Embedding Co-production for Social Accountability: The Role of NGOs in Marginalised Economies

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Dedicated To:

My beloved parents and my loving family

Your unconditional love, unwavering support, and endless encouragement have been my foundation and strength. Your exceptional care, constant inspiration, and boundless blessings have guided me throughout this journey and made this achievement possible.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own original work, except where due acknowledgement has been made. It has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for any degree or other qualification at the University of Essex or any other academic institution.

Farjana Jahan Nipa

December 2025

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Abstract

This thesis explores how co-production can enhance the social accountability of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) operating within the complex institutional contexts of marginalised economies. Accountability is essential for NGOs' legitimacy and effectiveness. However, existing research indicates that the proliferation of donor-driven monitoring systems and the prioritisation of upward, functional accountability have significantly changed NGOs' operational logics and approaches (Agyemang et al., 2017; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Tanima et al., 2020; Yang and Northcott, 2018). These technocratic practices often marginalise participatory forms of social accountability, leading to mission drift (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Hopper and Tanima, 2018). To address these issues, scholars advocate for co-production—collaboration between professionals and citizens to better share assets, resources, and contributions (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021)—as a means to strengthen social accountability (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). Using Social-symbolic Work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) as a framework, this study conducted an in-depth case study of BRAC, the largest NGO in Bangladesh, employing semi-structured interviews, journal entries, observations, and document analysis. The findings reveal that BRAC's Climate Change Program (CCP) representatives supported co-production through intermediary community groups, enabling beneficiaries to reconceptualise their roles from passive aid recipients to active agents of change. This shift transformed community mindsets, enhanced self-efficacy, and fostered a collective sense of agency, creating conditions for social accountability mechanisms to emerge within environments characterised by deep-rooted socio-economic and cultural barriers. The study concludes that co-production functions as a catalyst for social accountability,

narrowing the relational gap between NGOs and communities. By embedding shared ownership in the design and implementation of programmes, NGOs like BRAC can institutionalise more participatory, inclusive, and sustainable accountability practices, empowering communities to overcome structural barriers and actively shape their own development pathways.

Keywords: NGOs, co-production, social accountability, emerging economies, BRAC, Bangladesh, Social-symbolic Work.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 NGOs, Social Accountability, and Co-Production in Development 1

1.2 The Objectives of the Research 6

1.3 Research Gap and Questions 9

1.4 Background of the Study 12

1.4.1 Marketisation and Hybrid Models of NGOs 13

1.4.2 The Bottom-of-the-Pyramid (BoP) Model 14

1.4.3 The Rise of Social Enterprise Models 16

1.4.4 Implications of Social Accountability 19

1.5 Recentring Social Accountability in NGO Practice 19

1.5.1 Facilitating Social Accountability through Co-production 20

1.5.1.1 Participatory Tools for Social Accountability 20

1.5.1.2 The Role of Social Capital in Enabling Social Accountability 21

1.5.1.3 Conceptualising Co-production as a Framework for Accountability 22

1.5.1.4 Co-production as a Transformative Pathway to Social Accountability 23

1.6 Structure of the Thesis 26

1.7 Conclusion 27

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction 30

2.2 NGOs and Their Development Initiatives in Bangladesh 33

2.2.1 The Historical Evolution of NGOs in Bangladesh.....33

2.2.2 Neoliberal Impacts on NGOs in Bangladesh.....35

2.2.3 Neoliberalism and the Rise of Hybrid NGOs.....36

2.2.4 Neoliberalism and the Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) Approach.....37

2.3 NGOs' Accountability Mechanisms.....38

2.3.1 Upward Accountability and Mission Drift.....40

2.3.2 NGOs' Mission Drift and Its Impact in Bangladesh.....42

2.3.3 Social Accountability and Grassroots Development.....43

2.3.4 Participation as a Process for Social Accountability.....44

2.4 Co-production and Community Participation for Social Accountability.....48

2.4.1 The Theoretical Foundations of Co-production.....49

2.4.2 Types and Depth of Co-production.....50

2.4.2.1 Aspirational and Transformative Co-production.....51

2.4.2.2 Collective and Community Co-production.....53

2.4.2.3 Representative Co-production.....55

2.5 Role of Intermediaries as Co-producers.....58

2.6 Facilitators and Barriers to Co-production.....60

2.7 Theoretical Framework.....62

2.7.1 Social-Symbolic Work.....64

2.7.2 Social-Symbolic Objects.....65

2.7.3 Core Principles of Social-symbolic Work.....67

2.7.4 Various Dimensions of Social-symbolic Work.....70

2.7.4.1 The Discursive Dimension 71

2.7.4.2 The Relational Dimension 73

2.7.4.3 The Material Dimension 75

2.8 Conclusion 77

Chapter 3: Research Context

3.1 Introduction 82

3.2 Bangladesh: A Paradox of Development 83

3.3 Structures and Functioning of NGOs in Bangladesh 86

3.3.1 Go-NGO Partnership 86

3.3.2 Government Regulations of NGO Funding in Bangladesh 88

3.4 Barriers to Social Accountability 90

3.4.1 Socio-political Barriers to Social Accountability 91

3.4.2 Socio-economic Barriers to Social Accountability 93

3.4.3 Socio-cultural Barriers to Social Accountability 94

3.5 Conclusion 98

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction 100

4.2 Methods of Data Collection 101

4.2.1 Case Study Method 103

4.2.2 Access the Field for Data Collection 104

4.2.3 Case Selection: Why BRAC and CCP 106

4.2.4 BRAC's Climate Change Program (CCP) 108

4.2.5 Selecting the Sampling Methods for the Study 112

4.2.6 Ethical Approval 114
4.3 Data Collection 115
4.3.1 Overview of the Data Collection Phases 115
4.3.2 Multi-Methods Approaches and Triangulations 120
4.3.3 Interviews with the Beneficiaries 122
4.3.4 Interviews with the Climate Action Groups (CAGs) 127
4.3.5 Interview with the NGO Staff 130
4.3.6 Interviews with the Government Representatives 133
4.3.7 Participant Journals and Researcher Reflexivity 135
4.3.8 Secondary Data 138
4.4 Methods of Data Analysis 139
4.4.1 Stage 1: Familiarising with the Collected Data 141
4.4.2 Stage 2: Generating Initial Codes 143
4.4.3 Stage 3: Searching for Initial Themes 145
4.4.4 Stage 4: Reviewing and Refining Themes 146
4.5 Conclusion 147

Chapter 5: Constructing the Organisation Towards Co-production

5.1 Introduction 149
5.2 The Community Participation and Construction of BRAC 152
5.2.1 Bridging the Humanitarian-Development Nexus through Co-production 154
5.2.2 Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) 156
5.2.3 Participatory Approaches of Development 159

5.2.4 Community Empowerment Program (CEP) 161

5.3 Reconstructing Participation: Organisational Learning and the Creation of Research and Evaluation Division (RED) 165

5.4 The Architecture of Co-production: Organisational Work Shaping CCP Dynamics 168

5.4.1 Situatedness of the Climate Change Project: The Purposeful Objective 168

5.4.1.1 Reshaping Manpower: Purposeful Recruitment Strategy 174

5.4.1.2 Reshaping Manpower: Purposeful Staff Development and Capacity Building Strategy 179

5.5 Flexible and Adaptive Structure: Purposeful Loyalty Culture 184

5.6 Bridging Divides: Building Trust Across Community Lines 189

5.7 Conclusion 193

Chapter 6: Transforming Selves and Shaping Systems: Co-production for the Creation of Public Value

6.1 Introduction 197

6.2 Community Involvement: Building Spaces for Lasting Impact 199

6.2.1 Creating Spaces for Participation 200

6.2.2 Developing a Sense of Ownership and Contributors 209

6.3 From Dependency to Agency: Resource Work for Co-production 212

6.3.1 Enhancing Knowledge and Building Social Awareness 213

6.3.2 Valued Citizens 219

6.4 Enhancing Capabilities to Co-produce 223

6.4.1 Capacity Building 224

6.4.2 Developing Self-efficacy 229
6.4.2.1 Tackling Unequal Power Dynamics 231
6.4.2.2 Co-producing Knowledge 234
6.4.2.3 Ensuring Equitable Partnerships 237
6.5 Bridging the Humanitarian-Development Nexus through Co-production ... 241
6.6 Conclusion 242

Chapter 7: Embedding Co-production: Advancing Social Accountability of NGOs in Marginal Economies

7.1 Introduction 247
7.2 Community Engagement and Shared Responsibilities: A Path towards Social Accountability 249
7.2.1 Intermediary Groups as Local Ambassadors 250
7.2.1.1 CAGs: Representatives of the Communities 258
7.2.1.2 CAGs: Building Collective Questioning Power 263
7.2.1.3 Challenges in the Process of Collective Questioning 266
7.3 Climate Youth Group (CYG): Youth Representatives from the Community 271
7.4 Theatre Groups: Representatives for Mass Awareness 275
7.5 Local Advisory Committee (LAC): Representatives of the Government Authorities 280
7.6 Fostering Local Advocates: Culturing Social Accountability 282
7.6.1 Competent Community 284
7.6.2 Adequate Skills to Practise Social Accountability 288
7.7 Conclusion 294

Chapter 8: Discussion – Co-production as a Pathway to Social Accountability

8.1 Introduction 298

8.2 Embedding Co-production through Social-Symbolic Work (Discussion of Research Question 1) 304

8.2.1 Co-production as Organisational Logic and Source of Legitimacy .. 305

8.2.2 Discursive Work: Constructing Empowerment and Shared Meaning 306

8.2.3 Relational Work: Building Trust, Inclusion and Shared Responsibility 310

8.2.4 Material Work: Institutionalising through Structures and Practices .. 315

8.2.5 Integrating the Discussions: Co-production as Dynamic Alignment. 320

8.3 Reimagining Roles for Co-production (Discussion of Research Question 2) 322

8.3.1 Transforming Identities and Building Agency in Co-production..... 324

8.3.2 Building Capacity and Confidence: Self-efficacy as the Foundation of Agency 325

8.3.3 Negotiating Power and Legitimacy in Co-production 331

8.4 Co-production as a Mechanism for Social Accountability (Discussion of Research Question 3) 332

8.4.1 Representative Co-production as Accountability Infrastructure 333

8.4.2 Community Co-production and Empowerment as Social Accountability Practice 335

8.4.3 From Voice to “Collective Questioning Power” 338

8.5 Synthesis: Co-production as an Evolving Framework for Social Accountability 340

8.6 Conclusion 344

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction 347

9.2 Research Contributions 347

9.2.1 Theoretical Contributions 348

9.2.2 Empirical Contributions 350

9.2.3 Practical Contributions 353

9.2.4 Methodological Contribution 354

9.3 Limitations of the Research 356

9.4 Future Research Direction 356

9.5 Summary of the Thesis 358

9.6 Concluding Remarks 358

References 361

List of Figures

2.1 Conceptual linkage between NGO accountability challenges, co-production, and social-symbolic work 48

2.2 Conceptual model of co-production mediated by social-symbolic work..... 63

4.1 Pages from the journal entry 136

4.2 Pages from my diary 138

6.1 Creating spaces to be co-productive 202

6.2 Bringing citizens and powerholders together in the same institutional spaces 232

6.3 CCP's strategies for self-transformation towards co-production..... 240

7.1 The chain of intermediary groups as representative co-producers..... 270

List of Tables

3.1 The key socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural barriers to social accountability 96

4.1 Overview of the 1st phase empirical data collection..... 116

4.2 Overview of the 2nd phase empirical data collection..... 118

5.1 BRAC's gradual construction of a co-productive organisational model 153

5.2 Social-symbolic work underpinning BRAC's embedding of co-production 192

6.1 Social-symbolic work mechanisms enabling role reimagination in the CCP's co-production 241

7.1 Intermediary groups within the CCP and their roles in representative co-production 255

8.1 Summary of Research Questions and Key Findings from Chapters 5–7 299

Appendix

Appendix 1: Map of Mongla Upazila.....402

Appendix 2: Ethical Approval.....403

Appendix 3: Flipchart (Secondary Data).....404

Appendix 4: Consent Form.....405

Appendix 5: Written Instruction for CAGs Journal Entry.....406

Appendix 6: Open Coding 408

Appendix 7: Collected Secondary Data.....410

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 NGOs, Social Accountability, and Co-Production in Development

Since the late 1970s, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have emerged as key actors in global development, especially in countries like Bangladesh, where they have played a significant role in both rural and urban progress. Often stepping in to fill gaps left by government limitations, NGOs have been vital in delivering essential socioeconomic services such as health, education, and poverty alleviation through partnerships with citizens, communities, and various levels of government (Barai, 2020; Khandker et al., 2016; Qayum et al., 2024).

NGOs also act as important intermediaries that empower marginalised citizens (McMullin, 2022; Haug, 2023). As intermediaries, they can amplify the voices of those most affected, enhance legitimacy, and draw on grounded expertise from vulnerable communities (Brandsen, 2020; Bremer and Meisch, 2017), potentially leading to more equitable and sustainable outcomes in grassroots development. Their capacity to innovate and mobilise resources has enabled them to become leading agents of change in regions where public services are limited or declining (Uddin and Belal, 2019).

Over time, NGOs in Bangladesh and elsewhere have expanded their mandates to include broader development goals, such as sustainability, climate change adaptation, and social care (Alawattage et al., 2019; Hall and O'Dwyer, 2017). However, although NGOs play a crucial role in the development of marginalised economies worldwide,

the increasing complexity of social and economic issues has compelled NGOs to go beyond service delivery and engage more deeply with the structural causes of inequality (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Banks and Hulme, 2012; Tanima et al., 2020).

This development signifies a significant shift from traditional need-based service delivery models to rights-based approaches. Conventional needs-based methods see development as a need or act of benevolence, driven by philanthropic motives and patronage dynamics, rather than as an assertion of rights. Needs-based approaches focus on meeting specific needs, such as healthcare or education, but do not emphasise addressing the underlying structural conditions and policies necessary for systemic change (Cornwall and Nyamu-Musembi, 2004; Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021; O'Leary, 2017).

In contrast, the rights-based approach emphasises empowering developing communities to claim their rights to self-determination and the realisation of political, civil, economic, and social rights. Beneficiaries must be central to practical needs assessments and the justification of service design and delivery (Hall and O'Dwyer, 2017; Wellens and Jegers, 2014). Active participation in NGO Programmes fosters stronger connections among beneficiaries, boosts their cooperation, and contributes to the organisation's success (Awio, et al., 2011).

NGOs foster beneficiaries' self-reliance and self-efficacy, enabling them to manage programmes by the end of the assistance period independently. It maintains that an NGO's beneficiaries must see themselves as 'rights claimers' within the broader development context, rather than mere recipients solely of NGO services (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Kingston et al., 2019; Marini et al., 2017; O'Leary, 2017). This reorientation from welfare provision to rights-based engagement has inevitably placed

greater emphasis on accountability, particularly on how NGOs justify their actions to those they claim to serve.

Central to this shift is the growing focus on accountability, in which NGOs are expected to be answerable not only to donors and governments but also to the communities they serve (Dewi et al., 2021). This form of downward or community-focused accountability is often called “grassroots accountability” (O'Leary, 2017) or “social accountability” (Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021), emphasising the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between NGOs and their beneficiaries in fostering inclusive, participatory development. The social accountability mechanisms of NGOs aim to improve institutional performance by encouraging both beneficiary and community participation. In practice, the concept includes a broad range of institutional innovations that promote and strengthen voice (Fox, 2015). In the literature on NGO accountability, the term social accountability often refers to the accountability relationship NGOs maintain with their beneficiaries (O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2007; O'Leary, 2017). Yet, despite the normative appeal of social accountability, putting these principles into practice remains difficult, especially within weak institutional environments (Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017).

While social accountability is widely recognised as an effective way to enhance transparency, responsiveness, and active citizen participation in NGO-led service delivery, its implementation also faces significant challenges, particularly in developing contexts such as Bangladesh (Ahmed et al., 2023; Tanima et al., 2020; Taufiq, 2021). In many emerging economies, weak institutional environments characterised by inadequate regulatory frameworks, limited administrative capacity, and a lack of transparency undermine the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms. These

structural limitations hinder NGOs' ability to establish social accountability mechanisms (Ahmed et al., 2023; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011). To address these issues, development researchers have further examined the importance of NGOs' accountability in relation to their development strategies, institutional actions, and behaviours. Banerjee and Jackson (2017) called for utilising the potential of social capital by fostering co-production and actively engaging the community to strengthen social accountability mechanisms within the NGO sector. In response to these challenges, scholars and practitioners have increasingly turned to participatory frameworks such as co-production to strengthen accountability and citizen engagement.

Co-production refers to the practice whereby "professionals and citizens make better use of each other's assets, resources, and contributions to achieve better outcomes and/or improved efficiency" (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021, p.36). The framework identifies four distinct modes of co-production—the Four Co's: co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). Incorporating co-production practices into NGO development interventions offers a strategic response to social challenges by promoting closer collaboration between NGOs and grassroots communities. Through co-production, citizens shift from being passive recipients of services to active participants in shaping development initiatives, thereby boosting trust, transparency, shared responsibility, and self-efficacy. In this sense, co-production does not merely facilitate service delivery but provides a practical route through which NGOs can embed accountability within everyday development interactions.

Importantly, co-production and social accountability are closely interrelated. While social accountability emphasises NGOs' responsibility to be answerable and responsive to citizens, co-production offers the practical means through which this accountability can be realised. By involving citizens directly in the planning, delivery, and evaluation of development initiatives, NGOs can strengthen transparency, feedback, and mutual trust, the foundations of sustainable accountability relationships. Within this dynamic, NGOs act as intermediary organisations that connect citizens, communities, and public service providers, forming a vital part of the broader public service ecosystem (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; Mazzei et al., 2020; Osborne et al., 2022). As professionally organised intermediaries, NGOs facilitate or coordinate co-production processes, enabling beneficiaries to actively and meaningfully shape development outcomes. Through this intermediary role, NGOs can bridge institutional gaps and embed co-production practices that enhance social accountability, particularly in fragile governance contexts. In doing so, they help establish locally grounded, context-sensitive accountability mechanisms that foster both empowerment and sustainability over time.

Building on this theoretical foundation, this thesis positions co-production as both a practical and conceptual framework for rethinking NGO accountability in contemporary development. Therefore, this thesis argues that embedding co-production within the collaborative process, where citizens, beneficiaries, NGOs, and state actors jointly design, implement, and monitor development initiatives, can enhance social accountability practices in marginalised economies such as Bangladesh. As NGOs increasingly face donor demands, market-driven reforms, and pressure for measurable efficiency, co-production offers an alternative approach that reconnects them with their social missions and the communities they serve. It redefines

accountability not merely as a compliance task but as a relational and participatory process whereby citizens and organisations collaboratively identify problems, design interventions, and assess outcomes. By emphasising collaboration, dialogue, and shared responsibility, co-production bridges the gap between institutional performance goals and the moral duty for inclusion. Consequently, this thesis examines how co-production can be integrated into NGO-led development efforts to transform NGOs from sole service providers into facilitators of citizen voice, empowerment, and social accountability, demonstrating that sustainable and credible development results are achieved when accountability is co-produced through everyday interactions between NGOs and communities.

1.2 The Objectives of the Research

The primary objective of this research is to investigate how co-production can serve as a mechanism to enhance social accountability within the NGO sector, particularly in emerging economies such as Bangladesh. The study aims to explore how participatory practices are integrated through both operational strategies and symbolic processes, and how these practices contribute to creating more inclusive, transparent, and accountable development. It also investigates how NGOs engage with beneficiaries and communities through meaningful collaboration, the challenges they encounter, and alternative approaches that could foster deeper participation and shared responsibility. By focusing on community co-production, the research emphasises the complementary and transformative potential of NGOs' social accountability—moving beyond simple procedural participation to approaches that promote empowerment, rights-based development, and broader societal change.

To explore this theoretical question, I draw on an empirical case study of an NGO in Bangladesh, similar to those in other emerging economies around the world. NGOs have become a significant development agent in Bangladesh (Islam and Islam, 2016). This sector is gaining importance due to its efficiency and effectiveness in development efforts. NGOs in Bangladesh are characterised by their innovation, flexibility, independence, and responsiveness to the challenges faced by poor and vulnerable communities at the grassroots level (Barai, 2020; Islam, 2017; Lewis, 2017). The expansion of NGOs in Bangladesh over the past five decades has resulted in a substantial role, culminating in the formation of a distinct sector within civil society (Qayum, 2020). During this period, NGOs have been involved in various aspects of social life, including relief, rehabilitation, health, education, development Programmes, peace, women's empowerment, human rights, and environmental protection (Barai, 2020; Banks et al., 2024).

Although NGOs in Bangladesh play a vital role in the development sector, community participation in NGOs has remained underdeveloped (Ahmed et al., 2023; Tanima et al., 2023; Tanima and Hidayah, 2018; Taufiq, 2021; Ullah, 2023), or has often been tokenistic, with subordinate groups seldom included in policy or decision-making processes (Tanima et al., 2023; Rahman, 2023). NGOs in Bangladesh typically rely on donor funding, which grants these donors considerable influence. Conversely, the government establishes legal and regulatory frameworks governing NGO operations, thereby granting them significant sway. Beneficiaries have less leverage over NGOs than donors and governments (Karim, 2014; Rahman, 2023; Tanima et al., 2020). Researchers argue that NGOs should take deliberate actions and strategies to foster a culture of active community participation through co-production, thereby improving

this situation. Therefore, Bangladesh provides a compelling context for this research due to its globally recognised and densely networked NGO sector, which has played a key role in grassroots development for over five decades. The country's long history of community-based interventions and the central role of NGOs in delivering public services make it an ideal setting to explore how co-production can enhance social accountability in emerging economies.

To guide its theoretical inquiry, this research draws on Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) theory of social-symbolic work, which explains how actors construct and sustain social structures by creating shared meanings, cultivating legitimacy, and managing identities and relationships. This framework is especially relevant because co-production and social accountability are not merely procedural or technical practices but deeply relational and context-dependent processes. Within NGOs, fostering a culture of co-production requires more than implementing participatory tools; it involves building trust, facilitating dialogue, and legitimising community knowledge and voice within development practice.

