

NGO-Led Service Delivery and its Constraints: A Case Study of North East Area Development Society

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The Non-governmental Organization (NGO) led service delivery model is considered to be cost effective, participatory, and accountable, thus services reach the intended beneficiaries. Increasingly literature has come to prove otherwise that the NGO-led service delivery is contradictory, in the sense that NGOs implement donor agendas because of the high dependence on donor funds. This study examines NGO-led service delivery model amidst growing evidence and knowledge that this model may not adequately contribute to poverty reduction. The need for the donor agencies to channel resources through NGOs does not only expose NGOs to donor dependence but puts the NGOs in a position of implementing donor agendas as evidenced in the study as NGOs struggle to be effective and accountable to the donor community. NGOs seem to be at crossroads to follow the social mission of delivering services or to engage in advocacy activities. By the mere fact that NGO funding, governance and relationship with government depends on the legal and administrative framework, increasingly NGOs have been constrained to deliver services contrary to the donor presumption. Whereas NGOs have caused some impact on poverty reduction of individual farmers in Assam, they cannot be relied on because they only focus on a small percentage of the poor, even in places with the highest number of NGOs high levels of poverty is still evident. Further, this paper highlights what the NGOs and beneficiaries do to counteract the constraints identified.

Keywords: *Governance, Funding, Participation, NGO-led service delivery and Constraints*

1.1 Introduction

The NGO-led service delivery model has received more attention in the last two decades in development work by donor agencies who argue that development needs to be more sustainable, just, participatory, democratic

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and environmental friendly (Zaidi, 1999: 259). Increasingly, development aid to developing countries is being channeled through NGOs from the state (Clark, 1995, World Bank, 1994, 1995.) This shift from the state to NGOs is argued to be cost effective, accountable and thus benefits reach the targeted poor. Clark argues that: NGOs may be best placed to articulate the needs of the weak, working in remote areas, changing attitudes and practices of the local officials, and nurturing the productive capacity of the most vulnerable groups...may provide instruments which, whether invited or not by governments emphasize the participation of the poor (Clark, J, 1995).

The NGO led service delivery has registered great attention and successes as in the case of BRAC in Bangladesh (Edwards and Hulme 1995).The NGO model is premised on the fact that; its participatory, allows beneficiary participate in decision making and successful in delivering service to the poor (Hailey, J, 2001, Mercer A, et at 2004, Perere J, 1997) . However, academics argue that, the NGO led service delivery is short term, compromise the economic recovery of the country and project based, and has brought a new development paradigm of projecting (Tendler, A 2002). There is evidence that NGO service delivery has changed people's livelihoods (Clark, J, 1995, Hailey, 2001).

The new policy agenda of channeling service delivery to NGOs as a new paradigm in the development discourse has taken center stage in the development agenda of developing countries. NGO-led service delivery though not a new concept in development has shifted the trend in thinking and practice from what used to be top-down to participatory approaches of bottom up (Onen, D, M 2007:2, Namara, B, R, 2009). The current development debates pushed by the World Bank recommend participation of beneficiaries in project development since they argue that if the poor participate in development planning they own the results, become accountable and services reach the deserving (World Bank, 1995). We examine this assertion by the World Bank whether it's true within the Assam NGOs context.

Despite NGOs being praised as effective in service delivery, literature shows that NGOs are at cross roads between working with government and donors (DENIVA, 2006). Further, some scholars argue that NGOs impose themselves as representatives of the poor yet they work for survival of the people that formed them (Dijkzeul, 2006 cited in Namara, R, and 2009:2). With the growing interest by both scholars and development practitioners, the NGO-led model has received much attention in the last two decades. The argument here is whether the NGO-led model is the best for political, governance, funding and participation of the beneficiaries. Scholars have however, criticized the fronting of NGOs as a best service delivery mechanism, they argue that the role of the state has been reduced to ensuring an enabling environment thus making macro-planning difficult since NGOs can only

intervene at the micro- economy. With the increasing number of International development institutions like World Bank, supporting the NGO approach (Onen, D M, 2007:3), it is worth noting that the NGO-led model of service delivery is questionable in the delivery of services to the poor.

1.2 Problem Statement

Several studies on government led-service delivery have been carried out with contradictory arguments on the best way of service delivery to the poor (Oxfam GB, 2004, Onen, 2007). While some studies show that NGO-led model added some value on service delivery, (Gariyo, 2002), scholars criticize the NGO-led service delivery because there doubt whether there is any value added since the intervention is at micro-level, region specific and not replicable, and thus keeps the poor in perpetual poverty (Edwards, 2007, DENIVA, 2006), others accuse NGOs of trading on the poor (Namara, 2009). Based on available literature on NGO impact on beneficiaries and service delivery to the poor, this study aims at examining how NGO like NEADSis constrained in delivering services to the poor in operational districts.

