

**The State and Ethnic Minorities in Bangladesh - An
Evaluation of the Special Development Fund**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

A special development program was initiated from 1996-97 by the Prime Minister's Secretariat aimed at improving the socio-economic situation of the indigenous people of Bangladesh, resident outside the Chittagong Hill Tracts. A budgetary allocation of Tk. 5 crores per year has been made since program inception. In the first year, development activities were initiated in 22 thanas in 13 districts, expanding to 65 thanas in 25 districts in the second year.

The following types of activities were taken up for implementation:

- Income generation activities (training, group-formation and micro-credit)
- Tradition and culture
- Small-scale infrastructure projects
- Self-employment projects
- Water-sanitation
- Education

The program is being implemented at the local level through a 19-member committee¹ headed by the Thana Nirbahi Officer (TNO). *The committee members are drawn from local officials, local elite and representatives of the target groups (ethnic minorities).* The committee is responsible for identification, approval and implementation of "appropriate schemes" under a policy framework laid down by GOB.

The budget allocation per district is made in favour of the District Commissioner who in turn allocates these amongst the relevant thanas. The DC's office is responsible for overall monitoring and supervision. In addition, representatives from the Special Affairs Division are also supposed to monitor developments. Thana-wise allocations seem to be decided on the basis of ethnic-minority population densities. Other considerations include thana area, degree of "backwardness" etc.

The special program is more than three years old. However, there has been no attempt to find out to what extent the program has been able to meet program objectives and intentions. As such the program management feels very strongly that a proper evaluation should be conducted to identify problems, constraints, achievements and future policy.

Approach

Ideally, it would have been desirable to conduct a detailed evaluation of institutional approaches, implementation efficiency and program impact, on the basis of detailed questionnaire-generated information from a large sample of Thanas and beneficiaries. However very good results can be obtained from Rapid Rural Survey techniques employed by experienced researchers. This has the advantage of speed combined with good results and is thus, cost-effective in terms of time and resources.

¹ In practice, the number of committee members is often higher, e.g. in Haluaghat.

In terms of impact it is better to look at the relatively older projects (i.e. those that were taken up in the first year) rather than the more recently implemented projects. From the point of view of better understanding of the “institutional” issues (i.e. mechanisms used in practice to formulate, identify, finance, implement and monitor projects) there may be an advantage in looking at the more recent experience.

Thus around a third of the original 22 Thanas (7 Thanas) were selected for investigation, using RRA techniques. The basis of thana selection was target-population and programme coverage so that the full range of projects/activities developed for the different ethnic groups are captured. Details of the RRA are provided in Annex A.

Issues Investigated

- Assessment of objectives (primary, secondary, whether consistent, concrete results expected, whether objectives are realistic);
- Analysis and assessment of methodology and approach to project planning (participation of target group, planning schemes with time-frames and expected results, planning of phasing out etc.)
- Analysis and assessment of program steering: HQ level, district level, Thana level, activity level.
- Tools of project steering: information systems, monitoring, reporting, project visits etc.
- Analysis of implementation (description of activities and means, adequacy and quality of personnel designated for implementation, staff motivation, participation of beneficiaries);
- Comparison of activities as per planning and implementation; which factors helped/constrained implementation?
- Assessment of institutional development (mainly group-formation, training received, level/quality of groups, sustainability)
- Assessment of main core programs undertaken (e.g. micro-credit, small-scale infrastructure, education program etc.).
- Overall assessment of program success in terms of (a) effectiveness (were the methods effective for program achievement?) (b) efficiency (are the costs involved acceptable in relation to the project objectives?) and (c) Impact (contributions made in terms of institution building, know-how transfer, safe-guarding of tradition-culture-environment, improving sustainability – economic, social, institutional);
- Recommendations for future activities to ensure project success.

2.0 ASSESSMENT OF OBJECTIVES

According to the guidelines set by the Special Development Program the following program objectives were identified:

- *Improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the tribal people in the project area:* This is a general and overarching objective, and in itself does not help in providing policy direction to the program.
- *Enhancement of social awareness:* Again a general objective although somewhat more specific than the preceding point. However, social awareness is not adequately defined or discussed to make this a meaningful operational objective.