The theory of social-symbolic work offers valuable insights at both organisational and individual levels. At the organisational level, it shows how NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to embed co-production within their structures, routines, and accountability systems, shaping shared meanings and legitimising participatory practices. At the individual level, it explains how actors—such as NGO staff, community members, and beneficiaries—reinterpret their roles, negotiate identities, and develop relationships that support co-production and participation. In this way, the framework provides an integrated perspective for understanding how the interaction between organisational structures and individual agency facilitates the

institutionalisation of co-production and the promotion of social accountability within NGO practice.

1.3 Research Gap and Questions

While participatory and rights-based approaches have gained prominence in development discourse, especially within the NGO sector, their practical application often falls short of truly empowering beneficiaries. Scholars have demonstrated how participatory mechanisms in emerging economies are frequently co-opted by elites or become symbolic due to longstanding power imbalances, dependency relationships, and organisational challenges (Ahmed et al., 2023; Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). Although the literature increasingly recognises these limitations and advocates for more authentic grassroots involvement (O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017), there remains limited empirical understanding of how NGOs can incorporate meaningful social accountability, particularly through everyday organisational practices that involve communities as co-creators of development.

In particular, little is known about how NGOs implement co-production with beneficiaries, not only as a Programme approach but also as a means to establish legitimate, trust-based accountability relationships. In contexts such as Bangladesh, where NGOs are influential yet operate within hierarchical social structures and are driven by donor demands, this gap is particularly significant. Existing research often overlooks the symbolic and cultural efforts necessary to embed co-production into accountability processes. Consequently, this study addresses an important gap by exploring how NGOs can develop co-production practices that enhance social accountability (Tisdall, 2017).

Drawing on Lawrence and Phillips (2019) Social-symbolic Work, this study examines how NGOs can foster a co-production culture that enhances social accountability by promoting shared meanings, establishing trust, and legitimising participatory development practices. Additionally, the study highlights how social-symbolic work helps manage power dynamics by valuing local knowledge and encouraging dialogue, thereby creating a more equitable foundation for institutionalising co-production practices that support social accountability and promote rights-based, inclusive development. Consequently, the following research questions have been posed:

1. *How do NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to embed co-production within their organisational routines and establish "citizens' active engagement" in their development activities?*
2. *How do individual actors reimagine their role in co-production to ensure beneficiaries' participation in development activities that meet social needs?*
3. *How and to what extent can community co-production facilitate the social accountability of NGOs?*

To gain empirical insights into these research questions, this study adopts BRAC International in Bangladesh as its primary case study. Established in 1972 as a small-scale relief initiative, BRAC has grown into the world's largest and most influential hybrid NGO, integrating service delivery, advocacy, and enterprise-based development. Its scale, innovation, and ability to operate across both grassroots and global levels have enabled it to shape development policy and practice within and beyond Bangladesh. Given its extensive operational reach and long-standing institutional credibility, BRAC provides an ideal context for examining how NGOs engage beneficiaries and

communities in co-producing development interventions and how such participatory engagement strengthens social accountability mechanisms within the NGO sector.

This study focuses specifically on BRAC's project *"Enhancing Safe Drinking Water Security and Climate Resilience through Rainwater Harvesting"*, implemented by the Climate Change Programme (CCP) in collaboration with the Embassy of Denmark (EoD) in Dhaka. The initiative aims to provide safe drinking water and enhance community resilience to climate-induced vulnerabilities in Mongla Upazila[1], a coastal sub-district in southwestern Bangladesh severely affected by saline intrusion. Mongla's acute climate vulnerability adds analytical richness to this study by layering environmental precarity with accountability dynamics. In such fragile ecological contexts, where communities face daily struggles for survival and resource insufficiency, the processes of co-production and social accountability take on greater significance. Environmental stress amplifies the interdependence between NGOs and communities, compelling both to negotiate responsibilities, trust, and legitimacy amid scarcity and uncertainty. By situating co-production within this setting, the study reveals how climate vulnerability reshapes the moral and practical dimensions of NGO accountability, offering insights into the challenges of sustaining participatory governance amid ecological crises.

While much of the existing literature conceptualises co-production in instrumental or procedural terms—emphasising participatory tools, mechanisms, and implementation processes—this thesis adopts a social-symbolic perspective to provide a deeper analytical lens. The framework of social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019)

[1] Upazila is a sub-district level, the second lowest tier of regional administration in Bangladesh

moves beyond viewing co-production as a managerial practice to examine the underlying social and cultural processes through which meaning, legitimacy, and identity are constructed in development work. From this perspective, co-production is not only about institutional design or participatory techniques, but also about the symbolic and relational work required to sustain collaboration, build trust, and empower communities. This theoretical stance enables the study to capture how NGOs negotiate values, norms, and power relations in embedding co-production, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of how social accountability is enacted in practice.

1.4 Background of the Research

While researchers have highlighted how NGOs can strengthen social accountability through participatory mechanisms such as co-production, the changing development landscape has introduced new institutional pressures that complicate this role. Since the 1980s, the influence of neoliberal reforms and structural adjustment policies has resulted in the retreat of public welfare services, prompting NGOs to adopt more entrepreneurial, market-oriented approaches to remain sustainable (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Tanima et al., 2020). This global shift towards social enterprise and marketisation has been reinforced by donor expectations for efficiency, scalability, and measurable performance outcomes (Ebrahim, 2003; Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014; Alawattage et al., 2019). Consequently, NGOs are increasingly expected to combine social and commercial goals, creating hybrid organisational forms that blur the boundaries between non-profit and for-profit logics (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Cornforth, 2014).

Although these hybrid models offer some innovation and financial resilience for NGOs by reducing donor dependency, they also risk shifting NGOs' accountability focus mainly upwards towards donors, investors, and regulatory bodies at the expense of responsiveness to beneficiaries and local communities (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011). Upward accountability mechanisms involve reporting NGO activities and outcomes to funders and often follow procedures and formats specified by donors' organisations (Agyemang et al., 2017). To strengthen upward accountability to their donors and regulators, NGOs worldwide are developing outcome measurement (OM) methods (Yang and Northcott, 2018). As a result, the tension between financial sustainability and social responsibility has raised concerns about 'mission drift' and the erosion of grassroots accountability (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Ebrahim et al., 2014; Tanima et al., 2020).

1.4.1 Marketisation and Hybrid Models of NGOs

Since the 1980s and 1990s, 'structural adjustment policies' and the promotion of privatisation and liberalisation have transformed the global development landscape. These reforms led to reduced state involvement in welfare provision and increased the reliance on NGOs as key service providers (Tanima et al., 2020). As international funding agencies encouraged innovation and self-sufficiency, NGOs began adopting market-oriented approaches to tackle persistent social and environmental challenges such as poverty, inequality, and climate change (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). This shift marked the beginning of NGO marketisation, blending social welfare objectives with business and financial sustainability goals.

The marketisation of the development sector has led to hybrid organisational forms, in which NGOs blend social and commercial logics to remain financially sustainable while

pursuing their development missions (Battilana and Lee, 2014; Ebrahim et al., 2014). These hybrid models have allowed NGOs to diversify funding sources, innovate in service delivery, and reduce reliance on traditional donors. However, they have also created complex accountability dilemmas, as NGOs must balance upward accountability to funders and regulators with downward accountability to beneficiaries and communities (Bateman, 2010; Ebrahim et al., 2014; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019). Donor expectations for measurable impact and financial efficiency increasingly influence NGO practices, often leading to the prioritisation of performance indicators and reporting compliance over participatory engagement (Alawattage et al., 2019; Yang and Northcott, 2018). Consequently, while hybridisation has strengthened NGOs' organisational resilience, it also risks diluting their social missions and undermining their grassroots legitimacy.

1.4.2 The Bottom-of-the-Pyramid (BoP) Model

In the wake of global marketisation and the emergence of hybrid NGO models, the Bottom-of-the-Pyramid (BoP) approach has gained prominence as a strategy that integrates market mechanisms into poverty alleviation. Drawing on the work of Prahalad and Hammond (2002) and Prahalad and Hart (2002), the BoP model promotes *inclusive capitalism*, encouraging NGOs and development actors to engage low-income populations as consumers, producers, and entrepreneurs. Through this approach, NGOs seek to align social impact with financial sustainability by transforming marginalised communities into active participants in market-driven development (Ansari et al., 2012; London et al., 2014).

While the BoP model has introduced innovative ways to mobilise resources and expand services to underserved populations, it has also altered the accountability

dynamics within NGOs. The adoption of business-oriented practices often prioritises performance measurement, scalability, and efficiency as key indicators of success, at the expense of participatory or rights-based accountability. Donor agencies and corporate partners, important stakeholders in BoP initiatives, tend to prioritise financial metrics and short-term results, prompting NGOs to adhere to upward accountability structures that emphasise external reporting and measurable impact (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014; Alawattage et al., 2019). This change has weakened social accountability to beneficiaries, as community voices and local knowledge become secondary to the demands of market partners. Essentially, the BoP model risks reconfiguring NGOs' accountability relationships, replacing dialogue-based, trust-driven engagement with transactional and managerial approaches (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Tanima et al., 2020).

Consequently, this BoP approach has also contributed to what scholars describe as mission drift — the gradual shift away from social objectives towards financial priorities (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011). As NGOs adopted entrepreneurial strategies and sought competitive advantage in development markets, their core mission of empowering communities and promoting social justice weakened. Over time, success is increasingly viewed through the lens of profitability and efficiency rather than empowerment or inclusivity (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). This market-driven orientation not only undermines NGOs' legitimacy as agents of social transformation but also challenges their ability to maintain meaningful participatory relationships with beneficiaries. In contexts such as Bangladesh, where power imbalances and donor dependency are already prominent, the BoP model thus exacerbated accountability asymmetries, reinforced upward dependence and

weakened the very grassroots engagement that NGOs were initially established to promote.

A major criticism of the BoP model concerns its basic assumption that market participation and entrepreneurship are universally accessible and desirable. This “one-size-fits-all” approach fails to recognise the structural and socio-economic barriers faced by marginalised populations, especially in emerging economies where access to capital, education, and markets is often severely restricted (Karnani, 2007; Ansari et al., 2012). By depicting the poor mainly as potential entrepreneurs or consumers, the BoP discourse risks romanticising self-reliance while neglecting systemic inequalities that limit people’s ability to engage in market activities. Consequently, rather than empowering communities, such initiatives can increase precarity and exclusion, shifting the burden of economic risk onto those least equipped to bear it (Arora and Romijn, 2012; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Dembek et al., 2018). This mismatch between market expectations and local realities has, in many cases, heightened the vulnerability of the poorest groups, highlighting the limitations of applying a universal, market-centric development model to complex, context-specific social issues.

The limitations of the BoP model have, in turn, prompted many NGOs to experiment with social enterprise models that blend commercial sustainability with social innovation. These models aim to retain a commitment to community development while ensuring financial independence through entrepreneurial ventures, a shift that both builds upon and challenges the principles of the BoP framework.

1.4.3 The Rise of Social Enterprise Models

In response to the limitations of the BoP approach, many NGOs have increasingly adopted “social enterprise” models that aim to balance social and commercial goals. Building on the BoP philosophy, these organisations apply market principles to achieve social objectives while working towards financial self-sufficiency (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014). The social enterprise model marks a further stage in the evolution of NGO marketisation, positioning development as both a moral and economic pursuit. This hybrid approach enables NGOs to diversify funding sources, reduce dependence on donors, and broaden their operational reach. However, it also challenges traditional notions of NGO identity and redefines accountability by blending philanthropic and entrepreneurial logics (Alawattage et al., 2019; Dixon et al., 2006).

As NGOs increasingly adopt entrepreneurial strategies, performance measurement has become more technocratic and outcome-focused, with success defined through metrics such as efficiency, scalability, and cost-effectiveness (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014). While such indicators may improve transparency and attract investment, they often prioritise quantifiable outputs over the more intangible aspects of empowerment, participation, and social justice. This managerial focus closely aligns with donor and investor expectations, further reinforcing upward accountability at the expense of social accountability to local communities (Dixon et al., 2006). As a result, beneficiaries’ voices risk marginalisation as NGOs prioritise measurable deliverables and project efficiency over participatory engagement and community ownership (Tanima et al., 2020).

At the organisational level, this shift towards enterprise-based practices has transformed NGOs’ internal cultures and governance structures. Decision-making processes increasingly reflect private-sector management models, favouring

business-oriented expertise over community experience (Battilana and Lee, 2014). This professionalisation can detach NGOs from their grassroots origins, replacing relational engagement with managerial control. As a result, the ethos of solidarity and empowerment that historically defined the NGO sector risks being superseded by performance-based accountability regimes, thereby weakening the trust that underpins sustainable community partnerships (Banks et al., 2024; Ebrahim et al., 2014).

At the community level, the social enterprise model has created ambiguous relationships between NGOs and beneficiaries. When local populations are viewed as customers or investors, the moral and participatory foundation of NGO–community interaction becomes transactional rather than collaborative. This shift in relationships has exacerbated existing social inequalities, as those unable to participate economically may be excluded from Programmes or services (Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011). In contexts such as Bangladesh, where poverty, gender, and class divisions are deeply ingrained, this model risks marginalising the very groups NGOs seek to empower.

Ultimately, the rise of social enterprise models exposes a paradox in modern development practice. The growing emphasis on financial sustainability can obscure the distinction between social goals and market success, leading to mission drift, weakening grassroots legitimacy, and increasing vulnerability (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019). This tension underscores the need for alternative frameworks—such as co-production—that shift accountability towards collaboration, dialogue, and community empowerment rather than mere compliance and control (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017).

1.4.4 Implications of Social Accountability

The marketisation of NGOs has brought both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, hybrid models such as BoP and social enterprise approaches have strengthened organisational resilience and fostered innovation. On the other hand, they have altered accountability relationships, shifting focus from participatory, community-based accountability to performance-driven, donor-centric systems.

In this context, beneficiaries are increasingly seen as consumers rather than partners in development, which weakens the relational and empowering aspects of social accountability. By emphasising efficiency and scalability, NGOs risk diminishing their democratic ethos and reducing the space for citizen voice and oversight. Therefore, while marketisation offers financial and operational benefits, it also challenges NGOs' legitimacy as agents of inclusive and participatory development.

1.5 Recentring Social Accountability in NGO Practice

The increasing prevalence of upward accountability and mission drift in marketised NGOs underscores the urgent need to reconceptualise social accountability within development practice. As NGOs become more focused on financial efficiency and donor reporting, the voices of beneficiaries and local communities risk being marginalised, weakening both the legitimacy and sustainability of development outcomes (Ebrahim, 2003; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019). Moreover, researchers contend that promoting downward or social accountability can counteract the institutional pressures of marketisation by embedding accountability into everyday organisational practices rather than viewing it solely as an external reporting duty (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021). Social accountability enables NGOs to

reconnect with their foundational social justice mandates, ensuring their legitimacy originates from citizen engagement rather than donor compliance (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Tanima et al., 2020). In this context, social accountability mechanisms are not just corrective tools but strategic enablers that can rebuild trust, foster participatory governance, and deliver more equitable and sustainable development outcomes.

1.5.1 Facilitating Social Accountability through Co-production

In response to the dominance of upward accountability and the resulting mission drift within NGO practices, scholars have increasingly turned to co-production as a participatory, community-driven approach to achieve social accountability. Co-production shifts accountability from mere compliance with donors to genuine collaboration with communities, empowering citizens to participate directly in decision-making, monitoring, and implementation. Through this participatory engagement, accountability becomes a shared, relational practice rather than a top-down reporting obligation. This section examines how co-production functions as a mechanism for strengthening social accountability through three interconnected perspectives: participatory tools, which establish structured spaces for citizen engagement; social capital, which fosters trust and collective action; and the theoretical foundations of co-production, which embed these participatory relationships within NGO practices.

1.5.1.1 Participatory Tools for Social Accountability

To address mission drift and the debate over upward accountability, recent research on NGO accountability suggests several ways to establish social accountability mechanisms. The increasing emphasis on social accountability reflects organisations'

responses to broader societal challenges, highlighting the needs of individuals affected by global poverty, refugee crises, and natural disasters (Awio et al., 2011; Baker, 2014; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017; Taylor et al., 2014). O'Leary (2017) describes social accountability as a relationship-based form of accountability rooted in partnerships with 'others'. It involves participatory reviews, stakeholder focus groups, community monitoring, and social audits, serving as channels for dialogue, transparency, and feedback. These tools aim not only to collect information from beneficiaries but also to reshape power dynamics by involving them in decision-making processes. Similarly, Frey-Heger and Barrett (2021) emphasise the importance of face-to-face interactions with NGOs and their beneficiaries, fostering a dialogic interaction to build trust and enable communities to participate meaningfully in shaping development initiatives.

Other scholars, such as Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe (2011) and O'Dwyer and Unerman (2010), highlight how participatory approaches foster more democratic and context-sensitive accountability, enabling NGOs to respond more effectively to the lived experiences and expectations of the communities they serve. In social accountability mechanisms, it is hoped to minimise power imbalances as much as possible, and beneficiaries should ideally be able to create, develop, and implement Programmes and projects in collaboration with NGOs, wherein they play a significant role in defining their own development goals by utilising the potential of the social capital (Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021).

1.5.1.2 The Role of Social Capital in Enabling Social Accountability

Underlying effective participatory accountability hinges on the role of social capital in building networks, trust, and shared norms that facilitate collective action. Drawing on

Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) framework, social capital comprises structural, relational, and cognitive elements. Structural capital relates to the configuration of networks and institutions; relational capital involves trust, obligations, and respect among actors; and cognitive capital pertains to shared narratives and understandings. In rural and marginalised contexts, social capital is vital for supporting collective resilience and reciprocal relationships (Marini et al., 2017). Scholars such as Banerjee and Jackson (2017) argue that leveraging these embedded social networks enhances the legitimacy and responsiveness of NGO Programmes. When effectively mobilised, social capital can help strengthen accountability mechanisms and foster a sense of community ownership and co-responsibility. This co-responsibility of beneficiaries and the community where NGOs operate can significantly encourage the adoption of co-production practices within the NGO sector. When beneficiaries are actively involved in designing, delivering, and evaluating interventions, they shift from passive recipients to collaborative partners, which enhances their commitment to sustaining these initiatives (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). Empirical evidence indicates that NGOs with strong, trust-based relationships are better equipped to implement social accountability, as these bonds promote better beneficiary engagement and oversight (Mazzei et al., 2020). This relational foundation enables community members to hold NGOs accountable and ensures Programmes respond effectively to their development needs.

1.5.1.3 Conceptualising Co-production as a Framework for Accountability

Building on the above, co-production has become a powerful conceptual framework that can foster social accountability through community empowerment. Unlike traditional models that view beneficiaries as passive recipients of aid, co-production

considers them active collaborators. It supports every phase, from problem identification to project implementation and evaluation. Banerjee and Jackson (2017) emphasise co-production's ability to challenge the top-down tendencies of neoliberal NGO governance by redistributing power and making accountability a part of everyday interactions between NGOs and communities. Through co-productive arrangements, NGOs are better equipped to align their actions with the real needs and aspirations of local populations, thereby producing more sustainable and fair development results. As Frey-Heger and Barrett (2021) note, co-production does not simply add participatory elements to existing projects but fundamentally changes how development is planned and carried out, making social accountability a core aspect of the process rather than an afterthought.

1.5.1.4 Co-production as a Transformative Pathway to Social Accountability

Although co-production has been conceptualised in various ways across disciplines (Ewert and Evers, 2014; Osborne et al., 2016), a common feature is the active involvement of citizens or service users in designing, delivering, and evaluating public and social services (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; McMullin, 2022). It represents a form of collaborative governance that surpasses tokenistic consultation, positioning communities, NGOs, and service providers as partners sharing power and responsibility in shaping development outcomes. Co-production thus covers the entire range of participatory engagement—co-planning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment—between professional experts and lay actors (Lino et al., 2019; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; McMullin, 2022).

The concept was first introduced by Elinor Ostrom and colleagues in the late 1970s, who described co-production as "the process through which inputs used to produce a

good or service are contributed by individuals who are not ‘in’ the same organisation” (Ostrom, 1996, p. 1073). However, Ostrom’s definition has been criticised for its technocratic and input-focused approach, which overlooks the relational and political aspects of collaboration (Brandsen and Honingh, 2018; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). Later research has reinterpreted co-production as a relational, value-creating process rooted in trust, dialogue, and mutual recognition. For instance, Loeffler and Bovaird (2021, p. 36) define it as “professionals and citizens making better use of each other’s assets, resources and contributions to achieve improved outcomes and public value.” This broader perspective highlights power-sharing and co-creation, recognising that accountability and service legitimacy arise from ongoing interactions between institutions and communities rather than from unidirectional input.

Bovaird and Loeffler (2013) identify a broad range of service activities that fall under the co-production umbrella. These include co-commissioning services, which cover co-planning policies such as deliberative participation and planning for genuine, open spaces. Co-design of services includes user consultation, service design laboratories, and customer journey mapping. Co-delivery of services involves the co-management of various services, such as leisure centre trusts, community management of public assets, school governing bodies, peer support groups, and neighbourhood watch schemes. Co-assessment, which encompasses co-monitoring and co-evaluation of services, involves tenant inspectors, online user ratings, and participatory village appraisals.

Growing scholarly attention has been directed towards the simultaneous phenomena of co-production and the participation of third-sector organisations in delivering public services (Pestoff, 2012; Pestoff and Brandsen, 2013; Mazzei et al., 2020). The

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommends that social service organisations at both national and local levels should collaborate to address citizens' concerns (OECD, 2020). Co-production between NGOs and beneficiaries is crucial for addressing the vulnerabilities of marginalised populations in emerging economies, as it promotes inclusive, context-specific, and sustainable development solutions. In co-production, NGOs and community members work together to design, implement, and evaluate Programmes, recognising beneficiaries not as passive recipients but as active agents of change (Gazley, 2020; Knutsen and Brock, 2014; Mazzei et al., 2020). This participatory approach ensures that interventions are rooted in the lived experiences of marginalised groups, which is vital in contexts where state-led services often fail to reach the most disadvantaged due to power structures, systemic exclusion, or weak institutional capacity (Knutsen and Brock, 2014). By involving beneficiaries in decision-making, co-production may enhance social accountability, legitimacy, and ownership of development outcomes—key factors for long-term resilience and empowerment (O'Leary, 2017). Co-production practices can act as a transformative tool in emerging economies, facilitating social accountability in environments where inequalities are deeply entrenched and intersect with social, economic, and political vulnerabilities (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017).