1.3 Research Question

How are NGOs constrained in delivering services to the poor in rural Assam?

The NGO led Model is becoming an interesting debate amongst policy makers, academics and development workers. The proponents argue that the model is transparent, promotes decentralized governance and ownership of benefits, thus developing countries are being argued to adopt this process since issues of accountability, why the poor are constrained to participate, the limitations to their participation and how the NGO led service delivery can be pro-poor are at the center stage of this paper.

1.4.1 Research Site and population

The operational Districts of North East Affected Area Development Society, Jorhat. A NGO working in the state of Assam of North Eastern part of India.

1.4.2 Techniques of data collection

The study collected data both from primary and secondary sources with the use of both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. However, due to the nature of the data sought, the research was more skewed to qualitative approach.

1.4.3 Procedure of the research

Primary data was collected by use of interviews, observation and focused group discussions (FGDs). Twenty in-depth interviews were held with farmers who had benefited from NEADS, AACP Project. The interviews lasted between one-two hours, four FGDs lasting two hours were held to collect the beneficiary opinion and seek why they are constrained in participating in NGO led service delivery. These methods were chosen because the major concepts of the research were operationalized qualitatively.

2.1 NGOs and service Delivery

NGOs are commonly defined as independent development actors existing apart from government and corporations, operating on non-profit or for profit basis, with degree of emphasis on voluntary ...undertaking community development work or advocating on development issues (Michael, 2004: 3). We treat NGOs in this paper to be voluntary, nonprofit and serving social mission that is aimed at delivery services to the poor. The world bank, which is a key player in development business, identifies the following strengths of NGOs: strong grassroots link; field based development expertise; ability to innovate and adapt; process oriented approach to development; participatory methodologies and tools; long commitment and emphasis on sustainability; and cost effectiveness (World Bank, 1995:15).

NGOs played critical role in addressing persistent poverty, hunger by providing agricultural inputs in sub-Saharan Africa (Salih, 2001:1-7), there is no exact number of how many people are served by NGOs, however, Fowler (2005b:18) estimate that NGOs reach roughly more than 20% of the poor in the world. Despite the well-reported success stories, the participation of the beneficiaries in NGO service delivery has been criticized. Many argue that NGOs may not help the poor meet their needs, for example Fowler, refers to the service delivery of NGOs to be „overt and „employed to shield more critical intentions of civic mobilization (Fowler 2005b cited in Namara 2009) more, some accuse NGOs of causing duplication of services rather than serving the deserving poor, Leopold attributes this to the failure to develop projects based on local realities, local knowledge, donor insistence on logical frameworks and short term outputs rather than sustainable changes (Leopold 2001:96). The theoretical assertion that NGOs are better placed to deliver services to the poor is the motivation for this paper. We use this argument to examine the extent to which NGOs are constrained in delivering agricultural services to the poor.

NGO involvement in service delivery of poverty reduction programs is partly because of the increased need for efficiency in the provision of

public services and donor insistence on value for money. NGOs also assert that they are in a unique position to facilitate community empowerment because they are nearer to the poor and utilize participatory approaches.

Today, NGOs are considered to be a better channel for delivering multilateral and bilateral aid (although they still consume a small, but growing, proportion of aid)- this new policy agenda (Edwards and Hulme, 1996) has shifted the burden of sustainable development on to the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are increasingly seen as a magic portion for all the shortcomings that distress underdeveloped countries. Zaidi (1999) notes that NGOs have been positioned to address and resolve issues which range from those that affect the environment, gender inequality, sustainable development, law, political emancipation and participation. Issues or areas that the private or state sector cannot address are automatically expected to be undertaken by NGOs. The fact that a very large number of NGOs have failed to do so is now increasingly recognized by observers and analysts of the process (Zaidi, 1999: 260).

In the recent past, Assam, a North Eastern state of India has witnessed an upsurge in NGOs. Generally all NGOs in Assam claim that they are close to the grassroots people and therefore speak on their behalf, their programs are pro-poor and thus they are better placed to deliver services to the poor. This notion has been supported further by the development workers. Thus, it is argued that the private market and NGOs will provide services better, consequently more donors are channeling funds through NGO actors, government's role is to provide an enabling environment (World Bank, 1995, Edward and Hulme, 1996 in Mkandawire, T, 2001:7). Analysis of the literature indicates that government is argued to develop policies that ensure NGOs operate in a free and fair environment while leaving service delivery to the NGOs and private sector. Our concern at this stage of service delivery is, are NGOs riding on a safe road. We further investigate whether and how NGOs have been dubbed into donor agencies' agendas.

