POVERTY AND LOCAL ECONOMIC DATA MAPPING
OF
GAIBANDHA SADAR UPAZILLA

Prepared by:

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Executive Summary

In order to Facilitate Poverty Reduction by Strengthening Local Governance Institutions, Preparatory Assistance was sought to map the Poverty and Economic Development Picture of the Sadar Upazilla of Gaibandha District.

Based on infrastructure, human settlement, economic activities, cultivable land and population 13 unions of the upazila can be divided into four groups. The unions along the Ghaghat Basin namely Ballamjhar, Shahapara, Ramchandrapur, Boali, Badiakhali including the municipality are the richest. The second group of unions namely Kholahati, Kuptala, Laxmipur and Ghagoa are moderately rich. The third group comprising of the unions of Malibari, Gidari and Kamarjani are poor while Malibari is less poor than other two. The fourth group comprising of the estranged Mollarchar is the poorest.

Farm-activities

Irrespective of the above groups, paddy of different varieties particularly Aman and Boro are cultivated profusely in the unions excepting Mollarchar where again Boro lags far behind other unions - possible reason being lack of irrigation from wells or from the river.

Fruits are produced almost equally throughout the unions but the Unions of Mollarchar, Shahapara and Kamarjani lags quite behind other ten unions.

Jute is produced equally throughout the unions with slight exception in Ghagoa, Kamarjani and Mollarchar.

Sugarcane is produced throughout the unions but most in Badiakhali adjacent to Saghata Upazila and least in Kamarjani, Lakhsipur, Kuptala and Malibari. Potato is least produced in Ghagoa, Gidari and Mollarchar.

Winter vegetables are least produced in Ghagoa but other unions are uniform in producing the same. Summer vegetables are equally produced but very negligible in Mollarchar.

Cost of different agricultural activities like transplanting, weeding, harvesting and threshing are fairly uniform throughout the unions but cheapest in Mollarchar for transplanting, in Sahapara for weeding and in Gidari for harvesting.

Shallow tube well is more used in Kamarjani and least in Ramchandrapur. Deep tube-well is more used in Badiakhali and least in Kuptala. Hand tubewell is more used in Mollarchar and least in Gidari, low-lift pump is more in Mollarchar and least in Kholahati, and traditional method is most used in Gidari and least in Shahapara.

As low lying areas, in fact out of 13 unions only one is considerably less-low - floodwater is logged for longer periods in lower areas restricting scope for agricultural activities. Adjoining areas of other upazilas are not equally low and that is how they have got a natural advantage to get their fields ready for cropping well before unions of the Sadar Upazila. Consequently, Gaibandha has to purchase stuffs from others at a higher price during and immediate after flood. Again, by the time their produce is available in the market the price level has already

stabilized. Therefore, it appears that the issue is sustaining the vulnerable population during the rainy days and thereby enabling them to retain their resources.

The Land and Soil Resources Survey of the Sadar Upazila does not really support the fact that most of the unions are in low-lying areas. In that case, it can very well be inquired as to whether the natural drainage system is hampered by two-strands of embankments that are in the Sadar. At least on one occasion, a group discussion had accusing fingers toward embankment.

In our earlier discussion we categorises the unions of Sadar in 4 groups and we also observed that the group comprising of Gidari and Kamarjani are most vulnerable and least developed. It may appear feasible to think of a kind of intervention for this group. Within Gidari and Kamarjani again, Gidari is in better condition than Kamarjani.

The lone union of Mollarchar should be treated as a special case with its characteristic: vulnerability (flood) and opportunity (vast char-land remain fallow for at least four-months in a year).

The first group with 5 unions along the Ghaghat basin is more stable than others. Therefore, the 3rd and 4th groups of unions can serve as the hinterland for the first group. If it is assumed that the 3rd and 4th groups of unions will be producing agricultural crops when the first group can think about value-addition to those. The 2nd group a mixed batch though, can think of aligning themselves with the first group.