Co-production and social accountability, although often viewed separately in academic discussions, share a common goal: balancing power in service relationships and empowering citizens within development processes. In the context of NGOs working in emerging economies, this connection becomes particularly important. Co-production provides a structural and relational foundation for promoting social accountability by shifting beneficiaries' roles from passive recipients to active participants in shaping development initiatives. Through processes such as co-design,

co-delivery, and co-assessment (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013), NGOs can establish continuous, embedded mechanisms for dialogue, transparency, and shared responsibility. These mechanisms reflect and potentially deepen the objectives of social accountability, which aims to make organisations more answerable to the communities they serve (O'Leary, 2017). Rather than relying solely on external tools like scorecards or audits, co-production fosters internalised accountability practices rooted in ongoing interaction and joint decision-making. This approach is especially relevant in emerging economies, where top-down, donor-led models have weakened grassroots engagement and created accountability gaps (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Chowdhury et al., 2020). By enabling communities to co-define priorities, monitor services, and influence outcomes, co-production directly addresses these issues, strengthening legitimacy, building trust, and ensuring development aligns with local realities and values. Therefore, this thesis contends that co-production is not just a participatory ideal but a practical pathway to implementing social accountability within NGO development strategies, particularly in contexts characterised by institutional fragility and systemic exclusion.

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into nine chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study by outlining its background, rationale, research aims and questions, and central arguments linking NGOs, co-production, and social accountability. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on NGOs' developmental roles, accountability mechanisms, and community engagement, emphasising the intersections between co-production and social-symbolic work. Chapter 3 presents the research context and case study of BRAC International within Bangladesh's socio-institutional landscape, followed by Chapter 4,

which explains the research design, qualitative methods, data analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 5 examines how BRAC integrates co-production into organisational routines to promote citizen participation, while Chapter 6 explores how NGOs can facilitate attitudinal change and enable citizens to act as co-producers. Chapter 7 analyses the relationship between co-production and social accountability, demonstrating how representative co-production enhances social accountability. Chapter 8 discusses and synthesises the key findings through the theoretical lens of social-symbolic work, and Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by summarising its main contributions, practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the study and positioned co-production as a transformative framework for enhancing social accountability in NGO-led development, particularly in emerging economies such as Bangladesh. Drawing on the theory of social-symbolic work, the thesis contends that integrating co-production into organisational practices allows NGOs to promote participatory, rights-based, and contextually relevant approaches to development. The chapter also outlined the research aims, questions, and theoretical perspective, highlighting how co-production can be embedded through meaning-making, trust-building, and collaboration between NGOs and communities.

Looking ahead, this research has significant implications for both policy and practice. For NGOs, it provides insights into how co-production can be operationalised to improve social accountability and promote community ownership of development initiatives. For donors and development partners, it stresses the importance of moving

beyond efficiency-focused metrics and supporting more relational, participatory forms of accountability that empower local actors and embed sustainability within grassroots structures. More broadly, the study aims to inform future development strategies in Bangladesh and other marginalised contexts by showing how co-production can bridge the gap between NGOs' operational and organisational priorities and communities' lived realities, thereby facilitating social accountability mechanisms.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter critically examines the literature on NGOs' developmental roles, accountability practices, and community engagement strategies, with particular focus on how these intersect with the concepts of co-production and social-symbolic work (SSW). The review not only synthesises existing scholarship but also highlights the conceptual tensions and gaps that inform this study. It positions NGOs as both developmental actors and contested spaces—organisations that must balance their normative commitments to equity and empowerment with the pragmatic demands of donor dependence, institutional pressures, and legitimacy-seeking (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Ebrahim, 2003; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010; Banks et al., 2015).

Central to this discussion is the concept of social accountability, which refers to the mechanisms through which citizens, particularly marginalised groups, can hold NGOs and service providers accountable for their actions, performance, and commitments (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Kilby, 2006; Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021; O'Leary, 2017). Social accountability initiatives aim to enhance organisational performance by deepening citizen engagement and increasing responsiveness to community needs. These mechanisms seek to amplify beneficiaries' voices but remain challenging to implement in marginalised economies, where NGOs operate within asymmetric power structures and face multiple, often conflicting, accountability demands (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011). In this context, co-production has emerged as a potential pathway for fostering more participatory, dialogic, and

trust-based accountability relationships. Broadly defined, co-production involves citizens' collaborative participation in designing, delivering, and monitoring services (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). While widely promoted as a mechanism for inclusion and empowerment, co-production is also inherently political—shaped by power dynamics, institutional logics, and symbolic practices that determine who participates, under what conditions, and to what effect (Nabatchi et al., 2017; Pestoff, 2019; McMullin, 2022).

Simultaneously, scholarship on NGO accountability continues to highlight the imbalance between upward accountability—towards donors, governments, and regulators—and downward or social accountability—towards communities and beneficiaries. Although NGOs often claim to represent marginalised voices, their accountability frameworks tend to prioritise compliance and donor reporting over community engagement (O'Leary, 2017; Tanima et al., 2020). This tension raises important questions about legitimacy, representation, and whether NGOs truly enable communities to influence organisational priorities (O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015; Edwards and Hulme, 1996). Increasingly, scholars argue that participatory practices such as co-production can strengthen NGOs' legitimacy by grounding accountability in reciprocal relationships with communities rather than solely focusing on donor-driven performance metrics (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Rahman, 2023). However, translating co-production into practice with grassroots populations is far from straightforward. While it offers a promising way to improve social accountability, its success relies on how collaboration, trust, and legitimacy are socially constructed and maintained within NGO–community relationships. These processes are not merely technical but deeply interpretive and relational (Pestoff and Brandsen, 2013).

To explore these dynamics, this chapter employs the theoretical framework of social-symbolic work (SSW), which emphasises how organisations and actors construct meaning, legitimacy, and identity through discursive, relational, and material practices (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Phillips and Lawrence, 2012). Using this perspective enables a more detailed understanding of co-production as both a tangible practice of collaboration and a symbolic endeavour through which NGOs seek to legitimise their presence, build trust, and reshape accountability relationships (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012). It also highlights how communities reinterpret their roles and identities within these co-productive arrangements, asserting agency in contexts where structural inequalities and institutional constraints persist (Banks et al., 2015; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011).

In doing so, firstly, it examines the historical evolution of NGOs' development strategies and accountability practices, identifying how neoliberal reforms and donor dependencies have shaped their legitimacy and operational logics (Korten, 1990; Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Karim, 2021). Secondly, it analyses the theoretical and practical dimensions of social accountability and co-production, highlighting the persistent gap between participatory rhetoric and practice (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). And thirdly, it situates these discussions within the framework of social-symbolic work, interpreting how NGOs construct and sustain meaning, legitimacy, and trust through engagement with communities (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Together, these strands establish the conceptual foundation for this study, which seeks to explore:

1. How do NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to embed co-production within their organisational routines and establish "citizens' active engagement" in their development activities

2. How do individual actors reimagine their role in co-production to ensure beneficiaries' participation in development activities that meet social needs?

3. How and to what extent can community co-production facilitate the social accountability of NGOs?

2.2 NGOs and Their Development Initiatives in Bangladesh

NGOs have been rapidly expanding as vital service providers for the most disadvantaged members of society across local, national, and global development sectors (Banks et al., 2015; Khandker et al., 2016; Lewis, 2010; Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Lewis et al., 2020). To promote socio-economic progress, policy advocacy and public campaigns are essential activities of these organisations. Alongside the government and other institutions, NGOs are increasingly taking on a crucial role in achieving development goals (Banks et al., 2015). NGOs, especially those managing development and humanitarian Programmes, have become key actors in addressing the gaps left by the declining provision of social services by governments through their capacity for social innovation (Lewis et al., 2020; Qayum, 2024).

2.2.1 The Historical Evolution of NGOs in Bangladesh

Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, faces ongoing challenges in fulfilling the social and economic needs of its population due to limited state capacity and resources (Roy et al., 2017). In this context, NGOs have played a crucial role in national development (Barai, 2020; Khandker et al., 2016). Their

contributions include community welfare, disaster response, sustainable livelihoods, and social mobilisation, often filling gaps in public service delivery and advocating for marginalised groups (Banerjee et al., 2020).

The origins of the NGO sector in Bangladesh date back to the post-independence period of the early 1970s, when local and international civil society actors responded to the humanitarian crisis following the 1971 Liberation War (Islam, 2017). Initially focused on relief and rehabilitation, NGOs gradually evolved to tackle long-term development challenges, particularly in rural areas underserved by the state (Lewis, 2017). By the 1980s and 1990s, Bangladesh experienced rapid NGO growth, with organisations such as BRAC and Grameen Bank gaining international recognition for pioneering microfinance, non-formal education, and women's empowerment Programmes.

By the early 2000s, NGOs had become essential to national development planning, collaborating with government and donor agencies in key sectors such as health, education, disaster management, and poverty reduction. However, this increasing prominence has also led to greater scrutiny concerning accountability, donor dependency, and political alignment (Rahman, 2023). In recent years, NGOs have encountered more restrictive regulatory frameworks and shifting donor priorities, while also addressing complex challenges such as climate change, urban poverty, and forced displacement, including the Rohingya refugee crisis (Bala, 2020). Despite these pressures, NGOs continue to play a vital role in Bangladesh's civil society landscape, fostering grassroots participation and inclusion (Barai, 2020).

As NGOs' influence grew, so did expectations for greater accountability and transparency (Rahman, 2023). Heavy reliance on external funding often positions

donors as the main accountability audience, while government regulation further limits operational autonomy. In contrast, beneficiaries—nominally the central focus of NGO work—tend to have limited influence within accountability systems (Taufiq, 2021). This imbalance highlights a persistent weakness in downward or social accountability, which remains secondary to upward accountability to donors and regulators. The resulting tensions around legitimacy and representation emphasise the need for more participatory and inclusive accountability frameworks within the sector.

2.2.2 Neoliberal Impacts on NGOs in Bangladesh

The rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s has deeply transformed the structure, priorities, and accountability frameworks of NGOs in Bangladesh. Under the influence of international financial institutions and donor agencies, neoliberal policies promoted market-oriented reforms, reduced state involvement, and encouraged welfare outsourcing to non-state actors (Karim, 2021). This change accelerated the rapid growth of NGOs in sectors such as microfinance, education, and health, positioning them as key service providers. However, it also reshaped their roles—from advocates of social justice to contractors delivering pre-defined development outcomes (Muhammad, 2015).

This shift has entrenched donor dependency, with funding increasingly linked to performance metrics and short-term deliverables. As a result, NGOs often prioritise efficiency and measurable outputs over empowerment and long-term structural change (Banks et al., 2015). Neoliberalism has also led to the professionalisation and depoliticisation of NGOs, weakening their grassroots ties and reducing their capacity for rights-based advocacy (Tanima et al., 2020). Accountability has thus become skewed upwards, favouring donor expectations and compliance systems while

marginalising community voice and participation (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). In such contexts, participatory tools risk becoming instrumental mechanisms for project legitimation rather than genuine vehicles for empowerment (Sharma and Babu, 2022). Consequently, these dynamics raise critical questions about the role of NGOs in reproducing, rather than resisting, the dominant neoliberal development agendas in Bangladesh.

2.2.3 Neoliberalism and the Rise of Hybrid NGOs

Neoliberal development frameworks have led to what scholars call hybrid NGOs—organisations that blend civil society missions with market-based practices in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al., 2012). As the state withdraws from welfare provision, NGOs have stepped in to bridge the gap, professionalising their operations and adopting business-like management systems. In Bangladesh, prominent organisations such as BRAC, Grameen Bank, and ASA exemplify this shift, combining grassroots development efforts with sophisticated financial and organisational structures. While hybridisation has boosted their efficiency and credibility among donors, it has also distanced NGOs from their original advocacy-oriented and rights-based mandates (Banks et al., 2015).

The hybrid nature of NGOs operating under neoliberal logics creates tensions between their social missions and managerial demands. Market-driven models such as microfinance and social enterprise strengthen organisational resilience but risk undermining participatory and emancipatory ethos (Ahmed et al., 2012). As NGOs become increasingly embedded in donor agendas, they prioritise performance indicators and financial transparency over community accountability (Ebrahim, 2003). Beneficiary involvement often becomes tokenistic, used to validate project efficiency

rather than empower communities (Tanima et al., 2020). This produces what Ebrahim (2005) terms “accountability myopia,” where short-term metrics overshadow deeper, long-term social transformation. The resulting technocratic orientation restricts critical reflection and discourages transparency about failures or power dynamics.

Ultimately, the hybrid NGO form reflects a broader tension in contemporary development: the need to balance managerial efficiency with participatory legitimacy. Addressing this requires a shift from compliance-driven to relational and justice-oriented accountability, known as social accountability, recognising that meaningful accountability arises through dialogue, trust, and shared agency rather than performance metrics alone.

2.2.4 Neoliberalism and the Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) Approach

The Bottom of the Pyramid (BoP) model, popularised by Prahalad and Hart (2002), emerged in the early 2000s as a development strategy aligned with neoliberal market ideals. It views low-income populations not as aid recipients but as potential consumers and entrepreneurs, integrating them into market systems through private-sector solutions to poverty. In this paradigm, development is achieved through commercially viable ventures that meet the needs of the poor whilst generating profit, often through partnerships between corporations and NGOs (London and Hart, 2004).

While BoP strategies foster innovation and resource mobilisation, they have faced widespread criticism for commodifying poverty and reinforcing neoliberal ideologies (Karnani, 2007). By framing the poor as consumers rather than rights-holding citizens, BoP approaches overlook structural inequalities and power dynamics, often increasing vulnerability instead of reducing it (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). In Bangladesh,

NGOs have adopted BoP models to expand services such as microfinance, education, and healthcare. Although these initiatives improve access, they often operate within top-down, market-oriented frameworks that constrain genuine participation and collective empowerment (Dey et al., 2021).

The spread of BoP principles into NGO practices has further blurred the line between profit and purpose, turning NGOs into social enterprises or market intermediaries (Roy, 2010). While this hybridisation can improve efficiency and sustainability, it also risks mission drift when commercial goals overshadow community voice and social justice (Banks et al., 2015). Accountability shifts accordingly from beneficiaries and communities to donors, investors, and consumers, who measure success using metrics such as scalability, efficiency, or return on investment (Ebrahim, 2003; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). This change boosts upward accountability but weakens social accountability, marginalising participatory governance and collective action.

As a result, while BoP models provide innovative tools for delivering services, they also exemplify neoliberal rationalities that depoliticise development and limit NGOs' transformative potential. In fragile governance contexts such as Bangladesh, where inequalities are deeply rooted, these dynamics highlight the need to reconsider NGO accountability—shifting from transactional, market-based approaches towards participatory frameworks that rebuild trust, legitimacy, and citizen agency.

2.3 NGOs' Accountability Mechanisms

To understand how NGOs manage their diverse commitments, scholars increasingly examine accountability as a question of power (Andrews, 2014). Recent literature highlights the rise of accounting innovations that seek to combine social and economic

value—such as blended value frameworks in community organisations (Marini et al., 2017; Nicholls, 2009) and social return on investment measures in social enterprises (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Hall et al., 2015). These developments reflect an ongoing search for mechanisms that align performance measurement with social purpose. However, concerns persist about how such mechanisms can effectively reduce poverty and improve beneficiaries' well-being. These debates have been intensified by a series of scandals that have eroded public trust in the non-profit sector and by the rapid expansion of NGOs globally (Gibelman and Gelman, 2001; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010; Tanima et al., 2021; Young, 2000).

The global expansion of NGOs, especially in developing regions, has been motivated by the belief that NGOs are more efficient and community-focused than governments in providing essential social services and supporting democratisation (Hall and O'Dwyer, 2017; Uddin and Belal, 2018). However, this perspective has faced growing critique from scholars and practitioners alike, who challenge the idea of NGOs as "magic bullets" and call for a more thorough examination of their accountability relationships (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Najam, 1996; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Tanima et al., 2020). As a result, accountability has become a key focus in NGO research, demanding more in-depth theoretical and practical exploration.

In the literature, accountability is regarded as context-dependent, reflecting both ethical and moral responsibilities within civil society. Marini et al. (2017) describe NGO accountability as an acknowledgement of the rights and expectations of the communities they serve, covering both functional and moral aspects (Dewi et al., 2021). Functional accountability relates to immediate duties—such as the responsible management of resources and adherence to donor requirements—while moral

accountability pertains to broader social values of fairness, responsiveness, and justice.

Functional accountability, primarily upward in nature, is often operationalised through funder-driven tools like logical framework analysis (Najam, 1996). Although these mechanisms foster transparency and efficiency, they face criticism for reducing complex social realities to quantifiable indicators that emphasise donor expectations over local needs (Ebrahim et al., 2014). Upward accountability systems usually require NGOs to report activities and outcomes according to donor-defined protocols (Agyemang et al., 2017; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008; Ebrahim, 2003, 2009). In contrast, downward accountability—towards beneficiaries and communities—is more likely when supported by inward accountability, where NGOs internalise social and moral responsibility as part of their organisational ethos (Andrews, 2014). Edwards and Hulme (1996) view downward accountability as a measure of how well NGOs align their practices with the priorities of their beneficiaries, while Roberts (1996) contends that accountability should be understood as a social relationship rooted in mutual dependency rather than mere compliance.

2.3.1 Upward Accountability and Mission Drift

NGOs in the development sector often rely on funding from government and private donors to carry out welfare and development Programmes in underprivileged areas (Agyemang et al., 2017; O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015). These donor–NGO relationships typically function as "supply-led" systems, where donors set goals, allocate resources, and expect implementing NGOs, often local partners, to execute them (Agyemang et al., 2009; Gray et al., 2006). This establishes formal, hierarchical, and compliance-oriented accountability mechanisms, emphasising quantitative

indicators and regular reporting (O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015; Ebrahim et al., 2014). Consequently, many NGOs—particularly larger international ones—prioritise upward accountability at the expense of other aspects.

While upward accountability aims to ensure efficiency and prevent misuse of funds, its dominance reinforces a narrow, accounting-based logic that privileges financial performance over social outcomes (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Agyemang et al., 2017). NGO leaders often express frustration that donor-driven expectations and financial reporting have overshadowed more inclusive approaches to accountability, such as participatory decision-making and stakeholder dialogue (Dillard and Vinnari, 2019; Tanima et al., 2020). Scholars question whether such accountability systems genuinely promote development or simply reproduce dependency and control (Ebrahim et al., 2014).

Donor-centric mechanisms have been shown to cause mission drift—a gradual shift away from NGOs' initial social goals towards those aligned with donor priorities (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019). By prioritising financial accountability over social accountability, these systems undermine NGOs' role in promoting equity and empowerment, often worsening social and environmental vulnerabilities among the very communities they aim to support (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Lehman, 2019).

To overcome these challenges, scholars advocate for participatory and relational accountability frameworks that reconnect NGOs with their beneficiaries. O'Leary (2017) highlights the importance of community partnerships that embed principles of self-determination within accountability relationships. Mechanisms such as participatory reviews, stakeholder focus groups, and social auditing can help NGOs

identify community needs and build mutual trust (Marini et al., 2017). These approaches go beyond mere compliance, providing a foundation for social accountability—an accountability practice rooted in dialogue, transparency, and citizen empowerment.

2.3.2 NGOs' Mission Drift and Its Impact in Bangladesh

NGOs in Bangladesh function within a complex landscape of accountability shaped by their connections with donors, the state, and local communities. Heavy dependence on external funding and strict regulatory oversight from donors and government agencies has solidified a culture of upward accountability, where NGOs are mainly answerable to funders and regulators rather than to the communities they serve (Ahmed et al., 2023; Tanima et al., 2020). Donor-driven accountability systems focus on outcome measurement, performance indicators, and financial reporting. Although these mechanisms aim to boost transparency and efficiency, they often limit NGOs to easily measurable results, restricting their ability for long-term social change. Maîtrot (2019) notes that prioritising social performance legitimacy over moral or participatory legitimacy weakens NGOs' capacity to pursue empowerment-focused goals. Consequently, a persistent divide remains between the participatory rhetoric of NGOs and the compliance-driven, technocratic practices that dominate their internal systems.

This donor-centred logic has contributed to mission drift, whereby NGOs gradually shift from their original advocacy or rights-based goals towards donor-aligned, market-friendly interventions such as microfinance, livelihood Programmes, and social entrepreneurship (Mia and Lee, 2017). While such initiatives can alleviate poverty, they often lack participatory mechanisms and fail to challenge structural inequalities. Tanima et al. (2020) note that NGOs frequently reorient their project portfolios to

secure funding within competitive donor markets—actions that safeguard institutional survival but weaken grassroots accountability and advocacy capacity. Consequently, NGOs in Bangladesh risk becoming service providers rather than agents of social change, diminishing their democratic function and legitimacy (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017).

As NGO–beneficiary relationships become more transactional, social accountability declines. Beneficiaries' voices are often excluded from Programme design, monitoring, and evaluation, while participatory tools tend to serve donor reporting needs rather than community responsiveness (Rahman, 2023). Power imbalances further discourage beneficiaries from expressing criticism, especially where NGO services are seen as charitable aid (Lewis et al., 2020). Scholars therefore support participatory and relational accountability approaches—such as community-based evaluations, social audits, and co-production models—that promote citizen engagement and shift power in development processes (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). Without such reforms, NGOs risk losing their legitimacy as agents of social justice and merely becoming implementers of externally imposed agendas.