2.2 The Poor and Service delivery

It's not easy to define the poor, however we ought to base on the literature from different scholars and development workers to attempt give an operational meaning of the poor. The World Bank defines the poor using poverty line: as those [people] who spend less than US\$ 1.25 a day. We recognize that using the poverty line approach in this study we may not get the best for the purpose of the study, we therefore use the capability/ entitlement approach to poverty by Sen (1993). The capability approach to poverty is based on human development of the whole being; it underscores foundational importance to human freedom of choice and achievement. The

capability approach encompasses personal characteristics like intelligence, age, sex, reading skills, social aspects like, public policies, social norms, gender roles and power relations (Sen 1992). The advantage of this concept lies in its multidisciplinary definition of the poor; poverty can be defined by applying the various social indicators as in the human development index (Caizhen, L, 2009:24). Thus defining the poor using the capability approach brings a broader picture than using the income or the poverty line approach. The location of the poor in service delivery is studied in a new but growing development literature. A study by Edwards et al (1996) showed that NGOs even fail to reach the poorest of the poor whom they work for. As much as NGOs get money from donor agencies, they have not ably delivered services to the poor however much we claim that NGOs are cost effective in service delivery. Much of the money meant for service delivery to the poor is spent in the bills of the project managers organizing workshops, conferences and making press releases to impress the donors that they are working when they appear in the media. We question this whether the poor have been involved or it's all about accountability. Rather than using the poor to solicit money from donors to make accountability to the donors, we are concerned in this paper that instead of NGOs accounting upwards to the donors, efforts be made to account downwards by delivering what ought to be for the poor.

2.3 Participation and its use in development work

Participation is given prominence in this paper because it provides space for the poor to be heard at all levels of analysis used in the paper. We look at participation of the beneficiaries in funding, governance, and policy making in the delivery of agricultural services to the poor. The word participation is used by both exact and natural sciences, in the present paper we use a social science context, the use of the word participation needs to be redefined and located among the vast literature on participation. Some authors like Oakley notes that participation is considered a voluntary contribution by the people in one or another program (Oakley et al, 1991:6). The discourses on participation is contested, Mosse D, notes that participation is linked to greater productivity at lower costs, efficient mechanisms for service delivery, or reduced recurrent and maintenance costs (Mosse, D, 2001: 17). Jennings, for example, considers participation to be involvement by a local population and at times additional stakeholders in the creation, content and conduct of a program designed to change their lives", (Jennings, 2000:1) Jennings argues, participatory development must recognize "the importance of entrusting citizens with the responsibilities to shape their own future"(Jennings, 2000:2). The overriding emphasis in this perspective is the local people's capabilities and popularagency (Mohan G, 2004:62).

The World Bank as an International body from its own point, views participation as the process by which stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policymaking, resources allocation, and program implementation , (Klugman, 2002:237). According to the World Bank, participation of stakeholders in the selection and design of projects can improve decision making, strengthen ownership, and help poor people and disadvantaged groups; and that systematic social analysis can help ensure that bank operations achieve objectives, that they are feasible within their social and institutional context (World Bank, 1994:10). This paper uses the phrase participation of the poor in development work to mean involvement in decision making at all levels of governance.

Participation in development work has a long history and emerged with the adoption of Participatory development which nursed out of the recognition of the shortcomings of top-down development approaches. The aim of participatory development was to make people central to development by encouraging beneficiary involvement in intervention that affects them. The broad aim of participatory development is to increase the involvement of the socially and economically marginalized peoples in decision making (Guijt 1998:1 in Cooke 2001). The World Bank (1994) saw participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, decisions and resources that affect their lives... donor driven and outside development was rapidly adopted by individuals and organization. Participatory approaches are justified in terms of sustainability, relevance and empowerment (Cooke, 2001: 5).

Participation can result in political co-optation, and can require contribution from participants in form of labor, cash or kind and thus transfer some of the project costs on the beneficiaries, and those who challenge the rhetoric of participation; it masks centralization in the name of decentralization (Biggs and Smith 1998 in Cooke, 2001)

Participatory planning may more accurately be viewed as the acquisition and manipulation of the new planning knowledge rather than the incorporation of people's knowledge by projects (Cooke, 2001:8). Chambers refers to participation as "handing over the stick or pen and chalk"- a process in which people are let to do it themselves for themselves and take control over the process; the participation for all development organizations is that at every level, ownership is pushed down, handed over and fostered. Beyond this, participation at community or group level is then not their participation in our program, but our participation in theirs; and participation by the poor is not just in the design and implementation phase of projects, but also in identification, monitoring and evaluation, and policy formulation (Chambers, 1995a:38)