- *Preservation of cultural heritage:* Again a grand-sounding, very general objective that has not been carefully thought through. In practice this objective has been given a narrow and limited interpretation (construction of community centers/cultural complex, provision of musical instruments like tabla and harmonium).
- *Institution building and leadership development:* Once again a laudable objective that has not been carefully defined in operational terms. In practice support provided to local community organizations and group-formation for micro-credit can be viewed as steps in the right direction in terms of this objective.
- *Involvement in mainstream development activities:* It has been difficult for the program to address itself to this objective. Involvement of ethnic peoples in mainstream development activities varies, depending on the ability and quality of the leadership and the cooperation given by the main development agencies at the Thana.
- *Human resource development:* Given the poor access to education, health services and training facilities in many tribal areas, this is a highly desirable objective. Much of the program focus in this respect has been on health (mainly water and sanitation).
- *Poverty alleviation :* This has basically meant microcredit, water-sanitation projects (tubewells, slab-latrines), micro-infrastructure (foot-bridges, small culverts) etc.

The main projects undertaken under the program basically involves three elements:

- Infrastructure and Construction a main thrust (culverts, bridges, temples, cultural centres)
- Microcredit
- Water-sanitation

These presumably relate to the seven, rather grandly set objectives for the program outlined above. It would thus seem that program objectives fail to recognize the fact that the program is small and to be effective, needs to be clearly focused and implemented. All the thanas took up very similar sub-projects, in part because of the Guidelines which does not allow for much flexibility.

- **ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT OF METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH TO PROJECT PLANNING**

Infrastructure and Water-Sanitation Projects

Potential projects are identified at the Thana level by the Thana Committee (on the basis of the Guidelines). The Committee members deliberate amongst themselves before arriving at the final decision with regard to project prioritization and implementation. Generally the TNO and the Thana Engineer play a critical role. *The tribal representatives often play an important role as well depending on their individual leadership ability, morale and relationship with the other influential members in the committee.* There is no direct participation of target groups in the decision-making process.

Once a specific decision is made the project is put out to tender (and will also have explicit, clearly defined targets/outputs and time-schedules). At this stage, the responsibility for awarding the contract, monitoring and supervision of works lie with the LGED, and in particular with the Thana Engineer.

Microcredit:

The approach to micro-credit implementation under the program has been in one of two ways: through indigenous agencies or groups or through government agencies. The preferred approach is to find a suitable local partner organization that works with and is embedded in local (tribal) society (e.g. the Tribal Welfare Association in Haluaghat). Where such partners are difficult to find or lack the minimum capability or institutional strength needed for the job the option is to fall back on the Thana Committee or government agencies like the BRDB, Thana Cooperatives or the Department of Social Services (e.g. in Godagari 2nd phase, Kamalganj, Kalmakanda).

Material distribution (like educational and sports materials) is a small component of the program. These are mainly distributed by the Committee (sometimes a sub-committee is formed for the purpose). In some cases the major responsibility of identifying suitable beneficiaries is left with local bodies (clubs or schools) e.g. in Ghoraghat, Panchbibi.

4 ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAM STEERING: HQ LEVEL, DISTRICT LEVEL, THANA LEVEL, ACTIVITY LEVEL.

HQ Level

At the HQ level the program is managed by one full-time staff with the rank of "Research Officer" who works under a director (Director 5). Director 5 is responsible, in addition, for a number of other programs.

An inter-ministerial committee has been set up consisting of representatives from the Ministries of Finance, Planning, LGRD and Home) with the mandate to undertake a number of duties: (a) visiting project areas to gather information and to suggest suitable projects for implementation (in a brief report), and (b) deciding on allocation of funds to the different thanas. The committee has not been given any monitoring duties, however.