2.3.3 Social Accountability and Grassroots Development

In the NGO literature, Kilby (2006) offers a foundational framework for understanding downward accountability—the mechanisms through which NGOs remain answerable to their intended beneficiaries rather than solely to donors. Downward accountability emphasises transparency, participation, and responsiveness, requiring organisations to establish systems that enable communities to influence decisions and evaluate performance (Ebrahim, 2003). Recent scholars have broadened this concept into social accountability, defined as the processes that promote dialogue and collective

action between citizens and organisations to ensure the responsible use of power (Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021; O'Leary, 2017).

Kilby's (2006) framework conceptualises downward accountability across two dimensions: 'depth'—the level of feedback and access beneficiaries have to NGO management—and 'formality'—the structure and communication mechanisms through which such feedback is given. He argues that more in-depth and formal accountability mechanisms improve NGO effectiveness and promote empowerment. Murtaza (2012) similarly highlights that formal and semi-formal channels of accountability are crucial for beneficiaries to influence NGO operations and outcomes. Alawattage and Azure (2021) compare social accountability with upward accountability, suggesting that the former should foster 'social knowledge' based on open communication and 'rational consensus.' Building on this, Boomsma and O'Dwyer (2019) contend that social accountability must be emancipatory, allowing marginalised actors to reflect on and challenge conditions of subjugation through dialogue and participation.

Earlier frameworks also shed light on these dynamics. Hirschman's (1978) "exit and voice" model—later refined by Paul (1992)—emphasises that accountability can be achieved when beneficiaries either exit by seeking alternative service providers or exercise *voice* by influencing organisational performance. In resource-constrained contexts such as Bangladesh, the option of exit is often unavailable, making *voice* the primary avenue for influence. However, the effectiveness of voice depends on beneficiaries' access to information and opportunities to participate at all stages of project planning and implementation (Rahman, 2023).

2.3.4 Participation as a Process for Social Accountability

Beneficiaries' meaningful participation is widely recognised as a key element of social accountability within NGOs. Contemporary approaches emphasise active, informed, and ongoing community involvement throughout decision-making, implementation, and monitoring phases. Rahman (2023) highlights several benefits of participation: it mobilises local resources, utilises indigenous knowledge, improves project design, and fosters community ownership. Participation thus transforms beneficiaries from passive recipients into active development partners, strengthening mutual accountability between NGOs and communities (Awio et al., 2011; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010).

To assess the quality of participation, Ebrahim (2003) proposes a ladder of participation that reflects different levels of power sharing. Nominal participation offers symbolic inclusion without decision-making authority; instrumental participation involves community input to improve project efficiency, while maintaining NGO control; representative participation allows selected community members—often local elites—to influence certain decisions; and transformative participation empowers communities to actively engage in project planning, implementation, and evaluation. This highest level closely aligns with the principles of social accountability and co-production, fostering shared ownership and collective responsibility for outcomes.

It is widely argued that allowing beneficiaries to participate in the development process enables organisations to learn from them and better understand how to respond to their needs (O'Leary, 2017; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). However, it is also noted that the ladder of participation can vary in different contexts. For instance, in certain circumstances, involvement is limited to organisational activities such as consulting with constituents and providing them with information. In other situations, beneficiaries may actively carry out some project-related tasks. In some cases, it is possible to

persuade beneficiaries to negotiate with NGOs over decisions (Marini et al., 2017; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). To promote the interests of marginalised communities, several NGO studies advocate for grassroots involvement and downward accountability using techniques such as "participatory reviews, stakeholder focus groups, or social auditing (O'Leary, 2017)."

Despite these positive findings, some researchers argue that implementing social accountability is filled with numerous complications. Several studies have shown that beneficiary feedback is often used to guide NGO activities, but not to influence their implementation (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). Alternatively, it is frequently utilised in narrative form in upward accountability reports to donors (Agyemang et al., 2009; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). Studies also indicate that accountability practices do not tailor to the specific needs of beneficiary groups. It is also clear that, quite often, beneficiaries are reluctant or afraid to question or critique NGOs out of fear of "biting the hand that feeds them" (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010). Furthermore, power imbalances within communities can enable elites to dominate participatory spaces, undermining inclusion (Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011).

In emerging economies like Bangladesh, participation often signifies symbolic inclusion rather than genuine empowerment. NGOs frequently organise community meetings or consultations to obtain approval for predesigned projects, using these interactions to meet donor reporting requirements rather than encourage meaningful dialogue (Rahman, 2023; Tanima et al., 2020). Such practices sustain a gap between participatory rhetoric and reality, where beneficiaries' influence over decisions remains limited.

To overcome these limitations, scholars and practitioners increasingly promote co-production as a more transformative approach to participation (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). Unlike traditional participatory methods, co-production positions citizens as equal partners in designing, delivering, and evaluating development initiatives. It recognises that local knowledge, lived experience, and community capacities are crucial for creating context-sensitive, sustainable, and accountable outcomes (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016). In Bangladesh, where traditional participation often reinforces existing hierarchies, co-production provides a way to redistribute power, build trust, and encourage shared ownership. By integrating accountability into everyday relationships and interactions, co-production moves beyond tokenistic consultation towards relational and dialogic forms of social accountability. It thus offers NGOs a foundation to bridge the gap between upward accountability obligations and their moral commitment to community empowerment.

Before turning to the detailed discussion of co-production in Section 2.4, the following Figure 2.1 summarises how the preceding analysis of NGO accountability challenges conceptually connects with co-production and the social-symbolic work framework, highlighting their combined contribution to strengthening social accountability.

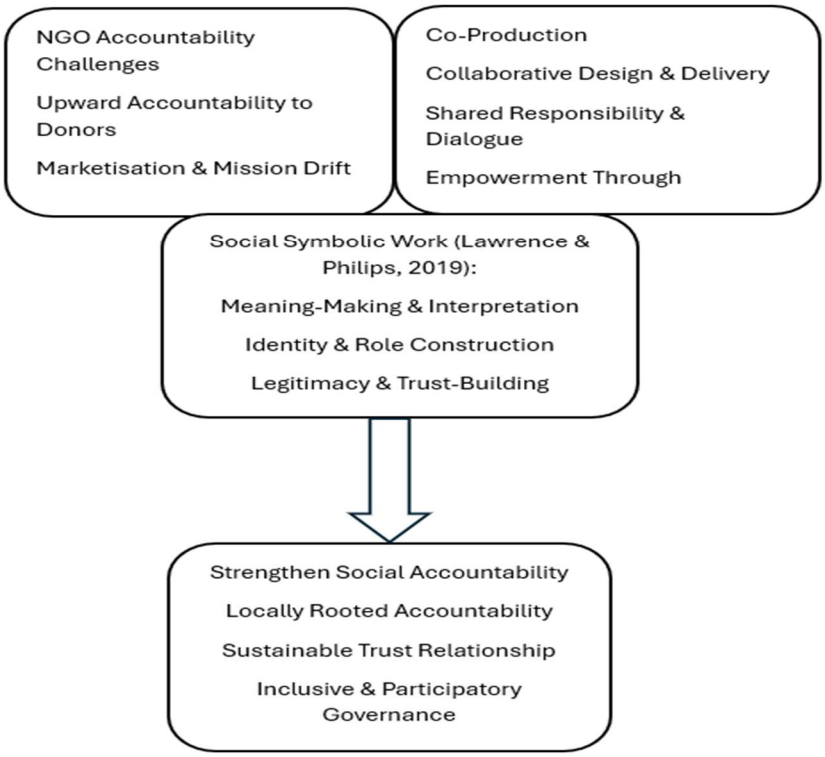


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Linkage between NGO accountability challenges, co-production, and social-symbolic work (Source: Author)

2.4 Co-production and Community Participation for Social Accountability

The growing discussion around social accountability and co-production highlights a broader shift in development thinking—from top-down management approaches to more participatory, inclusive, and power-aware forms of governance. Social accountability emphasises how citizens, especially marginalised groups, hold organisations responsible for their actions and commitments (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021). Co-production supports this by positioning citizens not just as passive recipients of services but as active co-producers of policies and services, sharing responsibility and agency with state or non-state actors across the design, delivery, and evaluation stages.

While conventional accountability depends on compliance and audits, co-production encourages dialogue, reciprocity, and collective problem-solving. The combination of these ideas offers a framework for refocusing community voices and shifting power dynamics in NGO-led development. In Bangladesh, where donor dependence, hierarchical governance, and social inequality often limit citizen influence, co-production offers a way to rebuild trust, enhance legitimacy, and integrate accountability into everyday relationships, rather than relying solely on external reporting systems.

2.4.1 The Theoretical Foundations of Co-production

Originating in institutional economics and collective-action theory, the concept of co-production was introduced by Elinor Ostrom and colleagues in the 1970s to describe collaboration between citizens and service providers in producing public goods (Ostrom, 1972, 1996). Ostrom argued that outcomes improve when users contribute knowledge, time, and resources alongside professionals. Over time, this idea has evolved from a technical description of joint production into a normative vision of participatory governance, emphasising that effective public services depend on civic engagement, trust, and mutual responsibility (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021; McMullin, 2022).

Recent scholars describe the co-production of public services and outcomes as involving public service organisations and citizens leveraging each other's assets and resources to achieve better outcomes or efficiency (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). This approach challenges traditional service models by actively involving citizens throughout the policy cycle. Bovaird and Loeffler (2013) and Loeffler (2020) specify the

four Co-s as four distinct modes of co-production—co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment. They explain these four Co-s as follows:

i) Co-commissioning of services and outcomes, which involves
   - Co-planning of policy—e.g. deliberative participation, Planning for Real
   - Co-prioritisation of services—e.g. participatory budgeting (macro scale), personal budgets (micro-scale), stakeholder groups on budget committees
   - Co-financing of services—e.g. crowdfunding, local fundraising.

ii) Co-design of services, e.g. user consultation, Service Design Labs

iii) Co-delivery of services, e.g. peer support groups (e.g. expert patients),

iv) Co-assessment (including co-monitoring and co-evaluation) of services, e.g. tenant inspectors, user on-line ratings (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013).

The differentiation among the Four Co's goes beyond theoretical analysis; it has important implications in practical settings. Initially, three of the Four Co's relate to citizen voice: co-commissioning, co-design, and co-assessment, while co-delivery focuses on citizen action. Usually, the participants in these two forms of co-production differ considerably. Citizens involved in citizen action often show little interest in traditional forms of citizen voice, such as attending meetings, serving on committees, writing letters, or lodging complaints. Likewise, people who are good at expressing their opinions may be hesitant or feel they lack the time to participate in activities such as monitoring in StreetWatch, collecting litter in public parks, supporting local neighbours, or volunteering as firefighters (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021).

2.4.2 Types and Depth of Co-production

Co-production can be categorised based on participants and beneficiaries at individual, group, and collective levels (Brudney and England, 1983; McMullin, 2022; Nabatchi et al., 2017). As the concept of co-production has developed, scholarly efforts have increasingly sought to break down its forms to better understand the many ways citizens engage with service providers and the various impacts this has on governance, inclusion, and accountability. Rather than viewing co-production as a single or uniform process, recent literature regards it as a multi-dimensional and context-dependent practice, shaped by the level of participation, the timing of involvement, and the power dynamics within institutional structures. Among the most influential contributions to this area, Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) effectively illustrate citizen involvement throughout the entire service cycle with their 4 Co's model. This framework highlights specific moments for engagement, encouraging a more critical examination of whether participatory mechanisms genuinely redistribute power or merely reinforce existing hierarchies under the guise of collaboration. In the context of NGO-led development in Bangladesh, where participatory rhetoric often masks donor-driven priorities and centralised decision-making, applying this typology enables a more thorough evaluation of how and to what extent co-production functions as a tool for self-efficacy, community empowerment or, conversely, is employed to legitimise bottom-up agendas aimed at establishing social accountability.

2.4.2.1 Aspirational and Transformative Co-production

Pestoff (2019) presents a typology based on levels of participation, distinguishing between individual and collective co-production. He further develops the conceptual landscape of co-production by introducing two types: aspirational and transformative. The difference between these forms reflects varying degrees of civic engagement and

institutional dedication. Aspirational co-production mainly involves recognising the potential benefits of co-production, often paying lip service to the idea, while accepting citizens' marginal or incidental contributions to publicly funded services. This may involve finding ways to gradually improve citizen participation in delivering public services (Pestoff, 2020).

Aspirational co-production is a minimal or symbolic form of engagement where organisations acknowledge the potential value of citizen involvement but mostly restrict participation to marginal or supplementary roles. It often appears through rhetorical commitments to participation or through superficial, ad hoc contributions by citizens, such as occasional consultation or volunteering without changing the core decision-making structure (Pestoff, 2020). This type of co-production tends to develop in environments where institutional inertia, resource constraints, or donor priorities prevent deeper participatory integration. In many NGO settings, especially in aid-dependent contexts such as Bangladesh, aspirational co-production is often observed when participation is viewed as a procedural formality rather than a genuine commitment to shared governance (Niva et al., 2022).

In contrast, transformative co-production involves promoting collaboration through active facilitation, nurturing, and institutionalisation. Its primary aim is to democratise service delivery (Pestoff, 2020). Transformative co-production is marked by its ability to redistribute power, strengthen deliberative engagement, and embed democratic values into the design, implementation, and oversight of public or NGO-led services. It goes beyond mere participation in delivery; it invites communities to take part in strategic areas such as assessing real needs, setting agendas, allocating resources, and evaluating impacts, thereby challenging traditional hierarchical service models.

This approach aligns closely with principles of social accountability and downward legitimacy, as it encourages reciprocity, mutual learning, and collective agency. For NGOs, adopting transformative co-production means moving beyond instrumental or donor-driven participation models and investing in long-term relationships, trust-building, and capacity development. In doing so, NGOs can reposition themselves not just as service providers but as facilitators of community-led and participatory development, thereby fostering social accountability.

2.4.2.2 Collective and Community Co-production

Over time, the concept of co-production has evolved to recognise that it is often a collective, community-based process carried out not by isolated individuals but by groups, networks, and local partnerships. Collective co-production refers to joint citizen action that produces collective goods, whose benefits extend to a wider society, even if inputs are supplied individually or collaboratively (Brudney and England, 1983, pp. 63- 64; Bovaird et al., 2015, p.51). It frequently arises through horizontal collaboration among citizens—such as volunteer groups, self-help organisations, or grassroots movements—driven by shared interests or a sense of civic duty. In this way, collective co-production enhances public value by fostering mutualism, reciprocity, and social capital, enabling participants to go beyond self-interest and build shared trust and cooperation (Pestoff, 2012; Fox, 1996). As the outcomes of each collective cycle strengthen community bonds, these processes can generate the social momentum typical of civic movements and improve long-term participatory capacity.

For NGOs, collective co-production serves as a foundation for participatory governance, enabling them to mobilise citizen networks and amplify community voices. Based on Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) framework, the relational, structural,

and cognitive dimensions of social capital—trust, shared norms, and mutual obligations—facilitate coordinated action and resource sharing, particularly in fragile governance environments like Bangladesh. When NGOs leverage these social infrastructures, collective co-production becomes more than just a Programme tool; it acts as a community governance mechanism, unlocking local capacity, distributing leadership, and bolstering legitimacy in contexts where institutional trust is weak. However, while it energises collective efforts, collective co-production does not necessarily imply direct collaboration between communities and institutions; rather, it provides a civic foundation upon which more institutionalised forms of partnership—such as community co-production—can be established.

Community co-production, by contrast, embodies a more embedded and relational form of collaboration between professionals (e.g., NGO staff) and community members. While collective co-production emphasises citizen-to-citizen cooperation, community co-production highlights reciprocal partnerships between citizens and service providers, where both parties contribute knowledge, skills, and resources to co-design, co-deliver, and co-assess services (NESTA, 2011; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; Jaspers and Steen, 2020). This approach draws on the principles of reciprocity and mutuality, transforming communities into active partners rather than passive recipients. Loeffler and Bovaird (2016) identified five forms of community contribution: knowledge, resources, compliance, creativity, and legitimacy, all of which improve service quality and accountability.

From a development perspective, community co-production is especially important in contexts like Bangladesh, where NGOs often fill gaps left by fragile state infrastructure. Initiatives such as community-led school committees, water user groups, and disaster

preparedness teams show how collective agency can improve service design, foster ownership, and ensure long-term sustainability (Pestoff, 2012). However, realising the full potential of community co-production requires careful attention to inclusivity, as deep-rooted social hierarchies can lead to elite capture or the exclusion of marginalised voices.

Importantly, community co-production also serves as a pathway to social accountability. Mechanisms such as social audits, participatory budgeting, and citizen monitoring transform participation from simply technical tasks into political processes, enabling citizens to jointly oversee NGOs and demand responsiveness (Fox, 2015). When built on strong social capital—trust, shared norms, and local networks—these practices bridge the gap between grassroots needs and institutional actions, turning co-production into a process of reciprocal accountability rather than a one-way reporting system. In this way, while collective co-production establishes the foundation by fostering civic solidarity and social capital, community co-production formalises these relationships into ongoing partnerships that embed accountability into everyday social practices. Together, they offer NGOs a transformative framework to rebuild legitimacy, increase participation, and promote social accountability in development practice (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; Pestoff, 2012; Fox, 2015).

2.4.2.3 Representative Co-production

Eriksson (2019) introduced the concept of representative co-production to address the limitations of direct citizen involvement in public service delivery, especially when logistical, institutional, or social barriers hinder widespread participation. This approach relies on the knowledge and skills of group representatives who assess, plan, and deliver services on behalf of others, thereby facilitating value co-creation among

community members (Eriksson, 2019). The participation of both representatives and service users is essential for developing co-production strategies, as representatives communicate expectations, share experiences of service performance, and articulate user needs (Osborne et al., 2013). Building on the ideas of co-production and co-creation (Osborne et al., 2016), Eriksson (2019, p. 298) defines representative co-production as:

> *The joint and voluntary involvement of group representatives in evaluating, designing, and delivering public services that enable value co-creation for other group members.*

The primary goal of representative co-production is to amplify the voices of hard-to-reach or socially disadvantaged groups. It is particularly useful when marginalised populations—such as women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, or the ultra-poor—face social, cultural, or logistical barriers to direct participation (Eriksson, 2019; Røhnebæk and Bjerck, 2021). By involving community representatives, this approach expands participation beyond the "usual suspects," fostering inclusion and empowerment (Vanleene et al., 2018). In many development and public service settings, especially in emerging economies, NGOs often struggle to engage in genuine co-production due to entrenched power imbalances and unequal access to participation (Brandsen, 2020; Cepiku and Giordano, 2014; Dietrich et al., 2017; Donetto et al., 2015; Morrison and Dearden, 2013). Acknowledging these challenges, Eriksson (2019) described representative co-production as a practical and inclusive method that enables participation through designated representatives, thereby extending co-production reach to vulnerable communities.

In this model, individuals serve as ‘intermediaries’ or ‘accountability brokers’ who voice collective concerns, contribute to service design, and oversee performance on behalf of their communities (Røhnebæk and Bjerck, 2021). Co-produced representation thus provides a mechanism for integrating community oversight and feedback within institutional frameworks, especially where direct participation is not practical. As Fox (2015) notes, effective social accountability mechanisms combine “voice” (citizens’ capacity to express demands) with “teeth” (institutional responsiveness). Representatives, by gathering dispersed community voices, can facilitate both—ensuring grassroots concerns reach decision-makers and that feedback loops stay active and credible.

In contexts like Bangladesh, where limited literacy, time poverty, and mobility often hinder direct participation, representative co-production offers NGOs a way to improve social accountability (Banks et al., 2015; Tanima et al., 2020). By acting as advocates, monitors, and intermediaries, representatives connect beneficiaries with NGO leadership, turning accountability from a one-way reporting task into a continuous, dialogic process. However, the success of representative co-production depends on how it is designed: without clear selection procedures or inclusive monitoring, it risks reproducing elite capture and misrepresentation (Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; Mansuri and Rao, 2013; Mehta et al., 2022). Building the capacities of representatives through rights-based training, participatory evaluation, and feedback mechanisms can enhance their legitimacy and impact (Joshi and McCluskey, 2018).

Ultimately, representative co-production provides NGOs with a practical way to foster inclusion and accountability when direct participation is limited. It broadens the idea of co-production by integrating participatory values into institutional practice and ensuring

that marginalised voices impact decision-making processes. In this way, it acts both as a corrective for participatory gaps and as a strategic path to social accountability in complex development settings.

However, for representative co-production to effectively promote social accountability, its design must address risks of misrepresentation and elite capture. Studies on participatory governance in South Asia indicate that representatives chosen from dominant social groups might prioritise their own agendas or those of local elites, thereby reinforcing exclusionary dynamics (Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; Mansuri and Rao, 2013; Mehta et al., 2022). To mitigate this, NGOs can adopt transparent selection processes, hold regular consultations with communities, and establish feedback mechanisms that enable community members to assess and, if necessary, replace their representatives. It is also argued that enhancing the capacities of representatives—such as negotiation skills, rights literacy, and monitoring techniques—can improve their effectiveness as agents of accountability (Joshi and McCluskey, 2018). In this way, the practice of representative co-production can create opportunities for service co-design and facilitate a deliberative accountability process that embeds equity and responsiveness in NGO-led development activities.

2.5 Role of Intermediaries as Co-producers

Co-production utilises the practical skills and experiences of both professionals and citizens to deliver effective, high-quality public services (Jaspers and Steen, 2020). It harnesses community resources, including time, energy, knowledge, and local expertise (Coote and Goodwin, 2010), and views society as pluralistic, with multiple actors contributing to public value through diverse systems and processes (Osborne, 2006). Within the New Public Governance (NPG) framework, collaboration among

service users, third-sector organisations, and both public and private entities is vital in tackling complex public issues (Osborne, 2010; Verschuere et al., 2012). This approach underscores open government, active citizenship, and co-production as essential elements for improving service development (Brix et al., 2021).