Chambers notes that participation is about facilitating investigation, analyzing, presentation and learning by local people themselves, so that they generate and own the outcomes, and also learning requires confidence that they can do it, that the people are able to map, model, rank, score, diagram, analyze, plan and act. (Chambers, 1997:157)

2.4. Constraints of NGO service delivery

Much of the literature discussed in this chapter has been on the NGO-led service delivery to the poor. We now consider literature on the constraints faced by NGOs in service delivery. Studies by Rauh Karen (2010), Zaidi S A (1999) revealed among others the following to be constraints of the NGOs service delivery; heavily dependent on donor funds, power relations between donors (NGOs from the North) and recipients (NGOs from the South), professionalization and report culture, bureaucracy in NGOs work, dynamics of the aid chain, participatory model viz-a-viz the actual implementation. Vivian notes that the myth of participation is exposed and NGOs service delivery is non-participatory, the NGOs staff end up “thinking for” for the community, often overruling popular decisions (Vivian, 1994: 184), paper based accountability (Edwards et al, 1995, Fowler 1991), reliability and sustainability have not been fulfilled as NGOs operate in a specific condition, governance and politics of who provides services to the poor. Our concern is to investigate how NGOs are constrained in delivering services to the poor despite the praise and huge amounts of funds from the donors.

The constraints as revealed by the studies by Rauh K (2010) and Zaidi A (1999) are relevant to our study on how NGOs are constrained to deliver services to the poor. We therefore, put it to ourselves that despite these constraints what are the coping mechanisms NGOs adopt in the face of all the limitations encountered during the service delivery process. Many times, as NGOs partner with governments, they are reminded of their social mission of being non-profit, and holding leaders accountable (Care, 2005) therefore, there is disjuncture for NGOs to try to do business with government in the form of outsourcing as shown in the literature.

Because of their limited scope and reach, NGOs are hoodwinked to contract services which they were not meant to do, this action itself puts the NGOs in a compromising situation of politics of competition for winning contracts which many commentators and observers argue has eroded the moral fabric of society. The NGO staffs that are not competent in business like mission setting are forced to hire consultants to write technical proposals to get government funds. Rauh K, (2010), in her study on NGOs in Latin America, explicitly revealed that because of politics of power relations, NGOs in the south find themselves in a position of implementing the agendas of donors

who dictate on them [NGOs] the terms of work, always filling log frames with quantifiable indicators. The current trends in the NGOs world of donor recipient breeds the concept of *master-servant* syndrome. NGOs in the south become the servant, always making accountabilities and reports to fulfill the donor requirements and meeting deadlines otherwise funds are withheld or contracts cancelled.

3.1 The poor and service provision?

Service provision by NGOs is a term used differently by different development practitioners, scholars and academics. The word NGO-led service provision gained momentum in the 1990s when the World Bank and other International bodies joined the bandwagon of the Western NGOs to appear to be changing the development paradigm from top-down to bottom-up. Service provision is organized at different levels and the poor are considered to participate in development programs including government programs through their representatives. Like Chambers notes, participation allows the lowers to be heard, therefore if they are excluded from involvement in decision making, the outcome of the project becomes theirs not ours (Chambers R, 2005). Brock K, notes that the participation of NGOs in the district activities is likely to be labeled as participation in decentralized planning (Brock, K, 2004: 105). Some commentators have taken participation to be a constitutional right for which if the people are not involved in any project planning and implementation then that becomes denying them their constitutional right to participate and express their will (ibid).

With the adoption of the decentralized system of governance in Assam, the people were empowered to participate in the local government planning processes, determine what they need, hold leaders accountable, monitor and give feedback on issues if any gaps are identified. In the local government planning process in Assam, the poor are the target beneficiaries for government services through the NGOs and the private sector delivery mechanism, which is presumed to be cost effective and participatory. This is true of the AACP program, and NGO led service delivery. It's argued that the poor are hard to get and have no time to participate since they are busy finding what to feed on thus if they do not participate, they are participated (Interview with NGO worker). With this view in mind, participation of the poor in service delivery is seen at the receiving point instead of the poor being central in the delivery mechanism. As the donor agencies change focus from service delivery to advocacy, the NGOs that were once involved in service delivery have switched to advocacy, which is a more lucrative venture with a lot of funding from donor agencies and International bodies. With a shift to advocacy, NGOs have tended to compete with each other in policy advocacy to be

able to attract funding for their activities. The question is who talks what, who represents who, and where do they get the mandate? Donors are competing to fund NGOs especially those at the apex- networks, coalitions and thus NGOs have joined the bandwagon of showing off practice in an effort to win donor funding (Namara, R, 2009: 199). This is an indication of how donor dependency on donor aid has over ridden the original motives of NGOs by the individual motives of those who run NGOs claiming that they represent the poor. We find a rather an overlap in the mission of NGOs that were once service delivery and switched to advocacy, the constraint is basically high dependency on donor funds, locally generated funds cannot run organisations even for three months, if donors stopped funding us we can close shop the following hour (interview with NGO staff, August 2011). We note that locally generated funds in the form of membership fees are a small fraction of the budget of NGOs (only 1 percent for NEADS) to effectively deliver services to the poor.