Non-Farm activities

Non-farm activities and more specifically trade, commerce and manufacturing is limited in scope for variety of reasons. But the first group of unions appears to be more predisposed to those. Micro-credit experiences of these unions can be further studied to understand the skill and type of use of the same by the borrower and to understand whether they are nearing to graduation or already graduated. In either case, they can be inspired to go for the next stage.

There are reportedly 49 wholesale markets/hats in different unions for trading, 9 being in Sahapara, 7 in Ramchandrapur, 7 in Ballamjhar, 6 in Boali, 4 in Badiakhali, and 2 each in Ghagoa, Gidari, Kamarjani, Kholahati, Lakshipur, Kuptala, Malibari and Mollarchar. There are a few (03) `fully-functional' growth centers but people are yet to reap benefits.

Total number of cottage industry in Gaibandha district is 4934 and in Sadar is 884 where the most are concentrated but least in Malibari, Mollarchar and Kamarjani.

There are 409 manufacturing units of different types in Sadar thana, 30 being in the municipal areas and 62 in Ballamjhar. Manufacturing units are unevenly spread throughout the upazila.

Health and social work facilities are spread over the upazila concentrating on the Sadar, followed by Sahapara, Lakhshimpur and Kuptola. All of the unions excepting Kamarjani and Mollarchar has got health/family planning facilities of one nature or the other. There are rural health centres/dispensaries in Lakhshipur, Ballamjhar, Ramchandrapur, Badiakhali, Ghagoa, Kamarjani and Mollarchar. Apart from two such facilities, the municipality area has got two hospital/health complexes - where reasonable facilities are available.

Different Actors:

All the actors of Gaibandha can broadly be divided into three groups (1) Organized i.e; GO, NGOs and Traders, (2) Different social organizations like clubs, Samities etc., and (3) Apparently unorganized large mass of people i.e; employed and unemployed.

These groups have there own agenda: sometimes from within, sometimes borrowed, and occassinally imposed. GOs agenda is more imposed and borrowed, NGOs agenda are from within and borrowed, while traders' agenda are from within. Social organizations' agenda are more derived from the actions of NGOs and GOs. On the other hand, large masses agenda swindle from one end to the other.

Gaibandha is not an isolated island though a bit detached from the mainstream. How capable all these actors are in asserting their position within the country? How capable the traders and manufacturers are in meeting and creating demands? Is the geographical location an advantage or disadvantage for them to mingle in the mainstream? Is the natural environment hostile to the people, throughout the year? Is Gaibandha poverty-stricken because of the combined effect of 13 unions or a few of the unions can be identified? Is the poverty scenario of Gaibandha an extreme case than the national scenario? Are Gaibandhans half-fed and half-clad i.e; poor throughout the year or seasonal? Which season? What are the possible reasons for seasonal poverty? How and to what extent and in which counts Gaibandhans are different from other parts of the country? Is there any world-view of Gaibandhans that is different from that of other parts of the country? Are we able to term them ambitious? What are their ambitions or desires anyway? What is their accomplishments as far as micro credit, awareness raising and capacity building interventions are concerned? No doubt, these interventions has brought down some changes but has the changes been sustained to go for the next phase of intervention?
Ghaghat Basin namely Ballamjhar, Shahapara, Ramchandrapur, Boali, Badiakhali including the municipality are of one type.

Views of the Actors

Group discussions were arranged to grasp their understanding and it emerged that their meaning of economic development is development of physical infrastructures, development of cottage industries, provisioning of electricity, more agricultural production and creation of employment opportunities.

On question as to who is supposed to shoulder all those responsibilities of creating facilities or provisioning of services - the loud and clear answer is government. At one stage it emerged to us that possibly the NGOs are perceived as half-brother of government as on several occasions NGOs were also designated as creator of provisions-though of limited extent. On question as to what role the members of civil society can play - they are of the view that they can advance moral and other supports to those endeavors either by GO or by NGOs. The actors of civil society of Gaibandha are more coherent than other parts of the country presumably because Gaibandha is known as disaster-prone, marginalized (pocket) and people in general are peace loving.