In this evolving landscape, intermediaries have become vital players within co-production ecosystems. Haug (2023, p. 14) defines co-production intermediaries as:

> *Formal, non-state organisations that participate in public service delivery by supporting or substituting the public service provider or empowering service users.*

Intermediaries differ from both service providers and users (Bovaird, 2007; Nabatchi et al., 2017). They are formal organisations such as NGOs or for-profit firms that provide specialised knowledge, coordination, and facilitation skills (Casula et al., 2022; Dhirathiti, 2019; Ottmann et al., 2011; Surva et al., 2016). As external yet engaged actors, intermediaries pursue goals that may not always align with those of public institutions but often complement them (Yi et al., 2025; Haug, 2023; Kagan and Dodge, 2023). Their common role involves enabling participation, supporting service delivery, and sometimes substituting for or reinforcing public sector capacity (Petrescu, 2019). The interactions among these actors are crucial for creating public value—defined as both satisfying individual needs and delivering collective benefits that enhance community well-being (Alford, 2009; Haug, 2023). Co-production relies on trust among participants, as mutual confidence improves communication, learning, and accountability (Buntaine et al., 2021; Casula et al., 2022; Surva et al., 2016). Intermediaries can serve as impartial facilitators, mediating dialogue between users and providers and ensuring transparency (Frieling et al., 2014; Yi et al., 2025). The

quality of these interactions directly affects the value generated through co-production (Osborne, 2018), supporting the concept of a public service ecosystem where multiple actors collaborate to jointly create outcomes (Osborne et al., 2022; Dudau et al., 2019).

However, the neutrality of intermediaries is often context-dependent, shaped by power relations and the configuration of the involved actors. In development settings such as Bangladesh, intermediaries, especially local NGOs, community-based organisations, or informal advocacy groups, play a vital role in mediating these dynamics. They help mitigate power imbalances by facilitating communication, monitoring progress, and ensuring that interventions remain aligned with local priorities (Niva et al., 2022). Operating in this “third role” (Arnstein, 1969; Uster et al., 2022; Nowell and Kenis, 2019), intermediaries are neither passive recipients nor detached implementers but active co-producers who connect communities and institutions.

2.6 Facilitators and Barriers to Co-production

The core principle of effective co-production is including relevant stakeholders to view an issue from multiple perspectives and generate shared solutions that meet the needs of communities, institutions, and service providers. This collaborative process improves the quality and legitimacy of outcomes by drawing on diverse knowledge and experience. However, if co-production is to realise its expected value, critical questions arise: how and when it occurs, and what factors hinder it? Previous research identifies numerous facilitators and barriers to co-production, along with the motivations that drive individual and collective engagement (McMullin, 2022). Loeffler and Bovaird (2021) suggest four broad categories of barriers: user characteristics, community characteristics, organisational traits, and contextual factors.

User characteristics refer to the personal qualities and abilities of participants—such as age, education, previous experience, and willingness to participate. For example, older adults or individuals with limited digital literacy may encounter practical challenges in online engagement (Bovaird et al., 2015). Similarly, citizens who lack confidence in their contributions or have faced institutional exclusion might be hesitant to participate meaningfully. Community characteristics describe the relational context of co-production, including levels of trust, shared norms, and the strength of social networks (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2013). Communities with low social trust or significant socio-economic inequalities are less likely to sustain genuine collaboration, as power imbalances and social divisions often foster scepticism and restrict cooperation (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021).

In contrast, barriers linked to organisational characteristics, such as limited resources, insufficient staff skills, and ingrained organisational cultures, have received comparatively less empirical focus. Organisations with bureaucratic or top-down cultures may struggle to delegate authority or accept community input as legitimate (Uster et al., 2022). Likewise, contextual barriers, including restrictive policy frameworks, unstable political environments, or donor-driven agendas, can limit innovation and community participation. Yet these macro-level influences remain underexplored compared to individual or community factors (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). Recognising this gap is crucial, since organisational and contextual conditions largely influence whether co-production shifts from isolated initiatives into sustainable, embedded practices.

Motivational factors also play a crucial role in determining who participates and their reasons. Alford (2009) classifies these motivations into three main categories: material

incentives, such as financial benefits or access to services; solidarity incentives, originating from collective identity and belonging; and expressive incentives, linked to personal satisfaction and purpose (Alford, 2002). He also distinguishes intrinsic rewards, such as increased self-efficacy and empowerment, from external sanctions that stem from legal or contractual obligations. Similarly, Pestoff (2012) and Verschuere et al. (2012) highlight the importance of two preconditions for engagement: the accessibility of participation and the relevance of the issue. People are more likely to participate when involvement feels manageable and meaningful, and when they believe their participation can result in tangible outcomes (Van Eijk and Steen, 2016; Van Eijk and Gasco, 2018). However, the existing co-production literature lacks clarity regarding the relationship between these conditions and individual behaviour, the influence of motivations on behaviour, and the role of ease and salience in this process.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the theory of social-symbolic work (SSW) developed by Lawrence and Phillips (2019) to examine how NGOs construct meaning-making practices and legitimacy through co-production with communities and beneficiaries. SSW focuses on how organisational actors create, maintain, and transform social realities through practices such as identity formation, role configuration, and narrative construction. Applying this lens enables an understanding of how NGOs embed co-production not merely as a procedural mechanism, but as a culturally and symbolically meaningful practice that shapes relationships, trust, and legitimacy.

In this study, co-production is seen as both a practical and symbolic process. Practically, it involves collaboration and shared decision-making between NGOs and

communities; symbolically, it signifies the creation of shared meanings that uphold NGOs' legitimacy and reinforce their social missions. NGOs participate in symbolic efforts through participatory language, shared value framing, and capacity-building initiatives that align organisational goals with community expectations (Banks et al., 2015; Cornforth et al., 2015). Through these processes, NGOs aim to demonstrate responsiveness and accountability, while communities negotiate their roles and agency within co-produced development spaces.

Understanding these dynamics requires attention to *social-symbolic objects*—the focal points of symbolic work that embody shared meanings and collective aspirations. These may include ideas such as "empowerment," "participation," or "community ownership," which act as symbolic anchors for NGO–community collaboration. By analysing how these objects are constructed and mobilised, this study explores how NGOs use meaning-making to legitimise co-production and cultivate social accountability within development practice. Figure 2.2 below illustrates the conceptual linkage underpinning this study, showing how NGOs' accountability challenges can be addressed through co-production practices interpreted through the lens of social-symbolic work, ultimately leading to strengthened social accountability.

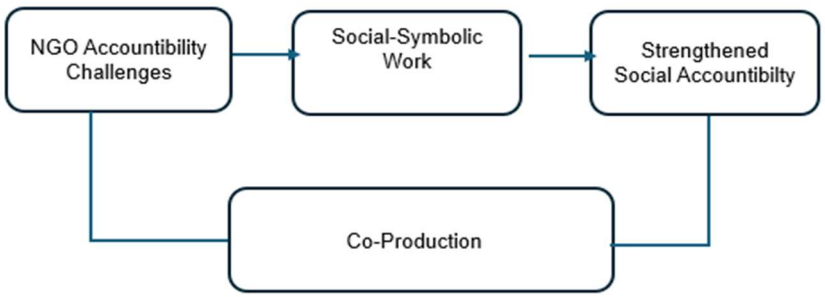


Figure 2.2: Conceptual model of co-production mediated by social-symbolic work (Source: Author)

This figure illustrates the conceptual pathway underpinning this research. It demonstrates that NGOs' accountability challenges can be tackled through co-production practices that encourage participation and shared responsibility. The social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) framework facilitates this process by explaining how meaning, identity, and legitimacy are constructed, ultimately leading to enhanced forms of social accountability.

2.7.1 Social-symbolic Work

Within the field of social sciences, researchers are increasingly demonstrating how individuals 'work' to construct organisational life. This includes establishing rules and routines that influence and facilitate organisational activities. It also emphasises the identities and positions of people within and around organisations, as well as the societal norms and assumptions that form the framework for organisational actions (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). 'Work' refers to how people and organisations engage in purposeful, reflective efforts based on the understanding that organisational existence is shaped by human interaction and can be changed through human agency. Research on these efforts has uncovered new forms of work, including emotion work, identity work, boundary work, strategy work, institutional work, and various others (Karakulak and Lawrence, 2024).

In social-symbolic work, Identity, emotion, institutions, ideas, aesthetics, and values are inherently social, as they are formed by and contribute to various social relations, and they are symbolic, as they are shaped through language and other modes of

symbolic expression (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Watson (2008) characterises identity work as a series of “mutually constitutive processes” wherein individuals endeavour to construct a coherent personal self-identity while reconciling the diverse social identities that relate to them. Self-work refers to the endeavours of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors aimed at influencing the social and symbolic aspects of a self, encompassing both their own identities and those of others. All this ‘work’ is social-symbolic work that influences the work of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors in constructing the social-symbolic dimensions of an organisation.

The targets of social-symbolic work are social-symbolic objects, which are roles, identities, practices, norms, or institutions that are socially constructed, and that actors aim to create, sustain, or alter through meaning-making activities. In this context, social symbolic objects—such as shared narratives, rituals, documents, and artefacts—play a vital role in anchoring and legitimising these forms of work, acting as reference points that embody collective meaning and guide organisational behaviour.

2.7.2 Social-Symbolic Objects

Within the theory of social-symbolic work (SSW), social-symbolic objects (SSOs) are the targets of symbolic action—the entities upon which actors focus their meaning-making efforts to construct, sustain, or transform shared social realities. As Lawrence and Phillips (2019, p. 25) define,

> *The concept of a social-symbolic object is a combination of discursive, relational, and material elements that constitute a meaningful pattern in a social system.*

SSOs are not simply physical artefacts or abstract concepts; they acquire meaning through collective interpretation, discourse, and practice (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). They provide focal points for SSW by embodying shared values, identities, and beliefs that actors seek to shape or contest. In the context of NGOs, social-symbolic objects might include concepts such as the “active citizen,” “community ownership,” or “participatory development”—all of which are shaped through organisational narratives, community engagement, training, and communication strategies. By engaging with these objects symbolically, NGOs try to influence how people see themselves, their relationships, and their roles in development processes.

SSOs can occur at various levels. At the individual level, identities such as the “empowered beneficiary” act as SSOs when constructed through discourses of agency, vulnerability, or participation (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). At the organisational level, tools and strategies—like participatory planning or accountability frameworks—serve as SSOs when they represent values such as efficiency, inclusion, or transparency (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012). At the institutional level, broader constructs like gender norms, poverty, or climate resilience become SSOs when actors symbolically reinterpret them to influence development discourse (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Austin and Seitanidi, 2012). In emerging-economy contexts such as Bangladesh, NGOs engage with SSOs, including poverty, disaster vulnerability, and environmental degradation, not only as material realities but also as symbolic constructs shaping public narratives, community identities, and organisational legitimacy (Austin and Seitanidi, 2012; Banks et al., 2015). These objects become sites where meaning, power, and collective purpose are negotiated, influencing how development is conceptualised and enacted. Through discursive, relational, and material work—which will be discussed in detail in the next section—NGOs seek to

reframe how these challenges are understood and addressed, thereby making SSOs central to their broader development and social accountability strategies.

2.7.3 Core Principles of Social-symbolic Work

The notion of social-symbolic work connects social-symbolic objects to individuals' potential to engage in purposeful, reflexive efforts to shape those objects. The idea of social-symbolic work was developed by Lawrence and Phillips (2019), drawing on three fundamental principles (p. 36): heterogeneous forms of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), human action Programmes seen as both automatic and controllable (Kahneman, 2011), and the repertoires of practices (Nicolini, 2012). By combining these three principles, Lawrence and Phillips (2019) defined:

> *Social-symbolic work refers to the purposeful and reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors to shape social-symbolic objects. These efforts occur through heterogeneous forms of agency bundled into Programmes of action that constitute the enactment of practices. Social-symbolic work has discursive, relational, and material dimensions, the salience of which will depend on the intentions of actors, the practices in which they engage, and the social-symbolic objects in question (Lawrence and Phillips,2019, p.31).*

Social-symbolic work embodies the “activities in which individuals and organisations intentionally and strategically exert efforts to influence their social-symbolic context” (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 31). The social-symbolic work framework also elucidates how actors intentionally influence the commonly overlooked aspects of their organisational context, including identities, emotions, institutions, ideas, aesthetics and values (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012), the very facets that provide significant meaning to organisational life. It is a component of a wider trend in organisational

studies known as the "turn to work," which was fostered by Barley and Kunda's (2006) call for "situated studies of work" that “yield more concrete representations of the act of organising”. The social-symbolic context refers to elements of organisational life that are produced and perpetuated by social interactions and are filled with appropriate meanings and needs (Hochschild, 1979). For instance, values that motivate or direct employees' behaviours and actions (Gehman et al., 2013), shared beliefs about strategic actions (Gond et al., 2018), and the emotions encountered throughout a phase of institutional changes (Moisander et al., 2016).

To identify purposeful, reflexive efforts, social-symbolic work focuses on three dimensions: combinations of discursive, relational, and material elements that create meaningful patterns in social systems (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). From this perspective, social problems such as climate change and poverty are viewed as dynamic social symbolic objects that can be altered through the intentional efforts of interested actors, including NGOs. Unlike narrower perspectives such as institutional work, which focuses on maintaining structures, or identity work, which centres on self-construction, the social-symbolic work (SSW) perspective offers a broader view of how diverse forms of purposive action interact to shape meaning, legitimacy, and social order within organisations.

Social-symbolic work operates at multiple, interconnected levels, such as the individual, organisational, and institutional levels, and each influences and reinforces the others (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). At the individual level, SSW involves the reflexive efforts of NGO leaders, staff, beneficiaries and community facilitators who construct meanings around participation, empowerment, and accountability through everyday interactions. These actors engage in discursive and relational practices,

such as framing, awareness building, and sense-giving, about community cohesion that shape how co-production is understood and enacted within their organisations. At the organisational level, SSW concerns how NGOs institutionalise these meanings through structures, routines, and accountability systems, thereby translating concepts and principles such as “community ownership” or “partnership” into operational norms and practices. At the institutional level, SSW extends to broader legitimacy-building processes, as NGOs negotiate norms, expectations, and power relations with donors, governments, and other stakeholders.

Therefore, I inquire about the mechanisms of social-symbolic work that promote co-production and how this practice can help establish a culture of social accountability among NGOs in Bangladesh. I draw on the social-symbolic work perspective because of its potential to reveal various ways in which deliberate actions can influence the social construction of ideas and objects in NGOs' operations. This potential relates to the focus on the intentional construction of organisations, their settings, and the individuals within them, as well as the process through which this construction takes place (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 49).

Through the lens of social-symbolic work, I aim to examine how NGOs ‘work’ to adopt co-production approaches in establishing social accountability mechanisms within their organisational practices. I aim to understand how NGOs establish co-production practices with diverse stakeholders, including their beneficiaries, the communities they serve, government authorities, and both national and international donors. I adopt the social-symbolic work perspective, which emphasises the diverse forms of work involved in the process. This approach highlights the various types of work, their interactions with one another, and the influence of the surrounding context on this

process. Additionally, this framework offers a detailed analysis of the actions and strategies of institutional actors, presenting them as thoughtful, purposeful, and capable individuals.

2.7.4 Various Dimensions of Social-symbolic Work

Social-symbolic work elucidates the deliberate influence exerted by actors on the commonly overlooked aspects of their organisational environments, including the self, the organisation, and institutions. (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) identify the self, the organisation, and institutions as the primary targets of social-symbolic work, representing three interconnected arenas where meaning is created, contested, and transformed. At the level of the self, social-symbolic work involves identity formation, how individuals construct a sense of who they are and what they represent within an organisation or social field. For NGO actors, this might involve framing themselves as “community facilitators,” “change agents,” or “accountability advocates,” roles that reflect both personal motivation and collective purpose.

At the organisational level, social-symbolic work focuses on how collective identities, values, and practices are constructed and maintained. NGOs engage in such work by articulating mission statements, codes of ethics, or participatory policies that symbolically communicate their legitimacy and distinctiveness. Finally, at the institutional level, social-symbolic work concerns how actors seek to maintain, disrupt, or transform the broader societal rules, norms, and belief systems that structure their environment. For instance, NGOs in Bangladesh engage in institutional-level SSW when they challenge hierarchical power relations, advocate for gender equity, or redefine accountability norms in development practice.

These three domains are interdependent: identity work at the self-level reinforces organisational narratives, while organisational practices can, in turn, influence institutional arrangements. Analysing SSW across these levels, therefore, allows for a more holistic understanding of how meaning-making processes connect individual agency, organisational practice, and institutional transformation.

These components are crucial in shaping the significance of organisational life. All these dimensions are social because they are present in interactions between individuals and groups, and symbolic because they are created and communicated through language and other symbols (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Rallens et al., 2023). To better understand this diversity, such authors expanded their understanding by analysing three important aspects of social-symbolic work: *discursive, relational, and material.* Each of these three dimensions is present in all instances of social-symbolic work, though their importance may vary depending on the kind of work and the social-symbolic objects in question (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

2.7.4.1 The Discursive Dimension

The discursive dimension of SSW refers to “efforts to shape social-symbolic objects that rely on text and talk” (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). This conception draws on the specific understanding of ‘discursive’ linked to writing on discourse analysis in social science. Phillips and Hardy (2002) argued that when people say something is constitutive, they imply that when they talk or write about the social world, they create that world. Therefore, without language and communication, there is no social reality. Without understanding language and communication, it is impossible to comprehend the reality and the true experiences of people.

The key to understanding the discursive dimension of social-symbolic work lies in combining the relationships among texts, discourses, and social-symbolic objects. Here, discourse refers to “a system of statements which contrast an object”. With this idea, Phillips et al. (2006) argued that the systems of statements are “structured collections of significant texts”. In this context, “texts” include not only written documents but also any form of symbolic expression that requires a physical medium, such as audio recordings, photographs, or other visual and material objects and non-textual items such as clothing, flags, decorations, and other means (Taylor and Van Every, 1993). Discourses go beyond simple collections of texts. They involve the relationships among texts (often embedded within other texts), as well as the systems of production and circulation through which these texts are created and shared.

This fundamental conception of texts and discourses implies that language and communication shape the creation of social and symbolic objects through various routes. Essentially, the discursive aspect of social-symbolic activity entails the creation of texts to combine with other texts to construct or influence. These are the objects that are linked to a discourse in terms of their social and symbolic significance. The discursive aspect of social-symbolic work involves influencing the systems of production and consumption associated with a particular discourse, thereby shaping the status of a social-symbolic object. This can be achieved by either spreading it more widely through expanded systems or restricting its availability by disrupting those systems. Relating to the discursive dimension of discourse, Phillips et al. (2006) argued that discourse, texts, and institutions are created by language and that texts derive meaning from their associations with other texts and their impact when utilised in various situations.

2.7.4.2 The Relational Dimension

Social-symbolic work's relational dimensions encompass the ability to influence distant or close socio-symbolic objects by establishing social connections with individuals and organisations (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Conceptually, comprehending the relational dimension of social-symbolic work is facilitated by the concept of "relational work" in economic sociology (Zelizer, 2012). This concept refers to the various actions individuals take to develop, maintain, negotiate, transform, and terminate interpersonal relationships. In her scholarship, Zelizer (2012) argues that economic activity is influenced by interrelated activities, which she refers to as "relational packages." These packages consist of interpersonal connections, economic transactions (including purchases, gifts, or bribes), the mediums used to carry out these transactions (such as money, food stamps, or casino chips), and the shared meaning of these combinations. Zelizer (2012) emphasises that relational work extends beyond economic activity. If we generalise these combinations, it may replace economic transactions with any value-creating process, such as love, cooperation, or competitiveness. This can then envision suitable combinations of interpersonal ties, media, and meanings that would accompany those processes.

Zelizer's concept of 'relational work' and 'relational packages' underlies the exploration of the relational dimension of social-symbolic work. It particularly emphasises three specific issues.

> *First, the concept of relational work suggests that the relational dimension of social-symbolic work will involve efforts to shape relationships among people, including establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating those relationships. Second, it suggests that this kind of work will be found in all spheres of social life, even domains in which the study of interpersonal relationships has*

> *traditionally been marginalised, such as the market, and what might be intensely private domains, such as death. Third, the notion of relational packages points out important facets of relationships, the shaping of which might be the focus of actors' efforts, including the definition of the relationship, the value produced by it for those involved as well as those otherwise affected, the media through which the relationship is negotiated, and the meaning of the relationship in terms of the individuals directly involved and the broader social system (Lawrence and Phillips,2019, p.34).*

These three concepts added important nuance to the relational dimension of social-symbolic work. At its core, this changed the perception of relationships as independent forms of work, and it recognised that this work is interconnected with the communication and physical aspects of social-symbolic work. Therefore, its focus is on multidimensional social-symbolic objects rather than relationships for the sake of relationships.

Drawing on Zelizer's (2012) notion of relational work and relational packages, Lawrence and Phillips (2019) identify three key implications of the relational dimension of social-symbolic work. First, the relational dimension is integral to all forms of social-symbolic work, as it targets every kind of social-symbolic object. While relational work often involves shaping interpersonal or inter-organisational ties, these ties may serve primarily as a means of influencing more distal symbolic objects such as norms, identities, or institutions. Much like the discursive dimension—where the creation of a text is not an end in itself but a mechanism for shaping meaning—relational practices can function instrumentally to reconfigure broader symbolic structures. Second, relationships themselves can also be constituted as social-symbolic objects in their own right. They are not merely vehicles for symbolic interaction but targets of work that

are simultaneously discursive, relational, and material. In this sense, symbolic work may focus explicitly on constructing, sustaining, or transforming particular forms of relationships, whether between individuals, organisations, or communities. Third, the relational dimension extends beyond individuals working on their own ties. Because social-symbolic work is defined by its object rather than by the actor, relational work can involve collective actors such as organisations, networks, or communities seeking to shape others' relationships. This highlights that the relational dimension is not confined to micro-level interpersonal dynamics but also encompasses meso- and macro-level processes in which actors strategically configure, stabilise, or disrupt connections across wider systems.