3.2 Do the poor get what is due to them from the service providers?

The NGO-led service delivery that is considered to be democratic, participatory and effective has been significant in the new development discourse that calls for a revamp from the traditional top-down to the bottom-up approach that is believed to bring the poor to participate in development agenda. The bottom-up approach enables the poor to be an integral part of planning, implementation, policymaking and governance (Salins L, 2007:10 in Namara, 2009:83). The underlying principle is that citizens are ready to participate and share their political agendas and bureaucrats are willing to listen and respond (Cornwall, 2007: 5) If citizens participate in local decision making, engage in local problem solving activities, it is seen as contributing to guaranteeing the access of the poorest to social services, thus enhancing prospects for economic and political inclusion, and for development (World Bank, 2001; UNDP 2003 in Cornwall, 2007: 5)

The NGO-led service is presumed to challenge the top down model of development, transform people's attitudes and thus a means to poverty eradication. The aim of NEADS is to work with the poor men and women in the rural agricultural parts of the Upper Assam. Together with its member organisation, NEADS has mobilized rural farmers to embrace agriculture as business shifting from subsistence to commercial farming.

Since the NGO-led service delivery is one of the strong points by the World Bank and current debates on service delivery, we investigated how the NGOs have secured the space to allow participation of the beneficiaries in the chain of service delivery. Some scholars expressed escapism on how NGOs have not been able to involve the beneficiaries in service delivery but further adopted the public service model of top-down approach in involving

the people. The extent to which the NGO-led service delivery is pro-poor is contested by many people who think that it's just a fashion to involve the people in decision making not in real terms of financial, procurement and full time assignment as noted by the one of the Block Development Officers (BDOs).

The NGOs pretend to be involving the poor in their work, the only thing I see is training, where they get attendance list to prove that the poor have participated in decision making but the core issues are not handled in those meetings (interview with BDO, Teok, Jorhat August 2011).

Interview with the NEADS, staff revealed that they have been constrained to involve all the poor at different levels of governance,

".....We used to invite two people from each SHG to attend our Annual general meeting, but due to financial resource constraints, we now invite the chairpersons. About 60% of our members have no access to donor support and the annual budget was also on descending trend... to ensure participation of women. We base on the women organization to send female participants" (NEADS Staff Interview, August 2011)

We can argue that participation in NGO-led service is a constraint at some stages in the service delivery chain especially at decision-making level. If the beneficiaries are not involved at the stage of decision making then policies passed may not be in their [beneficiaries] favour and therefore, the poor shun participating in NGO activities if decision making is left to representatives only without hearing the voice of the majority beneficiaries.

3.3 Perceptions of the beneficiaries and conditions for benefiting from NGO Led service delivery

The last decade was characterized by a shift in thinking that NGOs were effective in delivering services to the poor, NGOs represent the voice of the poor and better placed to participate in the policy process (Namara 2010:25). To deliver services better, NGOs set benchmarks to select those to benefit from the services. In-depth interviews with the beneficiaries revealed that:

".....in order to be selected as a beneficiary, you must belong to a community group, prove that you have land where to keep the goats/poultry or piggery/ and where to do kitchen gardening. As women we are challenged to prove that we have land, the only thing is if one is married then it's assumed that she has land and if not married then it's assumed that she lives at the family land." (In-depth Interview with AACP beneficiary, August 2011)

In regard to the above, land becomes a condition for being selected as a beneficiary. However, as noted by Cleaver, NGOs also have become bureaucratic in choosing who to participate in their programs, this also means that by putting land as a prerequisite for benefiting from the NGO service delivery, then the poor are being excluded.

"...I trained with AACP in animal husbandry and sustainable livelihoods, I have land, and had local goats but I was not selected to get improved goats from NEADS because I did not meet the criterion of benefiting. I have however, used the knowledge gained to cross breed my goats, apply manure in my garden and now I have the best garden in the village" (in-depth interview with a non-beneficiary of AACP in Amguri, Sivsagar, August 2011)

The conditions set for benefiting in NGO projects can sometimes leave out the poor who are the targets for these programs. The elites at times hijack these programs since they have the land, can subscribe to the local community groups and end up hijacking what is meant for the poor. However, a further in-depth interview revealed that, membership to a community group was important to live in the community as more other benefits can accrue not only from NGOs but from self-help projects. The poor have set up their coping mechanisms that shield them from being exploited. In one of the FGDs in Amguri, Sivsagar, the participants revealed that those who have land accept to use it for group activities.

