increasing as these are the home to some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Bangladesh who become the victims of both flood and river erosion regularly. In such rural disaster prone locations of Bangladesh, peoples' lives and livelihoods are vulnerable to many different factors. The poor in those contexts survive in their precarious state by employing a variety of livelihood or survival strategies. The word 'livelihood' means 'occupation' or 'employment', that is, a way of making a living. Recently, the meaning of the term is expanded in the development literature to include broader systems that encompass

social, economic and other attributes. Various factors may have effect on the strength, resilience and vulnerability of people's way of life. These may be their assets, their work and other cultural activities, and factors that help people get access (or stop people from gaining access) to these assets and activities. External factors, such as policies, institutions and processes, also affect livelihoods [1]. The poor survive in their precarious state by employing a variety of livelihood or survival strategies [2], [3], and [4]. Livelihood approaches and livelihood analysis (the method of studying livelihoods in this 'holistic' way) use this broader definition of livelihoods [5]. Thus, for the present study livelihood is considered as follows: "A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base" [6].

Sustainable livelihoods approach and framework:

The sustainable livelihoods approach aims to promote development that is sustainable not just ecologically, but also institutionally, socially and economically and to produce genuinely positive livelihood outcomes (rather than concerning themselves with narrow project outcomes, with resources or with output) [7]. Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLA) emerged as a means for more effective and more relevant poverty reduction through understanding poverty from the perspective of the poor [8]. Others [9] looked at the potential for SLA to be used in the development of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP).

The sustainable livelihoods approach aims to promote development that is sustainable not just ecologically, but also institutionally, socially and economically and to produce genuinely positive livelihood outcomes (rather than concerning themselves with narrow project outcomes, with resources or with output) [10]. Sustainable Livelihoods Approaches (SLA) emerged as a means for more effective and more relevant poverty reduction through understanding poverty from the perspective of the poor [11]. The SLA emerged partly as a result of this rethinking of poverty-environment linkages and has since become a driving force in its evolution [12]. Others [13] looked at the potential for SLA to be used in the development of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP). In order to recognize and understand the The framework follows:

importance of the policy dimensions at different levels, it is essential to examine sustainable livelihood approach because it links "micro level understanding of *poverty to policy* and institutional change processes at different levels (micro, meso, macro)" [14].

Sustainable livelihoods frame work was developed to help understand and analyse the livelihoods of the poor. It is also useful in assessing the effectiveness of existing efforts to reduce poverty. The SL framework is constantly evolving and is experimental in nature. The frame work is already widely used in a number of influential international development agencies.

The left hand section of the figure shows how the vulnerability context impacts on the livelihood assets of rural people - denoted by a pentagon. Livelihood assets are also influenced by outside policies, institutions and processes. Livelihood strategies of different categories of households are shaped by their asset base and by the policy and institutional context in which they live. Livelihood outcomes of different types of households are influenced by the vulnerability context - people's exposure to unexpected shocks - and their ability to withstand the shocks, which depends on their asset base. [15]

Many NGOs, in the context of vulnerability, work to ensure sustainable livelihood of the rural poor in the river basins.

Handicrafts: In the rural Bangladesh some people are found to have aptitude to make different kinds of handicraft items. Handicraft, (also known as craftwork or simply craft) is 'a type of work where useful and decorative devices are made completely by hand or using only simple tools. Usually the term is applied to traditional means of making goods. The individual artisanship of the items is a paramount criterion; such items often have cultural and/or religious significance. Items made by mass production or machines are not handicrafts' (Wikipedia. Handicraft. Retrieved on 24.10. 09. Retrieved from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Handicraft>). Handicraft items are intended to be used, worn, et cetera, having a purpose beyond simple decoration.

In the present globalized era, with many different national and international organizations working to improve the lives of the poor rural people in the third world countries, the traditional culture is being destroyed. This is a matter of concern for many and of course there are some who believe that there is no