2.7.4.3 The Material Dimension

Finally, the material dimension of SSW encompasses its tangible facets, including space, material inputs, final products, and the human body. Similar to the discursive and relational aspects, this dimension is an integral part of all instances of social-symbolic work, rather than existing alone or sporadically. The discursive and relational dimensions of social-symbolic work have implications for a material dimension. Discourse is contingent upon the physicality of written texts and the mechanisms by which they are created and consumed. Relationships are contingent on the medium through which they are discussed and carried out, whether in person or in a virtual setting (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

While considering the material aspect of social-symbolic work, it is crucial to analyse the connection between materiality and determinism/voluntarism as perspectives on human action. The focus on materialism is frequently associated with a determinist standpoint; however, this association is not obligatory. The main focus in the material

dimension of social-symbolic work relies on an understanding of humanity that acknowledges the possibility of voluntarism. In essence, the material dimension concerns how humans utilise infrastructures, technologies, and other components of the physical environment. (Monteiro and Nicolini, 2015; Raviola and Norbäck, 2013).

Recently, several authors have argued that objects and material arrangements should be incorporated into studies of social and organisational phenomena (Carlile et al., 2013; Latour, 2005; Leonardi et al., 2012; Orlikowski and Scott, 2008; Pickering, 2010). These scholars emphasise the significant impact of materials on social phenomena and often express concern with the idea that physical and nonhuman elements merely function as social symbols. Instead of restricting them to simple "carriers of meanings" (Pels et al., 2002), these authors propose that materials actively participate in creating and maintaining social structures. This involves moving beyond the view that sees objects as passive entities that only acquire significance symbolically. Instead, it requires recognising the ability of objects, spaces, technology, and other physical elements to genuinely influence social interactions and relationships. For example, X-ray machines and modern magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans used by radiologists are not merely symbolic representations of an occupational community. They are vital components that enable activities to occur and serve as focal points around which interaction and social relationships develop (Knorr and Ng, 1997).

Linking this example with the definition of ‘work’ proposed by Lawrence and Phillips (2019) highlights that their framework is multifaceted and emphasises patterns of action rather than specific individuals. Therefore, it permits the potential for various kinds of labour to be allocated among different individuals, either intentionally or by an unspoken allocation of tasks, and for individuals to transition between different forms

of work. Similar to other practice-based methodologies, their framework emphasises a process-oriented approach, where different types of work can be distributed among various actors over time. This allows for a longitudinal and dynamic perspective on the micro-processes that comprise organisational decisions and strategies.

Social-symbolic work is highly suitable for this research because it offers a strong theoretical framework to explore how NGOs create, maintain, and reshape meaning in their efforts to engage communities through co-production. Since co-production and social accountability are not simply technical processes but are deeply rooted in symbolic narratives, identities, and relationships, SSW helps reveal how NGOs utilise discursive, relational, and material practices to influence roles, norms, and expectations. This perspective is particularly relevant in development contexts, such as Bangladesh, where legitimacy, participation, and trust are often negotiated through both symbolic and practical actions. By examining the meaning-making processes behind co-production, Social-symbolic work allows this study to investigate how NGOs mobilise community engagement and build accountability beyond formal mechanisms.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the complex and evolving body of literature on NGOs' developmental roles, accountability mechanisms, and co-production practices, and has positioned these within broader theoretical debates on social-symbolic work. The review reveals that NGOs hold a paradoxical position in development: while they are celebrated as essential intermediaries capable of reaching marginalised groups and fostering social innovation, they are also criticised for their involvement with donor-driven agendas, technocratic accountability systems, and neoliberal logics that may undermine their transformative potential and lead to mission drift. This duality

underscores the ongoing tension between NGOs' normative commitments to empowerment and rights-based advocacy and the practical imperatives of survival, efficiency, and compliance.

The discussion of accountability mechanisms revealed a clear imbalance between upward accountability to donors, regulators, and international partners, on the one hand, and social accountability, which requires NGOs to respond meaningfully to the voices, needs, and rights of their beneficiaries, on the other. While scholars increasingly advocate for participatory and relational approaches that embed accountability within grassroots practices, the literature also indicates that social accountability often remains symbolic or procedural. This disjuncture highlights the need to explore how accountability can move beyond tokenistic feedback loops and instead foster dialogic, emancipatory practices that recognise beneficiaries as active rights-claimants rather than passive recipients of NGOs' services.

In this context, the literature on co-production provides an essential conceptual link. Co-production expands participation into a deeper form of collaboration, allowing communities to co-commission, co-design, co-deliver, and co-assess services. However, as this chapter has demonstrated, the realisation of co-production is inconsistent and influenced by institutional logics, resource limitations, and entrenched power imbalances. While scholars have argued that co-production can enhance social accountability by redistributing power and promoting shared ownership, there remains a significant empirical gap in understanding how this process can be practically integrated into NGO practices and daily interactions.

Much of the existing research remains theoretical or confined to specific sectors, offering limited insights into how co-production can be translated from rhetoric into

sustainable, accountable relationships. This gap underscores the central purpose of this study: to empirically examine how co-production is utilised within NGOs as a tool for fostering social accountability through the perspective of social-symbolic work. Especially in contexts such as Bangladesh, where participatory rhetoric may conceal donor dominance, power disparities, and deeply embedded socio-cultural norms, understanding how NGOs embed co-production in practice is crucial for reshaping social accountability relationships, building trust, and strengthening community agency.

The chapter has also emphasised the interpretive and symbolic dimensions of accountability and co-production by adopting a social-symbolic lens. This theoretical framework highlights how NGOs actively construct meaning, legitimacy, and identity through discursive, relational, and material practices. By foregrounding these symbolic processes, the review underscores that accountability is not merely a technical exercise of reporting or compliance but also a socially mediated process of meaning-making, negotiation, and legitimation. This insight is particularly salient in development contexts characterised by fragile institutions, contested legitimacy, and asymmetrical power relations, where NGOs must continuously (re)construct their role as legitimate intermediaries between donors and communities.

In summary, the literature emphasises both the opportunities and limitations of NGOs' accountability practices and their co-productive engagements with communities. It indicates that genuine accountability cannot be achieved solely through upward reporting systems or superficial participatory mechanisms but requires deeper processes of co-production that are symbolically and materially embedded in organisational routines and community relations. This provides a foundation for the

present study, which aims to investigate how NGOs in Bangladesh mobilise co-production as a form of social-symbolic work to institutionalise accountability, negotiate legitimacy, and strengthen community agency. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how NGOs can reconcile their complex accountability relationships and re-centre beneficiaries within the development practice they construct. The next chapter situates this investigation within its empirical context, outlining the socio-political environment of Bangladesh, the evolution of its NGO sector, through which these dynamics are analysed.

Chapter 3

Research Context

3.1 Introduction

This chapter sets the foundational context for the study, through which the research questions are explored. It focuses on Bangladesh, where NGOs have played a central role in development since the country's independence in 1971. Operating within fragile governance, ongoing poverty, and environmental vulnerability, NGOs have been vital in providing services and influencing development outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2020; Banks et al., 2024; Chowdhury et al., 2020; Lewis, 2017). Bangladesh's scale and international recognition make it a compelling case for examining how NGOs organise their work, engage communities, and handle accountability across local, national, and global levels (Baser and Hasnath, 2022).

The country hosts one of the world's largest NGO sectors, including globally recognised organisations such as BRAC, Grameen Bank, and ASA, alongside thousands of smaller community-based groups (Barai, 2020; Chowdhury et al., 2020; Khandker et al., 2016; Lewis, 2017). These organisations have advanced efforts in poverty reduction, education, health, microfinance, and gender equality, often filling gaps left by limited state capacity and weak institutions (Bala, 2020; Banks et al., 2024). From relief and rehabilitation efforts in the 1970s to today's multi-sector Programmes, NGOs have become embedded in rural and urban communities, shaping livelihoods and social transformation (Banerjee et al., 2020; Barai, 2020; Lewis, 2017).

However, the environment in which NGOs operate remains challenging. Recurring authoritarianism, fragile democratic institutions, and widespread corruption weaken

transparent governance (Sawada et al., 2018). These vulnerabilities are linked to climate change, frequent natural disasters, and deep-seated poverty that continue to destabilise livelihoods (Mojid, 2020; Mondal, 2019; Shammi et al., 2022). In this context, NGOs are essential providers of vital services, but their accountability practices are affected by donor dependence, restrictive regulation, and hierarchical organisational cultures (Ahmed et al., 2023).

Despite their achievements, NGOs' approaches to participation and accountability remain under debate. Beneficiaries are often seen as aid recipients rather than partners, and participation is frequently symbolic (Tanima et al., 2020; Taufiq, 2021). Accountability mechanisms mainly focus upwards to donors and regulators, while downward accountability to communities is limited (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Rahman, 2023). This imbalance creates a paradox: NGOs wield significant influence yet struggle to institutionalise participatory practices that enable communities to shape interventions. This tension underscores the need to investigate whether co-production can improve NGO accountability in Bangladesh. By involving communities as active partners in the design, delivery, and evaluation of services, co-production offers a way to rebalance accountability, enhance responsiveness, and foster more democratic and inclusive development.

3.2 Bangladesh: A Paradox of Development

Bangladesh's development achievements over the past five decades are widely recognised as remarkable. The country has made significant progress in reducing poverty, promoting economic growth, and enhancing social development, becoming

one of the fastest-growing economies in the Global South. However, this progress coexists with persistent governance weaknesses, democratic fragility, and growing inequalities—creating what scholars describe as a *paradox of development without democracy* (Barai, 2020; Blair, 2020). Despite notable successes in education, health, agriculture, and women's empowerment, institutional accountability, transparency, and citizen participation remain limited (Hossain, 2017; Riaz, 2016). Bangladesh's impressive socio-economic transformation has not been matched by equivalent progress in political or institutional reform. The state continues to struggle with maintaining democratic institutions, ensuring good governance, managing political unrest, and addressing the severe impacts of climate change (Shammi et al., 2022). Although the country now ranks within the lower-middle-income bracket of global GNI, ongoing weaknesses in political accountability and institutional stability continue to hinder equitable and sustainable development (Rahman and Masud-All-Kamal, 2024).

This disjunction between economic advancement and weak governance underscores the complexity of Bangladesh's development trajectory and provides a critical backdrop for understanding the country's dependence on NGOs, their accountability challenges, and the potential for co-production to foster more inclusive and participatory forms of development. Within this paradox of rapid economic growth and fragile governance, NGOs have become indispensable actors in Bangladesh's development landscape.

Between 1974 and 1991, the nation experienced a tumultuous period of military rule characterised by coups, assassinations, and martial law. Following the reestablishment of parliamentary democracy in 1991, governance initially improved; however, dysfunction soon re-emerged. Authoritarian tendencies have become

increasingly entrenched, raising questions about the extent to which Bangladesh's socio-economic progress could be strengthened under a more transparent and accountable political system (Khondker, 2025).

The "July Movement" of 2024 represents a pivotal episode in Bangladesh's ongoing struggle for democratic rights and freedom of expression (Siddik, 2024). Rising amid political repression, this movement united citizens, intellectuals, and activists in opposition to authoritarian rule and the decline of civil liberties. It symbolised both widespread discontent with autocratic leadership and a collective demand for a more inclusive and participatory political system (Ahmad, 2025; Alam et al., 2025).

Political unrest, corruption, livelihood instability, and the worsening climate crisis all contribute to the significant vulnerabilities facing Bangladesh. The country's predominantly agricultural economy depends heavily on its coastal region, which covers 47,201 km²—about 32% of the nation's landmass across 19 districts (Blair, 2020; Rahman and Masud-All-Kamal, 2025). Frequent natural and human-induced disasters such as floods, cyclones, storms, droughts, river erosion, and environmental degradation continue to impede development progress (Hossain and Paul, 2018). Increasing climatic variability, coupled with environmental issues like soil and water salinisation, has heightened agricultural vulnerabilities and weakened rural livelihoods (Hoque et al., 2022).

Adding to these existing vulnerabilities, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted Bangladesh's development trajectory, slowing economic growth and reversing poverty reduction for the first time in two decades (Hossain, 2021). With limited fiscal capacity to support its large population, the country's key economic sectors—including ready-made garments, remittances, agriculture, and local entrepreneurship—were severely

affected (Alam et al., 2020; Sakamoto, 2020). These intertwined vulnerabilities underscore the urgent need for robust governance and accountability mechanisms, particularly those involving NGOs, which continue to play a vital role in service delivery and community resilience (Lewis, 2017).

3.3 Structures and Functioning of NGOs in Bangladesh

Within Bangladesh's paradox of rapid development and weak governance, NGOs have emerged as key actors in delivering essential services, promoting social welfare, and addressing gaps in state capacity. Their widespread presence reflects both the state's reliance on non-state actors and the growing institutionalisation of NGO activity within formal governance structures. However, the ways in which NGOs are organised, regulated, and funded are deeply influenced by Bangladesh's political and bureaucratic environment, which in turn affects their autonomy and accountability relationships. This section examines the institutional frameworks that govern NGO operations in Bangladesh, with a focus on GO–NGO partnerships and the regulation of foreign funding as important factors shaping NGO accountability and community participation.

3.3.1 GO-NGO Partnership

In line with current global trends of streamlining the state's role, the Bangladeshi government has embraced the GO-NGO partnership to promote sustainable development for the country (SDGs Progress Report, 2025). A GO–NGO partnership signifies the institutional collaboration between Government Organisations (GOs) and NGOs in designing, financing, and delivering development Programmes and public services (Siddiiquee and Faroqi, 2016). These partnerships are founded on the

recognition that, although governments hold the formal responsibility for providing welfare and safeguarding citizens' rights, NGOs often have greater flexibility, grassroots outreach, and innovative service delivery approaches (Lewis, 2010; Banks et al., 2015). Instead of working independently, the partnership model highlights complementarities: the state provides legitimacy, policy frameworks, and sometimes resources, while NGOs contribute community trust, local knowledge, and Programme-specific expertise.

In Bangladesh, GO–NGO partnerships gained prominence in the post-independence period when the newly formed state lacked the institutional capacity to deliver essential services. Over time, these collaborations have been formalised across sectors, including primary education, health, microfinance, disaster management, and women's empowerment (Nair, 2011; Barai, 2020). In many developing nations, the limitations of the public sector are often linked to resource shortages, lack of expertise, weak political commitment, and limited human capital (Barai, 2020). Consequently, NGOs have emerged as effective alternative actors in delivering vital services to poor and marginalised populations, especially in areas such as health, education, and poverty alleviation (Lewis, 2017). Bangladesh exemplifies this global pattern, in which the relationship between GOs and NGOs has evolved, transitioning from an initial reliance on NGOs for post-war relief and rehabilitation to more structured collaboration in long-term development initiatives (Nair, 2011).

However, these partnerships are heavily influenced by Bangladesh's political and bureaucratic environment. The highly centralised and hierarchical nature of the state bureaucracy often enforces cumbersome regulations, such as through the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), which limits NGOs' autonomy and delays Programme

implementation (Karim, 2016). This is the main regulatory body of the government, established in 1990 under the Prime Minister's Office. Alongside the bureaucratic government systems, widespread political corruption and clientelism foster an environment where accountability is primarily directed upwards to donors and state regulators, rather than downwards to the communities NGOs serve (Blair, 2020; Ahmed et al., 2023). In practice, NGOs often need to navigate their space within a climate of political patronage and state control, which deters them from engaging in sensitive areas such as rights advocacy or government oversight. Consequently, while GO–NGO partnerships are seen as a means to promote Bangladesh's socio-economic development, they also perpetuate accountability imbalances, restricting communities' ability to participate meaningfully in decision-making and to hold either the state or NGOs to account (Ahmed et al., 2023; Tanima et al., 2020; Taufiq, 2021).

3.3.2 Government Regulations of NGO Funding in Bangladesh

A key aspect of the institutional setting for NGOs in Bangladesh is the highly centralised system of government regulation that oversees the receipt and utilisation of foreign funding. Since most NGOs depend on international donors for their operations, government rules and procedures for accessing and reporting on these funds significantly influence the sector's autonomy, priorities, and accountability practices. All NGOs wishing to receive foreign assistance must first register with the NGO Affairs Bureau and then seek approval for each project involving external funding (Nair, 2011). Registration entails submitting extensive documentation, including the organisation's constitution, details of the governing board, audit systems, and proposed development plans. Once registered, NGOs are required to submit project proposals for review and approval. These are often scrutinised not only by NGOAB but

also by relevant line ministries, depending on the sector of intervention, such as health, education, or environment (Siddiqui and Faroqi, 2016).

Beyond approval, the release of foreign funds is strictly regulated. All donor resources must be channelled through designated bank accounts authorised by NGOAB, and disbursements can only occur after clearance. NGOs are further required to submit quarterly and annual reports, covering both financial expenditure and Programme implementation, and these must be supplemented with external audits (Transparency International Bangladesh, 2018). This regulatory framework is intended to ensure accountability and transparency in the use of foreign funds (Haque and Ali, 2011). However, it has also created significant bureaucratic bottlenecks that delay project implementation and increase transaction costs for NGOs (Lewis, 2017).

The regulatory environment has become more restrictive under the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2016, which consolidated state oversight and introduced stricter penalties for non-compliance. The Act requires NGOs to obtain prior approval for all foreign contributions and prohibits activities that the state deems “political” or “against national interests” (Taufiq, 2021). While framed as necessary for transparency, this law has been widely criticised for curbing NGO autonomy, particularly for those engaged in human rights advocacy, election monitoring, or governance reforms.

These layers of control reflect a broader political context characterised by bureaucratic centralisation and systemic corruption. NGOs often need to navigate patronage networks and political sensitivities to secure approvals or avoid sanctions. Consequently, accountability is distorted upwards to donors and state regulators, while social accountability to local communities is undermined (Ahmed et al., 2023; Blair,

2020). In practice, NGOs face strong incentives to meet reporting requirements and maintain political neutrality rather than promote participatory mechanisms or challenge governance deficits. Therefore, while government regulation of NGO funding was intended to increase oversight, it has paradoxically reinforced accountability imbalances and limited the space for NGOs to act as independent agents of social change. These characteristics ensure that, although NGOs are deeply embedded in Bangladesh's social fabric and have become essential to its development trajectory, the country's systems also restrict their capacity for democratic participation and social accountability (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Lewis, 2017; Pervez and Haque, 2020). While the institutional and regulatory environment defines the formal parameters of NGO accountability in Bangladesh, the realisation of social accountability is also profoundly shaped by the nation's socio-political, economic, and cultural context. The following section examines the broader societal barriers that hinder community participation and limit the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms in practice.

3.4 Barriers to Social Accountability

While institutional and regulatory constraints shape the formal accountability frameworks of NGOs in Bangladesh, socio-political, economic, and cultural dynamics at the community level present equally significant challenges. Social accountability depends on meaningful involvement of citizens in decision-making processes; however, deeply rooted hierarchies, power imbalances, and entrenched social norms often restrict such participation. In Bangladesh, marginalised groups, particularly the poor, women, and ethnic minorities, frequently lack the resources, confidence, or platforms to voice their concerns and hold NGOs or state actors accountable. These social realities hinder the development of genuine social accountability and reinforce

a culture of dependency, where beneficiaries are seen as passive recipients rather than active partners in development initiatives (Taufiq, 2021). The following subsections delve into these barriers in greater depth, examining the socio-political, economic, and cultural factors that hinder the practice of social accountability in Bangladesh.

3.4.1 Socio-political Barriers to Social Accountability

Social accountability is part of the broader discourse on public accountability. It emphasises three key elements: transparency, accountability, and participation, which are vital for good governance (Sarker and Rahman, 2015). NGOs' social accountability is crucial in ensuring that service providers are transparent, responsive, and answerable to their beneficiaries. In Bangladesh, major barriers to NGOs' social accountability include a lack of transparency, undemocratic political environments, corruption, social hierarchies, and cultural norms (Naher et al.,2020).

In Bangladesh, where bureaucracy and legislation operate with limited effective accountability and checks and balances, conventional horizontal or vertical accountability has shown notable shortcomings. Due to these flawed mechanisms, ordinary citizens' access to information is restricted, and their voices remain unheard (Taufiq, 2021). The regulatory framework overseeing NGOs in Bangladesh is quite inadequate. Despite the requirement for NGOs to register with entities such as the NGOAB, monitoring their activities, especially concerning accountability, remains insufficient (Islam and Morgan, 2012). Inconsistent enforcement further contributes to systemic failures. Although regulations exist, their application is frequently inconsistent. Mir and Bala (2015) argued that the NGOAB often approves only specific projects and activities that advance the political interests of the ruling party, thereby

allowing certain NGOs to operate with less oversight of their social accountability responsibilities.

A lack of trust in power figures presents another significant obstacle. Widespread corruption in Bangladesh erodes trust among citizens, public institutions, and NGOs (Ahmed et al., 2023; Islam and Mahmud, 2015). These issues lead to potential abuses by the government, NGOs, and those in power (Ahmed et al., 2023; Taufiq, 2021). As a result, people show less interest in their rights and have limited knowledge of what a modern, democratic nation entails (Islam and Islam, 2016). When individuals see public officials as corrupt, they are less likely to participate in accountability initiatives, believing their efforts will not bring about meaningful change. The lack of accountability measures makes citizens hesitant to engage in processes they fear might be ignored or exploited.

Broader patterns of repression, such as media censorship under the Digital Security Act 2018 and restrictions on civil liberties, have eroded civic space and hindered NGO facilitation of public debate (Deegan and Islam, 2014; 2025). In such contexts, NGOs often self-censor or avoid accountability initiatives that require open dialogue or challenge power structures. The erosion of civic space has also transformed how NGOs in Bangladesh manage their accountability relationships. While donors and international partners frequently encourage NGOs to promote transparency, rights, and citizen voice, restrictive laws such as the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2016 and the Digital Security Act 2018 have fostered a climate of surveillance and control (Taufiq, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2023). In this environment, NGOs tend to prioritise compliance with state regulations and donor reporting requirements to safeguard their operational legitimacy, often at the expense of fostering participatory

mechanisms at the community level. Fear of reprisal or project suspension discourages NGOs from organising public hearings, citizen scorecards, or other accountability forums that may be seen as politically sensitive (Ullah, 2023). Consequently, the scope for social accountability narrows, reinforcing a cycle in which beneficiaries are regarded as passive recipients rather than empowered partners with NGOs. All these prominent factors undermine the concept of social accountability, as recipients are not seen as equal partners (Rahman, 2023; Niederberger, and Glanville-Wallis, 2019).