To be selected as a beneficiary, all the in-depth interviews and key informant interviews indicated that the beneficiary is supposed to have some bit of skill in keeping the project identified. If its poultry, at least one needs to have local chicken to begin with, this becomes a yard stick to show that the farmer will not start from zero.

"...the members of the group are all trained, but when it comes to selecting those to be given the birds, they first evaluate themselves, having local birds and the time to look after the birds. At the end of the exercise some members who meet the above are forwarded to us (NEADS) and then we go on to check whether what is stated is ground. In this way we use self-evaluation to select the beneficiaries" (In-depth interview with NEADS, AACP Project Official, August 2011)

• As noted in the literature, NGOs also have become bureaucratic in some way, because the conditions set for the beneficiaries are not different from those set by the government project which commentators have termed non participatory because the poor are excluded based on the conditions set, thus we argue in this paper that NGOs have not given the poor the chance to participate freely in the projects that were meant for them (the poor).

4.1 Funding for NGOs

Financial resources are important in running organization to implement their plans. As donors keep changing their focus to advocacy, NGOs in service delivery have had to change focus in order to continue to be funded. The trend in events following donor demands as revealed by (Zaidi, 1999, Rauh, 2010) proves to us how NGOs are at risk of being whisked away from the core social mission to serving donor agenda. Thus, the beneficiaries are left to hunt for the best alternative to continue participating in planning and decision

making of NGOs, which is both a political and governance issue. Interviews with the Director of NEADS, concurred with the revelation by the beneficiaries, *"Indeed we are refocusing our strategy, service delivery is no longer as attractive as it used to be, we were made to source out for funding"* (Director, NEADS, Interview August, 2011).

It is against such reasoning that NGOs are faced with a challenge of deciding between service delivery and advocacy, which the beneficiaries termed *'betraying'* the social mission of serving the poor as indicated in the FGD.

"I heard NEADS have not received funding for the last two years, but our director was heard on talking about other things not related to sustainable agriculture, what I do not understand is whether they will still come to us for follow up or the project has closed. When we asked one of the contact person he told us that we are now doing advocacy on big dams." (FGD with NEADS's beneficiaries in Dhekiakhowa, Jorhat, August, 2011)

With limited funding, even NGOs are at crossroads of continuing with service delivery or changing focus completely. Service delivery involves many risks such that even with limited internal sources, NGOs cannot maintain their staff for two months maximum, if donor funds are not available. NEADS for instance can only generate 1 per cent of the total budget from membership fees, which amount cannot even pay for office space and staff salary for one month. Financial resources are at the core of business for even those NGOs, which concentrate on social mission without diverting to profit motives.

4.2 Constraints in the planning and decision making processes

NGOs like any other institutions have guidelines in relation to decision-making processes and stakeholders involved in participating in management processes. The members meet during annual general meetings to receive and adopt annual reports including audited accounts. Cleaver notes that participatory decision-making is the most difficult part to achieve since they can result into lengthy meetings *'...at large meetings there was a notable disparity between the number of men speaking and number of women speaking, and the need to implement measures to ensure greater participation of women'* (Cleaver, F, 2001:43).

At one of the FGDs women reported that the language used in meetings is too technical for them to understand:

"...they (the elite) talk in complicated language which we don't understand even when we use Assamese they still mix with English a word like work plan, logical framework, audit report cannot be simplified, we end up keeping quiet for the rest of the time in the meeting. Our participation is in form of attendance but not in terms of decision-making. What can we decide when we have not followed what was said during the deliberations" (FGD August 2011).

Decision-making is crucial in running organizations and as a forum for feedback and filling information gaps. As mentioned by the FGD, technical language used by NGOs is not home grown; it is an imposition by the donor community to get information from the members. The use of log frames has created too much paper for the staff of NGOs even failing to carry on their field work. While the beneficiaries complained of technical language, the staff reported time wasting and too much paper work taking their time. Thus, NGOs have been seen as paper organizations instead of real service delivery. There sult to cope with the too much paper work is for NGOs to hire consultants to do the paper work but with a cost attached. The direct impact of this is to the service delivery chain, where money is diverted to writing reports for top management involved in preparing reports and feedback to the donors and the community.