The role of the Research Officer includes maintenance of links with the Thana Committees (through the TNO). *Actual visits to the program areas seem to be few and far between. Thus, of the seven thanas studied, three thanas were visited once (in the last three years).*

HQ Level Problems Posed

- HQ seeks proposals from Thana on projects but usually allocations made are a fraction of what is asked
- When allocations are made nothing is mentioned about which projects have been approved or otherwise (of those initially proposed by the Thana) - this leads to confusion
- *MIS is very poor: expenditure data is not regularly updated; data on number and types of projects are not available; similarly, no information exists on project status or micro-credit recovery status*
- *There is considerable delay in processing disbursements resulting in a tendency to stagger disbursements just before the end of the June deadline*

- No reporting format has been provided to the Thana although everyone sends in some kind of a progress report irregularly

Thana Level

There is considerable variation to be found in the experience of the TCs. Some committees are active and well represented by tribal leaders (e.g. Panchbibi, Haluaghat and Teknaf). In others (e.g. Kamalganj, Kalmakanda, Godagari) the most suitable candidates were not selected from amongst the tribals (i.e. community leaders or persons who enjoy the confidence of the community they are supposed to represent). Other (general) members tend not to be active as they do not have or are not given clearly defined roles. The TNO and LGED Engineer take on the most pro-active roles. In some cases however, active participation of some government departments was in evidence. Thus, the Dept. of Social Services was found to be active in Kamalganj while the Dept. of Coop and DPHE and Youth Development, were actively involved in Godagari and Panchbibi. *The main reason for lack of enthusiasm amongst the general members (and the departments/agencies that they represent) stems from the absence of clear instructions from their own (line) ministries regarding participation in this program, compounded by lack of manpower.*

Other problems identified at the Thana level are presented below.

- Irregular meetings of the Thana Committee (TC)
- Minutes of TC meetings are not properly kept and not circulated amongst members
- Agenda of meetings are not disclosed in advance
- Inadequate supervision/monitoring of activities – especially of micro-credit
- TC members seem to have little knowledge of the Guidelines or of procedural matters relating to the program
- Accounting practices employed is very weak. The TNO is responsible for accounts and he is supported by the Office Super in carrying out this task
- No audits appear to have been conducted so far

Community Level Constraints

- There are few community-based organizations (CBOs) for tribals and those that exist are weak. This is a major constraint faced by the TC in identifying suitable partners for project implementation. Thus in three of the thanas investigated, no suitable CBOs were found.
- Leadership is weak leading to problems faced in dealing with the state machinery and providing effective representation in e.g. the TC

• ANALYSIS OF IMPLEMENTATION

Activities and means

The types of activities undertaken are essentially similar in all the areas - a reflection of the directions provided in the 'Guidelines':

- Income-generating activities - mainly micro-credit, sometimes combined with a small skill-development training component;
- Health-sanitation - mainly installation of tubewells and sanitary latrines;
- Construction or repair of temples, churches and/or construction of cultural/community centres;
- Educational component, e.g. distribution of lamps, umbrella and paper to students in Haluaghat, cash in Teknaf, distribution of stipends in Haluaghat and Teknaf, construction/ repair of pre-school centres in Godagari and Panchbibi, etc. There were no education components in Kamalganj, Kalmakanda and Ghoraghat;
- Sports and culture - such as distribution of sports and cultural equipment (voleyball, football, harmonium etc.). An expensive keyboard was provided to the people in Panchbibi and Kamalganj. A guitar was provided in Kamalganj, and *adivasi* cultural instruments were provided in Halughat, Panchbibi and Ghoraghat;
- micro-infrastructure, e.g. roads, footbridges, culverts. Micro-infrastructures were built in all the thanas except in Teknaf.

Implementation of sub-projects were carried out mainly in three ways:

- Public tender - mainly for infrastructure and construction, including tubewells and latrines
- Micro-credit programs carried out with the help of tribal organizations or associations
- Thana project-committee were also formed (usually under the TNO) to look after, e.g. distribution of slab-latrines, supervision of tubewell installation, monitor work progress etc.