3.4.2 Socio-economic Barriers to Social Accountability

The social accountability of NGOs in Bangladesh encounters various obstacles due to the country's socio-economic context. Extreme inequality and poverty pose significant challenges to social accountability (Ahmed et al., 2023; Sarker and Rahman, 2015; Rahman, 2023). Poverty has not been measured solely through income or consumption approaches; instead, it is a multidimensional issue that encompasses education, health, housing, environmental risks, gender disparities, and social exclusion (Sen 1982; 1983). These deprivations affect social, psychological, cultural, political, and participatory indicators that reveal the true face of poverty. The concept of poverty has shifted from a physiological framework to a social paradigm, as Sen (1981) describes in his 'capacity approach' (CA), which considers vulnerability, inequality, and human rights. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), introduced by the UNDP in 2010, promotes a more comprehensive approach to studying poverty. In 2023, UNDP’s MPI identified health, education, and living standards as the key variables measuring poverty status. Recent academic literature has broadened the variables of poverty by including social, political, cultural, and empowerment concepts

(Chowdhury and Mukhopadhaya, 2014). To address the multidimensionality of poverty in Bangladesh, these authors broadly and clearly define it as ‘the inability or less ability to participate in society, economically, socially, culturally, and politically.’

Due to the multidimensional impact of poverty, a significant portion of the grassroots population in Bangladesh struggles with daily survival. This focus on earning a livelihood and fulfilling basic needs limits their ability to participate in the accountability mechanisms of NGOs actively. They may also lack access to essential resources, such as transportation and time, which makes sustained engagement difficult (Islam, 2017). More generally, inadequate living conditions, limited employment and economic opportunities, and vulnerability to climate change and frequent natural disasters affect people's lives and demotivate grassroots populations to participate in NGO accountability processes (Ahmed et al., 2023; Mukherjee and Mukherjee, 2018). However, it is clear that NGOs are recognised for fostering local participation, as they are generally more locally rooted and therefore closer to marginalised people than most officials. Nevertheless, due to the lack of livelihood security, beneficiaries tend to be passive recipients of NGOs' services rather than actively engaging in development interventions and accountability procedures (Islam and Morgan, 2012).

3.4.3 Socio-cultural Barriers to Social Accountability

The hierarchical social structure is a major obstacle to social accountability. In Bangladeshi culture, respect for authority is deeply rooted, often discouraging individuals from questioning or challenging power figures (Ahmed et al., 2023). The social hierarchy also acts as a barrier, as marginalised groups such as low-income and lower-caste individuals, along with ethnic minorities, have less access to platforms that enable them to voice concerns or hold officials accountable (Hossain et al., 2016).

Regarding NGOs, the power imbalance between NGOs and beneficiaries significantly hampers social accountability in Bangladesh. NGOs often adopt a top-down approach in project planning and implementation, where NGO personnel make decisions without meaningful input from beneficiaries (Tanima et al., 2023; Taufiq, 2021). Furthermore, the grassroots population frequently perceives that NGOs possess superior knowledge and expertise, while beneficiaries are regarded as passive recipients rather than active participants (Taufiq, 2021). The traditional role of NGOs, their monolithic development approach, and lack of accountability also play a crucial role in shaping social accountability mechanisms in Bangladesh (Islam, 2016). Among global pressures, limited local funding, heavy dependence on foreign donors, international development frameworks, and centralised administrative systems, along with hierarchical practices, are also significant (Chowdhury et al., 2020; Islam and Islam, 2016).

Grassroots communities in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas, face significant educational challenges, particularly for women. Low literacy levels and limited awareness of participatory approaches often lead to a limited understanding of accountability mechanisms and the benefits of community involvement (Niederberger and Glanville-Wallis, 2019; Hasnain and Jasimuddin, 2012). Although global commitments exist to work with people affected by various crises or vulnerabilities and to strengthen accountability mechanisms, in many cases, NGO community participation remains a mere “add-on," a non-essential element that is deprioritised when delivery pressures intensify (Niederberger and Glanville-Wallis, 2019). Frequently, NGOs' roles have shifted towards solely providing goods or services to poor ‘consumers’ rather than acting as ‘facilitators’ of collective action and

empowerment (Islam, 2016). This increasing focus on service delivery Programmes within NGOs poses challenges to the goals of community participation, empowerment of vulnerable communities, and poverty eradication. The lack of a shared understanding of accountability among grassroots populations also hampers NGOs' accountability procedures in Bangladesh. To consolidate the preceding discussion, Table 3.1 summarises the key socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural barriers to social accountability and illustrates how these interconnected constraints shape NGOs' accountability practices in Bangladesh.

Table 3.1: Socio-cultural Dynamics Shaping NGO Accountability in Bangladesh

Category	Core Challenges	Implications for NGO Accountability
Socio-political	- Weak democratic institutions and bureaucratic centralisation - Corruption and patronage networks - Restrictive laws (e.g., Foreign Donations Act 2016, Digital Security Act 2018) - Shrinking civic space and self-censorship	- Accountability directed upward to donors and regulators rather than downward to communities - NGOs avoid politically sensitive issues or advocacy - Limited transparency and community oversight

Socio-economic	- Pervasive poverty and inequality - Limited access to education, employment, and infrastructure - Climate-related vulnerabilities and livelihood insecurity	- Beneficiaries prioritise survival over participation - Resource constraints hinder engagement in accountability forums - Communities remain dependent on NGO service delivery
Socio-cultural	- Hierarchical social norms and deference to authority - Gender inequality and marginalisation of minorities - Low literacy and limited awareness of rights - Perception of NGOs as superior experts	- Participation becomes symbolic or procedural - Beneficiaries lack confidence to question NGOs - Downward accountability mechanisms remain weak

Table 3.1 summarises the socio-political, socio-economic, and socio-cultural barriers that restrict social accountability in Bangladesh. These interlinked constraints illustrate how structural, economic, and cultural factors converge to weaken participatory mechanisms within NGO practice.

3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Bangladesh offers a uniquely fertile environment for studying co-production and social accountability in NGOs. Despite numerous barriers to social accountability, NGOs in Bangladesh have played a vital role in the country's development by tackling various socio-economic challenges, particularly in areas such as poverty eradication, education, health, women's empowerment, climate change, and disaster management. The country combines one of the world's largest and most influential NGO sectors with a history of fragile governance, deeply rooted social hierarchies, and widespread accountability gaps. NGOs are recognised for their innovations in service delivery and development achievements; however, their accountability frameworks remain primarily focused upward towards donors and regulators, with limited engagement with communities and beneficiaries. Meanwhile, socio-cultural obstacles like elite dominance, gender inequalities, and weak traditions of participatory governance continue to hinder citizens' ability to act as equal partners in development. These paradoxes—remarkable development progress alongside limited democratic participation and accountability—make Bangladesh a particularly fascinating context for exploring whether co-production can help rebalance power, amplify community voices, and embed meaningful social accountability within NGO practices. Building on this contextual foundation, Chapter 4 examines the methodological framework through which this study explores how co-production can reshape NGO accountability in Bangladesh.

Chapter 4

Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines and justifies the methodological choices that underpin this research. Specifically, it details the strategies used for data collection, the opportunities and challenges encountered during fieldwork, and the analytical methods employed to interpret the data. Building on earlier discussions, the primary objective of the study is to investigate how co-production can serve as a mechanism to enhance social accountability within the NGO sector, particularly in emerging economies such as Bangladesh. The research examines how participatory practices are integrated into NGOs' operational strategies and symbolic (material, discursive and relational) processes, and how these practices contribute to creating more inclusive, transparent, and accountable forms of development. It also examines how NGOs interact with beneficiaries and communities through meaningful collaboration, the challenges they encounter, and alternative approaches that may foster deeper participation and shared responsibility.

To address these aims and questions, the study employs a qualitative, interpretivist research design, utilising an in-depth, single-case study approach. This design facilitates a comprehensive exploration of how co-production and social accountability are practised and experienced within a real-world organisational context. The case of BRAC's Climate Change Programme (CCP) in Bangladesh was selected because it offers a particularly rich and illustrative setting for examining how participatory

development and accountability processes are implemented in practice. The choice of case, along with its justification, is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

The inquiry is guided by a set of research questions aimed at clarifying the roles of beneficiaries and communities in co-production, how such engagement addresses social needs, and how these processes enhance accountability structures within NGOs. The methodological framework is grounded in the theoretical perspective of social-symbolic work, which emphasises the material, discursive, and relational practices through which organisations negotiate meaning, legitimacy, and accountability. This framework provides a foundation for understanding how NGOs, such as BRAC, engage in both operational and symbolic activities to establish accountability relationships with the communities they serve. The rest of this chapter is organised as follows: firstly, I provide a detailed account of the methodological design and rationale; secondly, I describe the data collection procedures; thirdly, I discuss the challenges and opportunities encountered in the field; and finally, I outline the analytic strategy used to interpret the data.

4.2 Methods of Data Collection

To align with the research objectives, I employed a qualitative interpretivist approach, based on a single, in-depth instrumental case study (McNabb, 2010, p. 48). In qualitative research, data collection methods are shaped by various internal factors, such as organisational cultures, policies, and environments, as well as external factors including national culture, social beliefs, religious ideologies, political views, economic conditions, and the historical context relevant to the research project (Huberman and

Miles, 2002; McClelland, 1995; Strauss, 1987). The methodological approach is characterised by several features (Creswell and Poth, 2016).

Firstly, it considers a comprehensive view of the study context. Secondly, it replaces standardised instruments with the researcher as the primary tool to capture participants' perspectives. Thirdly, it focuses on analysing words and other forms of representation rather than relying on numerical data to uncover meaning through identifying themes, gaps, and patterns. Lastly, it aims to produce a compelling understanding of the phenomenon under study, taking into account the theoretical assumptions used and adhering to established standards of quality (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Miles et al., 2014). Qualitative research methodology provides a deeper understanding of the processes and meanings related to a phenomenon in real-life contexts (Pratt, 2009; Rynes and Gephart, 2004), offering valuable insights that are often difficult to obtain through numerical data. Therefore, it has the potential to bring new insights and depth of understanding to the research questions that define the field (Barzelay, 1993; Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Alawattage et al. (2017) recommended that, to undertake qualitative research, researchers should consider the three "overlapping and interrelated acts" of contextualising (i.e., locating an accounting phenomenon within its relevant cultural, political, and institutional setting), historicising (i.e., from micro-histories to macro-histories that trace how "things" have changed in micro-organisational contexts), and explaining these in relation to the ‘evolution’ of broader socio-political and cultural systems, as well as theorising. Theorising involves the critical act of linking empirical data to relevant theoretical frameworks with the aim of (a) ‘explaining’ local events in terms of theoretical propositions and/or (b) ‘illustrating’ how specific theoretical

propositions operate within the particular empirical context of the research (Alawattage et al., 2017). It is a methodology that can highlight the subtleties, interconnections, and conflicts among players and institutions, which are necessary given the complexity of the assistance process. Gillham (2000) emphasises that by employing qualitative approaches, a researcher may "get under the skin" of an institution.

4.2.1 Case Study Method

For this research, I selected the single-case study method as the primary research approach. A single-case method is deliberate and grounded in theory, rather than chosen for convenience (Yin, 2013). The single-case design has long been recognised as a valuable approach in public administration research (Barzelay, 1993), as it provides rich, contextually detailed insights into organisational practices and decision-making. It is especially suitable when the case represents a critical, extreme, or revealing example that offers deep insights into a phenomenon, adopting an in-depth, contextually focused approach to understanding complex social phenomena (Patton, 2014). Case study research is notably effective for exploring “how” and “why” questions (Yin, 2013, 2018), as it allows the researcher to observe processes as they occur naturally. Since the main aim of this study is to capture the richness, nuance, and dynamism of these practices, a case study design offers the necessary methodological flexibility.

Although the term "case study" is used in various contexts, its main distinguishing features are that it involves multiple viewpoints (whether through one or more data collection methods) and is rooted in a specific context considered essential for understanding the topic under investigation (Ritchie et al., 2013). Case studies are

particularly valuable as they provide the opportunity to describe the circumstances surrounding a particular case over time in a detailed manner. According to Stake (2010), case studies in social science are "complex, holistic, and involve a range of not highly isolated variables." The present study supports this view. Through an in-depth case study, I was able to contextualise and capture workers' and stakeholders' ideas, emotions, actions, and connections (Woodside, 2010). The interpretive, experiential, situational, and personalistic nature of this approach aligns with what is regarded as the core of qualitative research (Stake, 2011).

4.2.2 Access the Field for Data Collection

The research was conducted within the context of BRAC International, a Bangladesh-based international NGO that provides an ideal setting for examining the intersection of co-production and social accountability. As a Bangladeshi national and former NGO practitioner, I was well-positioned to access the organisation and navigate its cultural and institutional environment. My previous professional experience and networks facilitated initial contact with potential research sites and helped build trust with key stakeholders; however, these factors were supportive rather than determinative in case selection. Initial outreach to several NGOs—carried out both formally and informally through professional contacts—primarily aimed to map the sector's landscape and assess the suitability of potential cases relative to the study’s objectives. Guided by the theoretical framework and in consultation with my supervisors, BRAC was ultimately identified as the most suitable and analytically valuable case for this research.

The choice of BRAC was mainly motivated by theoretical and methodological reasons rather than convenience or availability. As one of the world's largest and most influential NGOs, BRAC offers a comprehensive empirical context for exploring how co-production is carried out within complex, multi-layered accountability systems. Its longstanding presence in Bangladesh, combined with its hybrid model of service delivery and advocacy, along with extensive engagement with grassroots communities, makes it particularly suitable for examining how participatory development practices are embedded within organisational systems and culture.

Access to the field was initiated in October 2022. I contacted BRAC's research department by phone, and they advised me to contact the Programme Director and the Programme Head of the Climate Change Programme (CCP). Following their advice, I first emailed the CCP Director, who responded promptly. The Director arranged an online Zoom meeting to discuss my research aims and plans, as well as the type of support I was seeking. We held several Zoom meetings to discuss my study requirements, plans, the research population, and other support needed during data collection. The Director and the Programme Head kindly agreed to allow me to conduct my research with their CCP and introduced me to the Programme Manager, Deputy Manager from the Head Office, the Project Manager from the Mongla Branch Office, and the Liaison Officer. They also provided details about the branch's location and facilities. Subsequently, I contacted them directly via email and WhatsApp. To keep them informed, I sent a copy of my project information sheet so they could gain a clear understanding of my research and the assistance I might require from them.

By December 2022, initial communications and logistical preparations had been completed through a mix of email exchanges, Zoom meetings, and WhatsApp

correspondence. Negotiating access required balancing BRAC's organisational priorities with the research schedule, as well as building trust and clarifying the study's purpose and potential benefits to the organisation. These early interactions played a crucial role in establishing rapport with key stakeholders and obtaining the necessary institutional permissions. The detailed fieldwork for the case study officially began in May 2023, providing adequate time for relationship-building and ensuring data collection aligned with critical phases of Programme implementation. After securing institutional access and establishing rapport with BRAC staff, it was important to explain why BRAC—and specifically its Climate Change Programme (CCP)—was chosen as the focus of this study. The next section, therefore, describes and justifies this choice regarding the research aims, theoretical framework, and methodological approach.

4.2.3 Case Selection: Why BRAC and CCP

The case selection procedure followed a theoretical sampling logic (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537), designed to ensure that the chosen case offered strong analytical relevance rather than statistical representativeness. The selection of BRAC was therefore purposeful and conceptually informed, guided by the study's central objective: to investigate how co-production can function as a mechanism for enhancing social accountability within NGOs operating in emerging economies.

BRAC is one of the pioneering and most influential NGOs in Bangladesh, originally established as the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee, later renamed the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, and now known as Building Resources Across Communities (Ahmed et al., 2023; Banks et al., 2024; Qayum et al.,

2024). It serves as an ideal case for studying NGO accountability and co-production for several interconnected reasons. First, BRAC's unmatched scale, longevity, and institutional maturity have made it a key player in Bangladesh's development landscape and a benchmark for other NGOs (Ahmed et al., 2023; Uddin and Belal, 2019). These features offer a rich empirical foundation for analysing how accountability and participatory mechanisms (Banks et al., 2024; Lewis and Kanji, 2009) develop within a large, complex organisation. Second, BRAC's strong focus on participatory, community-based development (Nazneen et al., 2024) directly aligns with this research's emphasis on co-production as a pathway to social accountability. The organisation's hybrid role—combining service delivery, advocacy, and social enterprise—provides a unique opportunity to explore how NGOs balance upward accountability to donors with downward accountability to beneficiaries.

However, BRAC's prominence also heightens expectations related to transparency, internal governance, and accountability within the communities it serves. As one of the world's largest NGOs, BRAC operates under constant scrutiny from multiple sources. Donors who demand measurable results and financial integrity, government agencies that regulate BRAC's activities, and communities that expect fair, participatory, and responsive development initiatives. This layered accountability environment creates both opportunities and tensions: while BRAC's scale allows it to deliver widespread social Programmes, it also risks distancing the organisation from grassroots realities. These conflicting pressures make questions about how accountability is shaped, negotiated, and maintained particularly significant.

Therefore, BRAC provides a vital context for examining how the organisation constructs its formal commitments to participation and transparency into actual work

practices. Its prominence means that even small changes in its accountability and co-production practices can have broader effects on how development legitimacy is viewed across the sector. From the perspective of social-symbolic work, BRAC's actions provide a valuable opportunity to explore how meaning, trust, and legitimacy are actively created through discourse, relationships, and institutional routines. Studying BRAC, therefore, enables a deeper understanding of how large, hybrid NGOs strive to balance their symbolic commitments to inclusivity and empowerment with the practical and procedural demands of external accountability (Ahmed et al., 2023; Mahmud et al., 2014).

Building on these considerations, it was essential to choose a specific Programme within BRAC that could exemplify the organisation's participatory and accountability practices in action. Among BRAC's many initiatives, the Climate Change Programme (CCP) was identified as the most suitable case for analysis. The CCP provides a contemporary and contextually rich platform to explore how co-production functions within a large NGO's development efforts—particularly in addressing complex, cross-cutting issues such as climate change, community resilience, and local empowerment. Its focus on community-based adaptation, participatory decision-making, and accountability to climate-vulnerable populations aligns closely with the theoretical and empirical aims of this research. The following section, therefore, explains why BRAC's CCP was chosen as the key project for this study and how it reflects the broader organisational and societal dynamics central to the research.

4.2.4 BRAC's Climate Change Programme (CCP)

Having justified selecting BRAC as the organisational case, this section explains the rationale for choosing one of its flagship initiatives, the Climate Change Programme

(CCP), as the main project for empirical investigation. The CCP was selected because it offers an analytically rich context to explore how co-production functions both as a practical and symbolic mechanism for improving social accountability in a climate-vulnerable setting.

For data collection, I selected one of CCP's projects, titled *"Enhancing Safe Drinking Water Security and Climate Resilience through Rainwater Harvesting Systems,"* in Mongla Upazila, a sub-district of Bagerhat District in south-western Bangladesh (see Appendix 1). Mongla is one of the most climate-affected areas in the country, experiencing a severe and persistent shortage of safe drinking water caused by saltwater intrusion, groundwater depletion, and an increased frequency of cyclones and tidal surges (Uddin et al., 2019). Over 60 per cent of the local population lacks access to safe water, which negatively impacts livelihoods, agriculture, and public health (Ha-Mim et al., 2020). This intersection of environmental and socio-economic vulnerabilities provides a compelling context to explore how community-driven initiatives can enhance both adaptive capacity and social accountability.

Climate change and its associated impacts are widely recognised as major obstacles to Bangladesh's socio-economic development and influence long-term growth (Huq, 2016; Sammonds et al., 2021). Ranked as the seventh most vulnerable country to climate change, Bangladesh faces increasingly challenging circumstances each day (Ahmed et al., 2015; Haque and Irvine, 2018; Haque et al., 2019). The coastal regions of Bangladesh are highly vulnerable to climate change-induced disasters such as cyclones, tidal surges, floods, river erosion, and salt intrusion (Delaporte and Maurel, 2018; Rojas, 2021). Exploring a climate change project presents an ideal subject due to its intersectional approach to addressing two of the most pressing global challenges:

water scarcity and climate change. These issues are deeply interconnected, with climate change expected to worsen droughts, floods, and water stress worldwide (IPCC, 2023). Bangladesh is particularly susceptible, experiencing recurrent flooding, salinity intrusion, and seasonal water shortages that threaten livelihoods and food security (World Bank, 2023). Studying a climate change project that addresses water scarcity within this context provides timely insights into how co-production and accountability mechanisms can enhance community resilience and adaptive capacity.

The CCP emphasises implementing sustainable rainwater harvesting systems as a locally appropriate adaptation to increasing salinity and waterborne diseases (BRAC, 2022). Funded by DANIDA through the Climate Envelope of the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the project has a total budget of 29 million DKK over three years (2022–2024), aiming to benefit around 67,300 climate-vulnerable people. BRAC manages the project according to DANIDA's accounting and auditing standards for funds channelled through local NGOs, ensuring both financial transparency and social accountability in its implementation (BRAC, 2022). Notably, the project's design incorporates participatory and collaborative mechanisms that closely follow the principles of co-production. Local communities are not merely passive recipients of support but active partners in identifying water-related issues, prioritising needs, and maintaining the rainwater systems once they are established. This participatory approach positions communities as co-producers of development solutions rather than mere beneficiaries. Consequently, accountability extends beyond formal reporting to include ongoing, dialogic forms of social accountability, where community members can voice concerns, influence decisions, and monitor project outcomes. In this way, the CCP operationalises accountability as a two-way process—upward to donors and

downward to local stakeholders—bridging both the technical and relational aspects central to co-production and inclusive governance.