4.3 Constraints in monitoring and evaluation

The membership of grass root groups and Non-governmental organizations is usually with members who are illiterate who cannot read and write. Being a member of an organization requires that you are involved in monitoring and evaluation of processes and programmes. For this to be effective, members are required to make reports and read ahead of meetings. We find illiteracy to be a constraining factor in monitoring of NGO programmes and processes as revealed by the inability of members to write reports depending on the staff,

".....our staff is getting busy and busy, imagine after field work, theys it to listen to the members, writedown their stories into reports (interview with NEADS field staff, August, 2011).

The farmers also reported the same constraint of technical knowledge,

"though the staff are there to help us, they also become tired thus we just can't keep calling them all the time to come and fix a problem, we hear of a table to fill when we do farmer field visit, I don't understand those things" (in-depth interview with NEADS beneficiary in Amguri, Sivsagar, August,2011)

Interview with the Director NEADS revealed that some members cannot read and write at all, something constraining the smooth running of operations,

"...our membership is of men and women who barely did not go to school, something that we have no control over, but affecting our daily operations to the extent that even men fear to let their wives freely participate in some programmes".

Illiteracy increases the workload for some staff because the members who do the checks and balance of project activities cannot even write a single report about what they have found out, as observed above, the volume of

paper work keeps on accumulating on the staff hence affecting direct implementation of work.

Time is another constraint that was highlighted by the staff of NEADS. The poor farmers spend a lot of time in doing everything possible to fend for their families. In the words of Prof. Ashwani, *the poor have no time to rest, they work a lot we cannot claim that they are unemployed*. In-depth interview with the farmers, revealed that indeed time is a major constraint to attend meetings, appear for trainings and even do some group assignments. The poor find themselves in a dilemma of work, group activities and personal responsibilities

..in our group we agreed to meet every Saturday but now, I cannot attend because my business runs on Saturday, the meetings on Saturdays are not well scheduled for us, we work the whole week, we need some rest, I have goats to feed, children to care for and other family responsibilities. I have not attended meetings for the last four months; I am constrained, but committed to the group. As a household woman, I have to balance between attending meetings and my family life (In-depth with AACP beneficiary in Teok, Jorhat, Interview August 2011)

It is admitted that time factor and other household activities is a challenge NGOs face while implementing their work. Findings from the field, suggest that time and household activities are a limiting factor to participation in organization activities. From the literature, we note that, staff of NGOs who are presumed to be undergoing professional trainings to improve organizational profile complained of too much work expected from them against the direct implementation of the project.

4.4 Constraints in implementation

In the implementation of NGO programmes, there are constraints that deter the beneficiaries from participating as indicated in the above findings. The in-depth interviews further revealed that the poor are constrained in participating in the implementation of NGO work. Thus the respondents commonly mentioned lobbying and advocacy.

I believe lobbying is done by those who went to school, for me, I listen and wait for the outcome if we are to receive goats and piggery then I would be happy, my work is to look after my projects not to keep making noise and shout, it's a waste of time, how can I influence policy change from deep here in the village. We need other people to do that lobby and they bring what they get, we can't all go at the same time. Our staff is competent to do that on our behalf (interview with AACP beneficiary, August 2011)

With this belief in mind, the poor feel that some work of NGOs belongs to other people while the staffs of the NGOs interviewed believe that lobby and advocacy is about the power of numbers.

..yes, our people still believe that lobby and advocacy is for the educated, it's about the power of numbers, we must all engage the policy makers,we have issues with farmers,

they are constrained incoming out boldly, we shall continue training the minlobby and advocacy that's the best way for our farmers to be self-sustainable and assertive (in-depth interview with NEADS staff engaged in AACP, August, 2011)

The poor participating in the implementation of programmes is to their advantage but if they feel constrained, the service will remain, leap service and another white elephant (Key Informant, Amguri, Sivsagar August 2011). NGO service delivery is crucial in poverty reduction strategies in Assam. Berner, notes that NGO participation in the service delivery was one way of capturing the voice of the poor, however, it was noted that the process of NGO participation in the service delivery was hasty and rushed into and another ritualistic participation (Berner, E, 2010: 15)

The poor are constrained to participate in NGO work because of time and they have inadequate finances to meet all their needs. NEADS suspended three members because of non-compliance to the constitution, AACP staff revealed that the financial aspect from the member's side is tricky, even when we ask the members to pay at subsidized rate; it is hard for all of them to meet the target. At AACP, the members who were selected to get goats, birds or piggery were supposed to put in place the following if selected:

- i) Haveland to do the farming;
- ii) Construct a pig sty, poultry house, or raised house for the goats;
- iii) Be able to sustain the project after the project life time

On observation, some beneficiaries had abandoned the project reporting that it was expensive for them to maintain the project after the project ended.