Adequacy and Quality of Personnel

- (a) Generally, the Thana LGED is entrusted with the responsibility of calling public bids for construction activities, as well as monitoring and supervision that is entailed. The existing LGED machinery seems adequate for the job, and in general, the quality of work is good. However, there are no mechanisms for O&M, and in some cases it is not clear who owns the structures built.
- (b) Availability and quality of community organizations is a big constraint. Where these exist, these are often in embryonic form and are poorly staffed by ill-trained and inexperienced people.
- (c) The motivation and sincerity of the project committees is questionable. There are examples of embezzlement, bias in beneficiary selection and distribution of funds or resources that seem to be widespread. Important exceptions to this rule are Haluaghat and Panchbibi where project committees have set a brilliant example in terms of efficiency and honesty. Perhaps the main factor behind their success relates to the high quality of leadership provided in these two thanas (e.g. by Dr. Dijendranath Sarkar in Panchbibi and Mr. Promode Mankin in Haluaghat).

Participation of beneficiaries

The principal mechanisms available for community or beneficiary participation in the program is through participation of tribal representatives in the Thana Committee and

project sub-committees, and through community (tribal) organizations (CBOc). However, the experience in this regard is very varied. Active participation by tribal representatives were seen in Teknaf, Panchbibi, Kalmakanda and Haluaghat, while in the extreme case of Godagari, there was no tribal participation at all.

Comparison of Activities as per Planning and Implementation

In the case of physical infrastructure and construction projects, performance in general can be described as satisfactory, notwithstanding some cases where quality has been compromised (e.g. Community Centre at Haluaghat).

In the case of the micro-credit component, there is a wide gap between intended performance and actual implementation. These relate to all aspects of micro-credit, including distribution, terms (e.g. the rate of interest and repayment period), recovery rates, group-formation, creation of a revolving fund and skill-development and training. Many partner organizations remain unclear whether the money disbursed to beneficiaries are to be recovered, and if so at what terms. As a result recovery is generally very weak. Often credit is disbursed to individuals directly without first forming peer-groups and inculcating basic discipline (like savings mobilization, training, skill-development). Beneficiary selection is also problematic and do not seem to follow a standard set of criteria. In fact the whole micro-credit program is in a state of anarchy with different communities adopting different approaches and methods. A basic problem relates to the inexperience of many partner organizations with micro-credit. For many, this is the first time that an attempt is being made to implement a credit program. If these organizations were adequately briefed and their personnel provided with minimal training on micro-credit, their performance would have improved very significantly. Similarly, training imparted to beneficiaries under the program has been very limited, and in most cases it followed disbursement of credit rather than preceding it.

In the case of latrines, fielding and distribution was not preceded by any efforts to raise awareness, so that in a number of areas (especially in the Santal-Oraon areas) there was widespread non-use of these equipment and a rapid degeneration of the basic structures.

Factors That Helped or Hindered Implementation

- Strong involvement and good leadership of tribal communities has helped implementation
- The motivation and role of the TNO is critical
- One of the main inhibiting factors relate to the frequent transfer of the TNO
- Lack of departmental initiatives is another factor resulting in apathy of concerned Thana officials and general members of the TCs
- Lack of Thana level information relating to basic demographic and socio-economic conditions in the Thana makes planning difficult. We remain still dependent on the 1991 census data
- Lack of experience with micro-credit implementation by local bodies (CBOs);
- Supervision and monitoring activities are virtually non-existent contributing to the poor level of program implementation.

Assessment of Institutional Development

A number of new tribal CBOs were formed or those that were dormant were revived as a result of the program. However, these institutions were found to suffer from a number of weaknesses, including lack of trained staff, inadequate training and experience in development work especially in micro-credit, and poor managerial capacity. Some exceptions however, are noteworthy, including the Adivasi Bohumukhi Samabaya Sangstha in Panchbibi, and Kharangkhalai Rakhain Buddhist Welfare Association in Teknaf. Both these CBOs were found to have high recovery rates. The quality of leadership and good management practices, including transparent and sound record-keeping has contributed to highly effective and efficient implementation of projects. The Matikata Bohumukhi Samabaya Samiti in Godagari is another example of an efficient and well-organized CBO that is engaged in implementing the micro-credit component in the area. Recovery rates are high (100 %) and management seems to be efficient and honest. However the recovered funds are redistributed to the members rather than depositing to the Thana revolving fund, as specified in the Guidelines. Some samity/CBO members received training, e.g. skill development training to RBWA (Rakhain) and HBSS (for Chakmas) in Teknaf.