On question about amassing local resources or generating revenues - the issue appeared a bit embarrassing particularly for the chairmen of the UPs as they apprehend loosing popularity. On spending resources from the central government**:** misuse, wrong-use and misappropriation is voiced.

It is found that there are 29 NGOs of one type or other working in the upazila. Swanirvar is found to be engaged in 9 out of 13 unions, ASA and BRAC are present in 4-6 unions. Grameen is somewhat present throughout the upazila. GUK and EKOTA is present in 4 unions.

Therefore, where do we stand? Varity of issues of different dimensions is coming forward. Many of the issues are beyond the control of the Sadar Upazila. The NGOs and GO are tackling those issues, which are within the control of the upazila, in one way or the other. A proper coordination between the two could have improved the situation but that is yet to happen. One can think about coordination among the NGOs and more specifically the local NGOs.

It emerged from the group discussions that, among others, the role of information is considered critical for variety of reasons. However, people were found largely ignorant about vital information on the upazila. It appeared that whatever vital information is available, that is so from the Upazila Statistical Officer of the Government. However, their information are again incomplete backdated and not that user-friendly. Sharing of factual information as such is not practised nor there is any organized system to disseminate information.

All the people those were interviewed - individually or in group - observed two characteristics of the Sadar Upazila: (1) `Pocket', and (2) `Flood'.

Traders observed that, because of the `Pocket' scenario the local trade and commerce is hampered to have a boost. As the head quarters is 15 Km away from the national highway - traders of other areas are reluctant to come this far for their requisites, particularly when the adjoining Bogra Proper and Rangpur Proper is not quite far. Again, traders and businesspeople of Gaibandha do not always find it economically feasible to travel that far with their products. That is what also being echoed by a few of the manufacturers. Because of physical distance they are not able to compete effectively and because of poverty, local economy is not able to sustain them.

The members of CC&I are of the opinion that the River Jamuna can better be used for transport of goods and a city by-pass can be constructed to allure the traffic from the national highway of the east toward the river on the west and beyond. The study team on many occasions from several quarters encountered the case for `by-pass'. Truckers were very enthusiastic about the by-pass linking the East with the West or vice-versa. Right at this moment, there is no such construction to start a river-station at Balashighat (which is not in the Sadar uapzilla but an adjoining upazila) and the people observed that permanent structures on the bank of the river could be built to accommodate ferries to and from. They also observed that after the completion of the Jamuna bridge further down to Gaibandha - many of the ferries are supposed to be underused, therefore the Government can very well shift some of those ferries from there to here. By the way, there is a Rail Station at Balashi and an otherwise ferry service exists in Balashi -only thing is to strengthen it. The Bangladesh Railway for their own benefit can try to shift some of the ferries.

Discussion

The issue of flood is no doubt a trillion taka issues - for Bangladesh as a whole and for the sadar upazila. Out of 13 unions of the upazila 3 unions are worst affected: Kamarjani (90%), Mollarchar (80%) and Gidari (40%). These three unions adjoin the river Brahmaputra and Jamuna. While Mollarchar is on the other side of the Jamuna and farthest away from the upazila head quarters - other two unions are with the rest of the upazila. These two unions are along the river Brahmaputra and has got a smaller river inside and in order to protect this unions

and thereby other areas - there is a huge embankment along North to South. One can inquire as to why these unions are still affected as there is embankment and why Kamarjani is more affected than Gidari. There is a second embankment between the Union Gidari and its adjoining union - apparently to stop floodwater to westward toward the upazila headquarters.