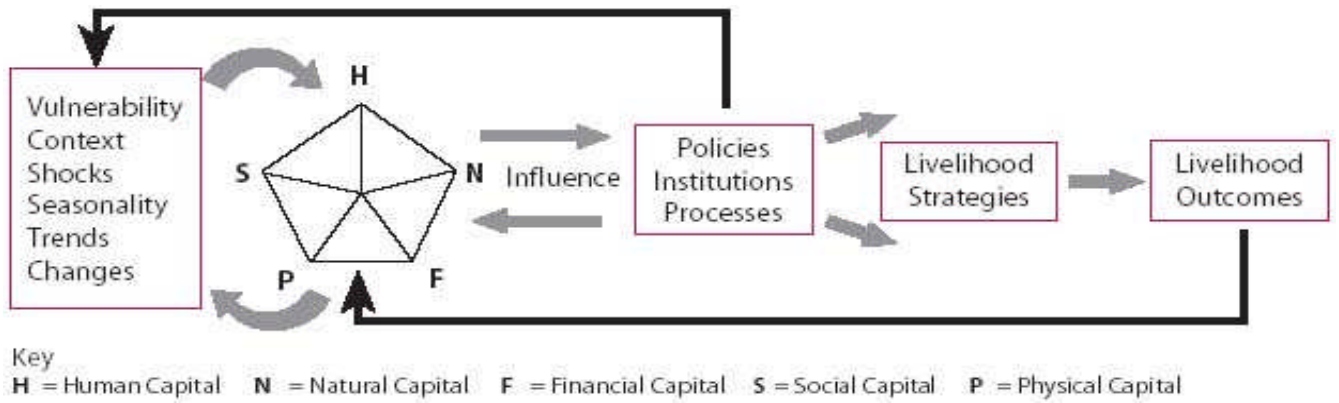


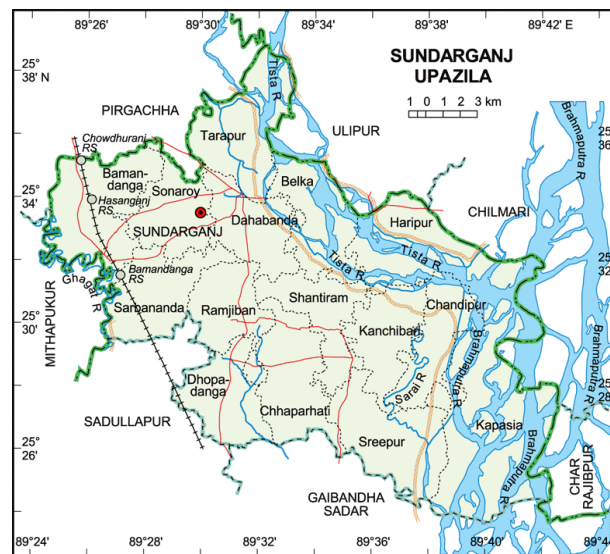
Figure 1: Sustainable livelihoods frame work



Map 1: Location of Sundarganj upazila in Gaibandha district

Source: Banglapedia, 2004

(Banglapedia, Gaibandha district. Retrieved on 21.9.10. Retrieved from http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/G_0004.HTM)



Map 2: Location of Haripur union in Sundarganj upazila

Source: Banglapedia, 2004 (Banglapedia, Sundarganj Upazila. Retrieved on 21.9.10. Retrieved from http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/HT/S_0603.HTM)

alternative to accepting the ‘new’ for development. The others’ concern is such that in spite of their aims for ‘development’, there are many reported incidents that show how different NGO interventions turn out to be ‘development disasters’. In this context, the present study used a ‘Sustainable Livelihoods Approach’ as the analytical framework as it offers an opportunity to reveal an all round view of the circumstances of the poor.

METHODS

Case study method is used for the present study. Analyzing a single specific case, the study attempted to show “how the artisan’s skill of making special items with bamboo chip is used as a means for mass large scale production for livelihood due to NGO intervention”.

The case: The present study was based on the case of Abdul Jalil. Abdul Jolil was the president of the *chatai* (mats made with bamboo chip) producer group in the village Ujan taora of Haripur union of Sundarganj upazila in Gaibandha district of Bangladesh.

RESULTS

The case of Abdul Jolil: Abdul Jolil is the president of the *chatai* producer group in the village Ujan taora of Haripur union of Sundarganj upazila in Gaibandha district of Bangladesh.

Abdul Jolil Shorkar is fifty five years old. He was born and brought up in the Ujan taora village. Till

today his family had been the victim of river erosion for sixteen times. Every time, in such a situation, they had to shift and became destitute. He is a father of six. Now, he has his wife and two sons in his family. Others separated getting married. Earlier it was extremely difficult for him to run a family of eight.

During the days of river erosion, they had to starve many a days. They never could completely fulfill the need for food for even a single day. The only property he had was his skill of making special items with bamboo chip. He could create new designs for *chatai* (a coarse mat made of date leaves or palm leaves or bamboo slips), hand fans, and used to make different new items. He learnt the basic skill from his father and with his creativity, using the skill, invented the ways of making other things like hand fans, wall mats etc. Abdul Jolil used to borrow the raw materials on credit and after selling the products used to pay the price of the raw materials. Thus had been living hand to mouth.