Micro-credit based group formation has NOT taken place at all. The only exception is an attempt to form groups in Panchbibi where 40 groups were formed in the second year of the project (and appear to be working well)

Twenty-five micro-credit borrowers in Panchbibi received skill-development training (e.g. in sewing, animal fattening, fisheries and poultry) – but this was an exception rather than the rule. In some cases there was lack of synchronization of training, e.g. in Teknaf where members received credit for small business but received training for animal fattening - the incentive for participation in the training program being the training allowance! Moreover, the training was received much later, well after receipt of the credit, rather than the other way around.

Some of the CBOs have achieved sustainable levels, especially in Panchbibi and Haluaghat. The others remain too weak and are likely to disappear in the absence of the Program.

7 OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAM SUCCESS

Effectiveness

- In general, infrastructure components implemented by the TC through LGED was effectively conducted
- Micro-credit through CBOs have not been very effective
- Tubewell and latrines: While distribution was effectively made the tubewell distribution component suffered from lack of technical support as TCs did not consult with DPHE (to determine suitability of siting and aquifer conditions); also there was ambiguity with regard to ownership arrangements especially at the

household level. In the case of latrines, these were frequently distributed without adequate motivation and awareness creation

- Other components like distribution of educational, sports and cultural materials were effectively implemented but of little value.

Efficiency

- In general, infrastructure/construction projects were efficient. Exceptions that may be mentioned are the costs involved in building the cultural complex and tribal hostel for students in Kalmakanda and Haluaghat which seems to have been excessive.
- Tubewells were often sunk inappropriately with scant regard to technical and ownership aspects, leading to wastage of resources and non-use; Latrines were also largely wasted and were not found to be much in use (exception: Teknaf - Kharankhali)
- Micro-credit: generally inefficient - partly due to the misconception that this was a grant and would not need to be repaid

Impact

- Infrastructure, especially cultural complexes and temples: The study team considers that these have had a significant positive impact on the communities in a number of ways – as a focal point for their cultural/social/religious needs, as a readily identifiable community space that is exclusively theirs and as a center or club.
- Micro-credit – As already discussed, this component, despite quite considerable potential, has not had much impact on the community.
- Water-sanitation: Again as discussed elsewhere in this report impact has been poor for this component.
- Other components (e.g. distribution of sports/educational materials): The study team agrees that these have had very little impact.

8 RECOMMENDATIONS

Headquarter Level

- It is important to strengthen HQ ability to guide, monitor and supervise program activities at the Thana level. The inter-ministerial committee should meet regularly (e.g. once every three months) to review program progress.
- The quality of MIS available to HQ is weak. This must be improved through standardized reporting of progress from each thana at regular intervals (preferably each month). These should be computerized.
- Whatever role that was provided to the DC's office should be withdrawn. However, this office should be kept informed of Thana developments by copying periodically produced progress reports (perhaps made out on a quarterly basis).
- While deciding Thana allocations (on the basis of proposals received from each thana) the HQ should clarify its position with regard to use of funds. Clearly, this should be left to the TC to decide – which is also the current practice. This de facto practice should now be made de jure.

- HQ must develop a specific plan for monitoring and supervision of Thana activities
- Finally, the program suffers from a lack of focus and a proliferation of too many small components. This dissipates funds, does not create a lasting impact and cannot be justified on any ground. A clear focus needs to be evolved.
- For this to be a meaningful program fund allocations must be raised and disbursements made more efficiently.

Thana Level

- Good management practices need to be inculcated at the Thana level:
 - Holding regular meetings of the TC to agree on project implementation and program review
 - Recording and maintaining minutes of the meetings
 - Advance notice to general members on meeting timings and the discussion agenda
 - Proper records of accounts that should be kept up to date and made accessible to all members of the TC
- Every effort should be made to identify and include the most able tribal representatives in the TC
- The morale of other general members of the TC needs to be boosted by giving them a clearly defined role. As of now, many question why they are in this body.
- Monitoring and supervision of projects is needed, especially for micro-credit. TCs should form appropriate sub-committees for the purpose (and a small TA built into program design)
- The quality, quantity, type and timing of training need to be carefully reviewed. At present this is a weak program area. There is a clear need for training of the staff of CBOs (in e.g. good management practices, micro-credit) as well of beneficiaries in specific skills.