The traders and businessmen of Gaibandha are of the view the Jute-based industry and agro-processing industry can be feasible in Gaibandha. On question as to why they are not starting one, they said that bank loans are not available. The businessmen, chamber people, are of the view that if natural gas can be made available along with the bypass and the river-station in Balashi – then the socio-economic condition of Gaibandha can be changed.

Gas possibility appears a far cry, by-pass and river station can be options. However, by-pass for the town alone may not be feasible if traffic of other districts do not find it suitable. River-station on both the sides of the Jamuna can be best option, which will not only help Gaibandha but northwestern corner of Bangladesh. The existing railway service between Dhaka and Dinajpur can greatly be benefited from a proper river-station.

Gaibandha people are warm and friendly but possibly slow in action. Non-locals of Gaibandha are of the view that locals are lazy, docile, cliques and weary. Forgery with papers for banks are not unheard of. Law and order situation is comparatively very good than other parts of the country - in fact the situation is equally good in greater Rangpur and Dinajpur region. Interestingly, river-eroded people are generally daredevil in other parts of the country but not the case in this region, not to speak of Gaibandha. Narcotics and liquor is stated and reported to be a problem and people of all ages appreciate those. Last year there was a tragedy of 52 people being killed by taking adulterated liquor.

Gradually `eroded-pocket' i.e. the upazila is being squeezed from the East by the river Brahmaputra on the other it is not really extending to the West toward Palashbari. The quieter upazila is not really in a position to make headway for variety of reasons. Coordination of developmental activities between and within NGOs and GOs are not quite present and again participation of local people in the activities is yet to be ensured. Toward better coordination, the chairmen of the union councils are of the view to make relevant GO and NGO people, somewhat accountable to them. Chairmen are also in favor of more authority, power and incentives. Commitment of the people to a cause or issue has not been firmly registered by either GO or NGO - as a result, among others, if a crack or hole is found in a dam or embankment - the locals feel that it is `theirs' business not `ours', or `his' not `mine'.

Otherwise easy-going and relax-loving Gaibandhans possibly would not be able to excel in technical and mechanical pursuits-diesel operated machines suffer a lot as there is no mechanics despite of a Vocational Training Center. Fishing, sewing and minding cattle would possibly fit them at this stage. By the way, the region has produced a number of table-tennis players of national stature and the game is a combination of art and science not vice-versa.

Options

It is reported that there was a big dairy farm in nearby upazila of Palashbari, which has now been transformed into poultry. Considering the vast charland of the upazila and its possible use during dry-season to arrange fodder for cattle, dairies can be an option. Further down the Jamuna, in Baghabari of Pabna district is the lone centre of the country where traders have been concentrating milk for ages for dispersion.

The River-port at Balashi can really be helpful in many ways. On a different plane, local tourists of Bangladesh can find Gaibandha inviting - particularly the Char areas during waning and waxing of the moon!

Conclusion

Economic growth or development or poverty reduction is primarily the business of those who aspire to benefit from it. Therefore, the urge of the same must come from within and accordingly the interventions will have to be tailored. It is evident that the sadar upazila people are only able to sustain growth of rudimentary level. Therefore, they must be mobilized to sustain existing level of growth on the one hand and equip themselves to fetch further growth on the other.

Recommendations

- Intensification and diversification of farm activities.
- Motivating local NGOs in the intensification and diversification of farm activities.
- Establishing and gearing up existing channels for marketing of farm produces.
- Local NGOs can think of becoming involved in contract farming of Banana and its marketing.
- The Bangladesh Railway can be perused to streamline and strengthen the ferry-services on both sides of the river and thereby attracting more passengers via Gaibandha.
- Gaibandha Foundation should take more interest in the present and future then past of Gaibandha.
- A five year intervention can be piloted to use barren char-lands, better use of cultivable lands, marketing of the produces, strengthening existing facilities and instilling a sense of belongingness within the stakeholders.
- An independent organisation could work as the Secretariat to motivate and steer the actors.