Abdul Jolil came to know the name of an organization, Akota, which started working in their village recently. They give good advice and suggest people ways of improving their lives. Some of the villagers became their member and were suggesting other villagers the possible ways of developed life through united effort.

One day a development associate of Akota came to Abdul Jolil with a proposal of composing a producer group with a few others of the village who had no livelihood option. The development associate

suggested Abdul Jolil to form a group for a large scale production of a specific easily producible item, a specific simple design chatai. Jolil formed a group of fifteen members and he was selected the president of the group. The group started saving taka five every week for buying bamboo to produce *chatai* unitedly and selling at a reasonable price. When all the members felt that they could save a sufficient amount of money, taka 2050, they bought the necessary amount of bamboo. Each of them started working. But no one could make a single chatai individually. Actually Abdul Jolil taught different members to make different parts of the chatai.

When they made many chatai in a short time period, Abdul Jolil being the president took the leadership, hired a truck and went to Rajshahi to sell their chatai to a great merchant (*mohajon*) and all the members benefited a lot. In doing this the Akota development associate supported him with information and went with him on the first occasion. Abdul Jolil is happy with the deposit he has now. His plan is to start a small cottage industry depending on his profession. But at the same time, he feels a deep sorrow for not being able to nurture his creative mind through creating innovative design and goods.

DISCUSSION

Following the sustainable livelihoods framework, the discussion for the case of Abdul Jolil is prepared.

Vulnerability refers to the external environment in which people pursue their livelihoods and their exposure (risk) to the negative effects of the external environment, as well as their resilience in resisting and recovering from external shocks and trends.

For Abdul Jolil, the major source of vulnerability is river erosion and floods.

Livelihood assets combine human (H), natural (N), financial (F), physical (P) and social (S) capital.

The assets that are generally recognised within sustainable livelihoods theory, as summarized by scholars [16], are:

Natural (Environmental) Capital: Natural resources (land, water, wildlife, biodiversity, environmental resources).

Physical Capital: Basic infrastructure (water, sanitation, energy, transport, communications), housing and the means and equipment of production.

Human Capital: Health, knowledge, skills, information, ability to labour.

Social Capital: Social resources (relationships of trust, membership of groups, networks, access to wider institutions).

Financial Capital: financial resources available (regular remittances or pensions, savings, supplies of credit).

Abdul Jolil has no land. He reported significant change in physical capital as a result of the activities undertaken by Akota. Now the villagers are working unitedly to ensure healthy environment and better infrastructure. He has the skill of making special items with bamboo chip. For Akota's activities, the villagers have formed many groups for sustainable livelihoods. The villagers are earning money and becoming self sufficient.

Effective policies, institutions and processes (PIP) are recognized as essential in sustaining livelihoods. Together, they shape poor people's livelihood options.

Policies, institutions and processes determine, amongst other things [17] (the followings-poor people's access to various assets (such as land or labour); the benefits poor people are able to derive from different types of capital (through markets); the environment for private sector investment; the extent to which poor people are able to engage in decision-making processes; and individual and civil society rights.

Abdul Jalil acknowledges the support of Akota for ensuring market access for reasonable price of their produced chatai; for encouraging decision making and groupformation; for access to information.

The purpose of investigating *livelihood strategies* is to seek patterns that can be acted upon in order to improve the livelihood prospects of the poor. This is about discovering alternatives and increasing options.

Abdul Jalil appreciates the initiative of Akota for creating livelihood option for almost all of the villagers. The villagers relied on Akota trusted the development associates and acted according to their suggestion and finally became successful.

Livelihood Outcomes are the achievements or outputs of Livelihood Strategies.

More income, increased well-being, reduced vulnerability, improved food security, more sustainable use of the natural resource base, are the indication of positive livelihood outcome.

Abdul Jalil ensured having positive livelihood outcome as a result of Akota's initiative. But at the same time he ensured having the pain of not being able to creating new designs. He said, "Earlier I had minimum food for survival. Now when I have enough food physical survival; my soul is dying my creative mind is dying."

His statement poses a serious question, “what is the priority – a suffering artisan or a living being with a dying soul?”.

CONCLUSION

The major findings of the study focus to the field level reality that the studied NGO intervention aimed to promote sustainable livelihoods was destroying craftsmanship and the traditional culture. The study raises question about the priority for the artisan whether sufferings due to poverty but maintenance of the craftsmanship or sustainable livelihoods but dying soul and creative mind. This case specific study draws attention to the broader context where the poor become the victims of NGO interventions and thus deserves further indepth analyses before any such intervention.

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