Beneficiary Level

- While there is little doubt that the program is able to reach the tribal communities, it is unable (or has not tried) to target benefits according to any specific criteria (e.g. poverty or women). As a result there has been a tendency for benefits to be concentrated amongst those who have better connections with TC members or tribal representatives.
- CBOs/beneficiaries often do not have a clear understanding of program objectives and financing terms – especially for micro-credit, resulting in a wide variety of terms and conditions used. These need to be standardized, clarified and clearly communicated.
- The role of local bodies (CBOs) is critical. These need to be promoted and strengthened through training and institutional development support.
- Awareness raising activities amongst beneficiaries is a missing element and is required for e.g. water-sanitation projects to be successful Group-formation has not really been attempted and should be carefully reviewed. The use of community groups as a focal point for development inputs (including training) has been very successful elsewhere.

- It is important to create awareness amongst the non-tribal communities as well so that jealousies and divisiveness is not generated. This has not been a problem so far however.

The State and Ethnic Minorities – Concluding Observations

The above review provides a certain insight into the institutional mind-set of the State towards ethnic minorities. Tribal peoples are essentially viewed as backward, poor and socio-economically and culturally inferior. However, there is an increasing recognition that (a) these people EXIST and (b) that 'something' needs to be done for them. Another important factor underlying this greater awareness relates to vote-bank considerations – it is found that these minority peoples vote 100 percent for the Awami League which is currently in power after more than two decades. Possibly increased donor awareness is also responsible, following recent developments in the CHT.

However, a number of weaknesses in the program fielded point to disinterest and apathy, if not outright neglect. Overall monitoring and supervision systems are almost non-existent. The HQ staff assigned for the purpose are few (actually only one junior officer is in charge of the program, along with other duties). The fact that an evaluation was initiated at all must be a positive development. However, we know that the report (eight detailed reports in all) are collecting dust since the committee set up to review it has failed to meet over the last 3 months. It is also doubtful if the recommendations made are going to be pursued.

It is perhaps odd that this program is being implemented by the PM's Office rather than by a suitable line ministry or directorate, e.g. the BRDB. One major problem that this has caused at the local level is the failure or lack of involvement of relevant development agencies in the program.

There has been no attempt to tailor the program to specific needs of the different communities. It is implicitly assumed that "they are all the same" and have the same problems, while in fact that is far from the truth. There is considerable difference amongst the various groups in terms of socio-economic development, educational and cultural level and the quality of local leadership and institutions (e.g. between the Garos and the Santals).

At the local level where the State is represented by the Thana Committee, all power rests with the TNO. More often than not, other committee members remain apathetic and unconcerned. Ethnic minority representatives are sometimes able to assert themselves, and when they can, programs are better run. In general, the positive element is that benefits/inputs do seem to reach ethnic beneficiaries, despite inefficiencies – although the rationale for distribution amongst the ethnic population is usually unclear. In particular, small infrastructure projects were found to have been built to specification and on time – a testimony to the fact that the Local Government Engineering Department that implements these has attained a basic level of competence and efficiency.

The State is just beginning to recognize the existence of ethnic minorities in Bangladesh – a welcome development which one hopes will not be prematurely aborted if there is a change of government in the next elections. By the same token, there is a severe dearth of information and research on ethnic minority issues which needs to be remedied. The

problem has been that traditional neglect has been partly a result of the perception that these people are too small in number to bother with. In statistical terms this is absolutely correct. What however will need to be emphasized is that these groups provide a crucial diversity to an otherwise homogeneous setting, and embody experiences, knowledge and culture whose importance cannot be gauged by their numerical size. We must also remember that over long periods of time many marginal/ethnic groups have merged with the Bengalis – Hindu and Muslim – and they provide a crucial insight into elements of our own past.

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