..I was given a cow, I put up the shelter, but later lacked support to buy drugs for the cow. It became inconveniencing for me all the time in the bush looking for pasture, these zero grazing cows are hard to maintain if one has limited piece of land, I used to wake up at 6am go to the bush, come back home, prepare for my children, do other household chores and realized I had lost all my money in buying drugs, Is old the cow and bought birds, I now have birds, atleast they are less expensive than the cow. (In-depth interview with AACP beneficiary in Bandhekikhowa, August 2011)

Financial resources for both the NGOs and farmers are key in the implementation stage of any project. The farmers could not even participate in meetings because they want to get other sources of livelihood. For NGOs to achieve their social mission in delivering services to the poor, financial resource mobilization has to be at the top of the agenda if NGOs are to contribute to poverty reduction.

4.5 Dynamics operating with in NGOs

Under this section, we examine how NGO set up has become a constraining factor in the delivery of services to the poor. Our findings are based on the

verbatim comments from the respondents and the literature review. What has become of NGOs in Assam is that they seem to be perfect in everything that they do without taking cognizance of other intervening factors like climate, location and government policy on service delivery.

NGOs have entered a grey area of recognition and visibility; they compete for space and end up wasting money on non-deliverables, the practice has seen a lot of signposts littering villages with names of NGOs operating in the area (Namara, 2009: 134). Key informant interviews in the project area concurred with Numara's finding

...You find a sign post with NGO X, another one with Y, Z, a lot of money is spent on posters, all in the name of service delivery, but the actual deliverables is pea nut. This visibility syndrome has posed a great challenge to the NGOs world in developing countries.

While taking on the new concept of basket funding, our finding was that, some NGOs have joined the system without taking proper analysis of their strengths and comparative advantages in terms of staff, space and capacity to delivery of services.

...we are faced with a big problem of our staff running from one organization to another, however much we tried to make staff sign contracts but we have no control over staff turnover (Coordinator AACP, Interview, August 2011).

Analysis of the AACP reports showed how over three senior staff had left the organization for greener pasture; the implication on the service delivery was that in the gestation period of looking for staff, the farmers were not being attended to. To the small organizations operating in only one district, were feared to be swallowed by the networks and consortiums since it's the name of the consortium or network that is made popular.

Professionalization of NGOs also was reported as a challenge faced by NGOs in service delivery. As NGOs expand their services to the grass root poor farmers the elite staff shuns working in *hard to reach* and *hard to survive* areas, the elite prefer to work in urban areas where they can access other services like internet. The professionals even shun working for local NGOs and prefer *big organization* thus to some organization work as recruiting grounds for big organization,

...the professionals come and go, so we depend on the strength of our members and the volunteers that we trained, however, technical knowledge can only be handled by subject specialists (Director, NEADS, Interview, August 2011)

From the analysis above, we argue that, whereas NGOs are involved in service delivery, they are not in position to sustain staff, carry out evidence based scientific research and the relationship between NGOs within the same sector is still contested, thus resulting into a challenge of how to utilize each other's corporate advantage, since much time is spent on debating who is

to do what, which organization will be the lead in the consortium if they applied together for funding. Thus NGOs have been accused of being accountants for the donors instead of making accountability to the communities they serve. At household level, NGOs focus on particular individuals who are face crowd out because all NGOs working in a particular will want to associate their success on the best achieving farmer.

We examined how the NGO-led service delivery model is faced with constraints of different kinds. We examined the perceptions of the beneficiaries on the NGO-led service delivery model. We analyzed and discussed the discourses of the NGO-led service delivery considering the constraints as grouped into political, governance, funding and participation space of NGOs. Further, we find out the coping mechanisms of NGOs and farmers in the face of limited resources. We also note that as the donors focus more on advocacy, NGOs in the service delivery, have responded by doing both service delivery and advocacy, which situation further exposes NGOs to a big dilemma amidst inadequate technical staff and limited time to carry out advocacy work.

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined how NGOs are constrained in delivering services to the poor. Unlike many other studies, the study avoided accusing NGOs for the gaps in their operations but rather, identified the reasons why the NGOs are constrained, the perceptions of the poor on NGO-led service delivery and the coping mechanisms of NGOs and beneficiaries in the face of limited resources. The main objective of the study was hinged on the fact that NGOs deliver services to the poor. The study found out that NGOs are constrained in delivering services to the poor thus contradicting what the donors assume to be the strength on which poverty focused resources are channeled through NGOs. Furthermore, from the findings of the study, as illustrated, the NGO-led service delivery is participatory, effective in mobilizing the grassroots communities, however we note that, NGOs are constrained by resources to sustain their work, this we would argue cannot be attributed to one single institution but several factors examined together. NGOs play a big role in representing the poor in the policy formulation process (Namara R, 2009) and therefore their work cannot be negated to piece meal.

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