CCP was chosen because it exemplifies a comprehensive, community-focused response to two of Bangladesh's most urgent development challenges—climate change and water insecurity. The Programme integrates technological innovation with participatory adaptation strategies, actively involving local beneficiaries, community leaders, and government representatives in planning, implementing, and monitoring interventions (BRAC, 2024). Beyond enhancing physical infrastructure, the CCP fosters local ownership, participatory learning, and behavioural change—key aspects of co-production.

This multidimensional and participatory design makes CCP a critically important case for examining co-production both as a process (collaborative engagement in design and implementation) and as a strategy (a means of building legitimacy and accountability). By emphasising inclusive decision-making and community empowerment, CCP offers a chance to analyse how shared responsibility and collaboration can strengthen social accountability while maintaining organisational legitimacy. From a social-symbolic perspective, the project also reveals how accountability and participation are carried out, narrated, and institutionalised through everyday practices and interactions. Studying the CCP, therefore, moves beyond simple description to provide conceptual insight into how NGOs implement co-production and embed accountability mechanisms within complex, climate-vulnerable social systems.

Therefore, the CCP serves as an ideal focal project within BRAC to explore the relationship between co-production and social accountability in practice. Its participatory ethos, multi-stakeholder structure, and governance complexity closely match the analytical objectives of this research. The following section describes the sampling methods used to identify and engage participants across the various stakeholder groups involved in the CCP.

4.2.5 Selecting the Sampling Methods for the Study

Sampling decisions are crucial in qualitative research as they determine how participants and settings are selected to align with the research aims (Burgess, 1984; Murray, 2015). Even in a single case study, choices must be made about where to focus and who to include, since it is neither practical nor necessary to capture every perspective (Robinson, 2014). For this study, I used purposive sampling to select the case of BRAC and its Climate Change Programme (CCP) based on their relevance to the research focus on co-production and social accountability. As discussed earlier, BRAC is a theoretically significant case because of its scale, participatory approach, and long-standing reputation for embedding accountability mechanisms within community-based projects (Eisenhardt, 1989; Ritchie et al., 2013). This intentional case selection ensured that the research setting provided both empirical richness and conceptual relevance for examining how NGOs operationalise co-production to strengthen social accountability.

In this case, I employed snowball sampling (Parker et al., 2019; Rapley, 2014) to identify and recruit participants for the interviews. One of the most common sampling techniques in qualitative research is snowball sampling, which relies on the principles

of networking and recommendation (Naderifar et al., 2017). Researchers typically start with a small number of initial contacts (seeds) (in my case, the CCP project staff in Mongla), who are recruited to participate because they meet the study criteria. Through their recommendations, I was introduced to other key stakeholders, Climate Action Groups (CAGs), NGO staff, community leaders, Union Parishad Chairmen and Members, community schoolteachers, and government authorities. This approach proved particularly effective in reaching participants who play informal yet essential roles in promoting participation and facilitating co-production. By following this chain-referral process, I was able to capture a range of interconnected perspectives that reflected the collaborative and relational nature of co-production.

Willing participants are then asked to suggest further contacts who meet the criteria and may be willing to take part, who in turn propose additional potential volunteers, and so forth. Hence, researchers utilise their social networks to establish initial connections and create a chain of sampling that ultimately includes a larger group of participants (Parker et al., 2019). In my case, after several weeks working with NGO staff, I requested their support in collecting data from various community groups involved with the project from the outset, even if they were not direct beneficiaries. Based on this request, they provided a list of actively involved individuals, including CAG group members (community volunteers), the Chairman and Members of the Union Parishad, CCP project officers, and staff from various CCP departments, such as training, monitoring and evaluation, and field supervision teams. Once I had finalised the sample population, I began data collection.

Using purposive sampling for case selection and snowball sampling for interviews ensured that the data collected reflected both the organisational and community

dimensions of accountability, aligning the methodological approach closely with the overall research aim of understanding how participatory practices contribute to social accountability within NGOs.

4.2.6 Ethical Approval

My research involves conducting interviews and meetings with staff from various levels of NGOs, their beneficiaries, community members, and government officials. These participants play a valuable role in the research process and should not be viewed solely as sources of data. Therefore, I obtained Ethical Approval (Appendix 2) from the University of Essex. Ethical approval review safeguards participants' well-being and also protects the researcher. By obtaining ethical approval, I aimed to demonstrate that, as a researcher, I have adhered to the recognised ethical standards of a legitimate research study. During the research process, participants have the right to be informed about who has authorised access to their data and what specific actions will be taken with it. Without ethical approval, the individual researcher bears personal responsibility for any claims made. Consequently, under my supervisors' guidance, I prepared the consent form, project information sheet, invitation letter for research participants, and open-ended interview questionnaires for NGO beneficiaries, NGO staff, community members, and government officials. All these documents were submitted to the Ethics Review and Management System (ERAMS) at the University of Essex to secure ethical approval for my data collection. After receiving approval, I finalised the plan for my data collection.

After receiving formal approval, I finalised my fieldwork plan and logistical arrangements. This involved creating interview guidelines and an interview matrix, as

well as collecting research materials such as a voice recorder, journals, and stationery for Climate Action Group (CAG) members. I then travelled to Bangladesh on 15 May 2023 to commence data collection. Upon arriving in Dhaka, I met with BRAC's Head Office staff, including the Programme Manager of the Climate Change Programme (CCP), to discuss the final arrangements for the fieldwork in Mongla.

4.3 Data Collection

Guided by the qualitative, interpretivist approach outlined earlier, the data collection strategy aimed to capture the complex dynamics of co-production and social accountability within BRAC's Climate Change Programme (CCP). To achieve a rich, comprehensive, unbiased, and contextualised understanding of this interpretative case study, multiple data collection methods were employed, including semi-structured interviews, observations, solicited diaries, and document analysis (Patton, 2002; VanWynsberghe and Khan, 2007). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse group of participants (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2), including BRAC staff, volunteers, public sector representatives, and community members. The objective was to develop a detailed, layered understanding of how these different stakeholders interact and contribute to participatory development practices, as well as their role in the co-production of climate action (Nowell and Albrecht, 2019). The following subsections describe the phases, methods, and practical steps taken during data collection.

4.3.1 Overview of the Data Collection Phases

The data collection process was carried out in two distinct phases. The first phase consisted of five weeks of intensive, in-person fieldwork in Mongla, Bangladesh, which

included semi-structured interviews, journal entries, participant observations, and various types of document analysis. The second phase involved a series of follow-up interviews conducted remotely via WhatsApp calls to clarify, verify, and expand upon themes that emerged during the initial fieldwork (Fetters et al., 2013). This multi-phase qualitative design (Creswell and Clark, 2017) offered both depth and continuity, enabling the triangulation of data sources and perspectives over time. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 summarise the sample composition, methods, and duration of interviews for each phase. Through this approach, I was able to develop a comprehensive, multi-layered understanding of how co-production and social accountability were enacted and experienced across organisational and community levels.

Table 4.1: Overview of the 1st Phase Empirical Data Collection

Quantity	Group	Index	Methods	Dates	Total time	Comments
14	Beneficiaries	Ben 1-14	Interview	23 May - 04 Jun 2023	05 h 15 min	Grassroots Population
6	CAG Members	CAG 1-6	Interview	24 May - 07 Jun 2023	02 h 50 min	Community leaders
1	Upazila Chairman	UPC	Interview	23-May-23	37 min	Elected Local Government Representative
1	Upazila Nirbahi Officer	UNO	Interview	31-May-23	20 min	Government Officer

1	Project Manager	PM	Interview	01-Jun-23	35 min	BRAC local Branch
1	Area Manager	AM	Interview	06-Jun-23	36 min	BRAC local Branch
1	Monitoring & Evaluation Officer	MEEL	Interview	06-Jun-23	28 min	BRAC local Branch
4	Project Officer	PO 1-4	Interview	07 Jun - 08 Jun 2023	02 h 30min	BRAC local Branch
2	School Teacher	ST 1-2	Interview	29-May-23	47 min	Community School
1	Deputy Manager	DM	Interview	24-May-23	29 min	BRAC Head Office Staff
1	Programme Manager	PMH	Interview	31-May-23	34 min	BRAC Head Office Staff
1	Programme Head	PH	Interview	11-Jun-23	42 min	BRAC Head Office Staff
1	Capacity Building Officer	CBO	Interview	04-Jun-23	23 min	BRAC local Branch
5	CAG Leaders	J 1-5	Journal Entry	25 May - 07 Jun 2023		Community leaders
40	-	-	35 Interviews /	23 May - 08 Jun 2023	16 h 6min	-

			5 Journal entries			

Source: Author's fieldwork, May–June 2023.

The second phase of data collection aimed to build on and deepen the insights obtained during the first phase. While the initial fieldwork in Mongla provided rich, contextually rooted data through direct engagement with community members and staff, the follow-up interviews enabled reflection, clarification, and exploration of emerging themes. Conducted several months later, these remote interviews proved especially valuable for assessing how participants' perceptions and practices changed over time and for validating earlier interpretations. This sequential approach aligns with the principles of iterative and reflexive qualitative research design, which emphasise revisiting the field to refine insights and enhance analytical depth (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). It also reflects the dynamic nature of co-production and social accountability—processes that continue to develop as relationships, trust, and contextual realities shift over time (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Table 4.2: Overview of the 2nd Phase Empirical Data Collection

Quantity	Group	Index	Methods	Dates	Total time	Comments
1	Programme Head	PH	Interview via WhatsApp call	11-Nov-23	37 min	BRAC Head Office staff

Quantity	Group	Index	Methods	Dates	Total time	Comments
2	Deputy Manager	DM	Interview via WhatsApp call	15-Nov-23 3-Feb-24	32 min 21 min	BRAC Head Office staff
1	Area Manager (Engineering Department)	AME	Interview via WhatsApp call	5-Feb-24	41 min	BRAC local branch
1	Project Manager	PM	Interview via WhatsApp call	10-Jan-24	53 min	BRAC local branch
1	Specialist, Advocacy and Knowledge Development	SAKD	Interview via WhatsApp call	11-Jan-24	49 min	BRAC Head Office staff
2	CAG Members	CAG 2 & 5	Interview via WhatsApp call	3-Feb-24 5-Feb-24	28 min 21 min	Community leaders
2	Project Officer	PO 1 & 4	Interview via WhatsApp call	13-Jan-24 14-Jan-24	37 min 23 min	BRAC local branch
10	–	–	10 interviews	11 Nov 2023 – 5 Feb 2024	5 h 42 min	–

Source: Author's Data Collection, November 2023–February 2024.

After the second phase of data collection, all interview recordings and field notes were systematically organised and securely stored for transcription and analysis. Follow-up

interviews via WhatsApp were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent using a digital voice recorder. Besides the recordings, I made handwritten notes during each session to document contextual reflections, tone, and immediate analytical insights that might not be apparent in the audio files. This approach ensured both the accuracy and depth of the qualitative data, in line with best practices for maintaining transparency and reliability in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

4.3.2 Multi-Methods Approaches and Triangulations

As this study aims to explore how NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to promote co-production and the strategies used to establish social accountability, I sought to gather information from both parties involved in the accountability system—the 'accountee' and the 'accountor'. After arriving in Mongla, I began my data collection from various sources. I employed a range of methods, including interviews, observation, and attending various types of meetings, to gather information from diverse groups of people, alongside a variety of documents, reports, and visual materials to enrich the data. The use of multiple qualitative methods was a deliberate strategy to enhance the depth, credibility, and trustworthiness of the research findings (Yin, 2018). Relying solely on a single data source (e.g., interviews) can limit insights and pose risks, as it captures only participants' reported experiences rather than their observed practices.

To overcome this limitation, I also used observational methods to gain direct insights into daily practices and interactions within the case (Marvasti, 2014). During the field visit, I observed three CAG meetings in different regions: Chilla (23rd May), Mithakhali

(31st May), and Burirdanga (5th June). Additionally, observations were carried out during travel and meetings with CAG members, and interactions with beneficiaries were systematically documented in my notebook. This provided invaluable direct insights into the community's relationship with the CCP, as well as the roles of CAG leaders, UP members, and other relevant stakeholders.

While interviews capture retrospective accounts (Briggs, 1986) and observations are limited to specific moments in time, I also asked six CAG members to keep a solicited diary narrating their views and reflections on their involvement with BRAC's activities in the community. Solicited diaries enable researchers to record participants' immediate reflections on unfolding events over a period, providing insights that may be lost in retrospective interviews (Rauch and Ansari, 2022). The CAG members were chosen because literacy levels in Bangladesh's grassroots communities are often insufficient to maintain written diaries, and these participants had the minimum literacy required to complete the task. All six members were invited to a meeting at the BRAC office, where I provided detailed instructions on completing the journals and the expected return dates. One participant was unable to return the diary due to personal reasons, while the remaining five submitted completed diaries documenting their experiences, emotions, and perceptions of their engagement with BRAC's Climate Change Programme during that period.

These solicited diaries complemented the interview and observation data, enhancing the depth and credibility of the research through methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2012). They provided a reflexive space where participants could record their thoughts and emotions in their own words, free from the immediate influence of the researcher's presence (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977). I also collected key documents and project

reports, including the project proposal, CAG guidelines, training modules, monitoring and evaluation reports, posters and flipcharts (see Appendix 3). Integrating these diaries with interviews, observations, and document analysis enabled a more nuanced understanding of participants' lived experiences, reinforcing both the interpretive and relational dimensions of co-production and social accountability within the study.

Triangulating these multiple data sources enhanced the robustness of the findings and provided a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. For instance, interviews revealed how staff and beneficiaries perceived co-production and accountability processes, while observations and meeting attendance offered opportunities to observe these dynamics in practice and identify gaps between stated intentions and actual behaviours (Flick, 2018). Analysing Programme documents and reports added historical and contextual depth, enabling a more holistic interpretation of the data. This integrated, multi-method approach aligns with best practices in case study research, which emphasise using multiple forms of evidence to develop converging lines of inquiry and build a credible analytical narrative (Yin, 2018).

4.3.3 Interviews with the Beneficiaries

First, I decided to conduct interviews with the direct beneficiaries from all six unions in the project area. I visited the field with the local Project Officers (POS) in each union. During these visits, I met beneficiaries and explained the objective of my research to encourage their participation. Some agreed, and then I asked the first interviewee who else in their village had received a water tank from BRAC. In rural Bangladesh, villagers are generally friendly and approachable; therefore, building rapport and asking for help was not a major issue, and identifying subsequent respondents in the

community was straightforward. In qualitative research, the location of interviews is important, as new surroundings and unfamiliar circumstances can affect the accuracy of data collection (Blackman et al., 2003; Olsson et al., 2013). For instance, Cridland et al. (2016) suggest that conducting interviews in the workplace or at home may create disruption, bias, or unexpected events that interfere with the interview. However, I had very limited options for choosing locations and often had to adapt to the situation.

All the beneficiaries were women because BRAC distributed water tanks only to female members of the community. Considering the circumstances of this grassroots female group, who are mostly homebound and engaged in domestic responsibilities, I chose to conduct interviews in their homes. As a female researcher, I had the privilege of accessing their houses and sitting with them even when they were engaged in household tasks such as cooking, preparing food, chopping vegetables, caring for poultry, or doing laundry in the pond. To become more approachable and converse with them easily, I learned the local dialect, accent, and some of the common vocabulary used in casual conversation, which made engagement easier. I always wore very casual clothing, with no jewellery and no makeup, to avoid giving the impression that I belonged to a higher social class. In Bangladesh, social status influences respect and value, creating divisions between the so-called upper-class and lower-class citizens, which is reflected in people's behaviour (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Tanima et al., 2020). I therefore tried to present myself as a very ordinary girl from their community, not very different from them.

I also aimed to be diplomatic when scheduling interview times with the beneficiaries (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006). From my previous data collection experience, I know that women in households often prefer to speak when men are not present, and

the absence of children reduces interruptions (Morgan Brett and Wheeler, 2021). Therefore, I scheduled interviews mainly between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m., when children were at school and men were usually working or outside the home. I also brought coloured pens, paper, and chocolates for children who were not at school. This approach helped keep children occupied and away from their mothers during interviews, allowing for more focused conversations. Traditionally, people in Bangladesh are very hospitable and easy-going, so these gestures were seen as polite and respectful.

Despite these efforts, I soon observed that some beneficiaries tended to give overly positive or complimentary comments about CCP staff and project interventions. This behaviour seemed to originate from a common assumption that anyone asking questions about the project was connected with BRAC. Because of their reliance on NGO services, many participants were understandably cautious about expressing criticism or negative opinions, fearing it might jeopardise their access to future support. In the Bangladeshi development context, grassroots communities often find it hard to distinguish between researchers and NGO staff. As a result, respondents may deliberately frame their answers to show gratitude or highlight needs, hoping to secure additional assistance. This dynamic illustrates the broader dependency relationships and power imbalances often present in NGO–community interactions in aid-dependent settings (Cornwall, 2008; Mosse, 2004; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017).

To mitigate this potential bias, I clarified my position as an independent researcher unaffiliated with BRAC in nearly every interview with direct beneficiaries of the CCP. This clarification was part of the ethical protocol approved by the University of Essex and was outlined in the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (Appendix 4),

which I read and explained to each participant before beginning the interview (Orb et al., 2001). I emphasised that I was not a BRAC employee and that my goal was not to judge whether BRAC was doing “right” or “wrong,” but to understand how the organisation supports communities, assesses local needs, and involves people in decision-making. Taking the time to explain my research purpose and independence helped to reduce misunderstandings about my role and to build trust with participants—an essential step in ensuring voluntary, informed participation in qualitative research (Moser and Korstjens, 2018; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

Even with these clarifications, some beneficiaries continued to express gratitude rather than critical reflections, often responding with statements such as, “The NGO is doing a lot for us; otherwise, I would have nothing like what I have now.” This tendency reflects a form of social desirability bias, where participants frame responses positively to maintain good relationships with the organisation or its perceived representatives (Bryman, 2016; Silverman, 2021). Recognising this, I used reassurance, reminding participants there would be no consequences for honest opinions, probing questions, and follow-up prompts to encourage more balanced reflections on both the benefits and limitations of the project. I also relied on triangulation with data from CAG members, BRAC staff, solicited diaries, and observations to cross-check and contextualise beneficiaries’ accounts, thereby reducing the risk of over-reliance on overly positive narratives.

Throughout the interviews, I remained aware that effectively accessing and conducting research within participants’ social and cultural contexts requires a level of insider understanding and sensitivity. Researchers’ insider perspectives and previous field experience can be valuable assets in building rapport and navigating community

dynamics (Hamid, 2010). Drawing on my prior experience of conducting research with NGO beneficiaries in Bangladesh, I was able to anticipate potential challenges, recognise subtle cues in participants' responses, and adjust my strategies accordingly. During each interview, I aimed to stay diplomatic and focused on my goals while remaining flexible in questioning. I often adapted the interview guide and used probing questions to gather more detailed and context-rich responses. Although this approach was sometimes demanding, especially given time constraints and social sensitivities, it ultimately enabled a deeper, more authentic understanding of beneficiaries' perceptions of participation, accountability, and co-production within the CCP.

Substantively, my interviews with beneficiaries aimed to capture their personal views about the CCP in their area. I began each conversation in a warm and open manner, often using indirect questions to foster trust. I sought to understand the initial assessment of community needs by asking whether BRAC had attempted to identify those needs and how they approached this task, including whether community members had been involved. I also explored whether there was any community participation in project planning and future delivery plans, the level of that involvement, and what monitoring and accountability mechanisms had been established with the community. In line with the broader accountability framework, I endeavoured to understand how BRAC is perceived as responsible for its activities in meeting community needs. Throughout the process, I remained patient, listened carefully, and showed empathy where appropriate; this helped build rapport and foster trust (Cridland et al., 2016). Over time, participants began to share not only positive experiences but also frustrations and less satisfactory aspects of the project.

While interviewing beneficiaries, I also tried, where possible, to meet CAG members from similar locations. This helped me save time and navigate the logistical challenges of working in rural Mongla, where transportation options are limited. Each day, I used three to four types of transport to reach my destinations—including boats, auto-rickshaws (tricycles), manual vans, and motorbikes. Data collection took place during May and June, the hottest summer in decades, with temperatures averaging 38–40°C and humidity making it feel above 45°c. Despite these challenges, careful planning, rapport-building, and adaptive interviewing strategies enabled the collection of rich and nuanced data from the beneficiary group.

4.3.4 Interviews with the Climate Action Groups (CAGs)

CAGs are volunteer groups that represent community interests and act as important intermediaries between BRAC and beneficiaries. Interviewing CAG members was notably different from speaking with the beneficiaries. The CAGs are voluntary groups chosen from various parts of each union, representing a diverse cross-section of the community. They comprise a mix of men and women, young and old, professionals and non-professionals, highly educated and less educated individuals, as well as people from political and non-political backgrounds. BRAC's aim in establishing these action groups is to involve local residents in the project, gather information about community needs and social issues, and understand their perspectives and the actions required to address local problems.

Altogether, I conducted formal interviews with six members of Climate Action Groups (four females and two males) from six different unions. I chose more females than males because, in rural Bangladesh, women are less involved in leadership and

community participation. From the female leaders of this group, I aimed to understand their views and attitudes towards community involvement and the co-production process. I also had the opportunity to engage with CAG members while walking through the village, visiting households to interview beneficiaries. Occasionally, I met some CAG members at the BRAC office when they attended meetings or had other reasons to visit. With permission from the branch project manager, I spoke with them to learn about their perspectives.

I asked the CAG members about their views on community engagement, why they believe it is important to involve the community in development practices, their motivations for volunteering, and how effective this engagement is in areas such as project planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, assessment, as well as the sustainability and future planning of projects. I also wanted to find out if BRAC provides any training or learning opportunities to help build trust with the community and strengthen organisational relationships. All these questions were asked in simple language, aligned with the co-production cycle and social accountability mechanisms. Needless to say, the enthusiasm of the CAG members clearly reflects their dedication to community development and their strong bond with the organisation.

In addition to these individual interviews, I also observed three Climate Action Group courtyard meetings on 23rd and 25th May 2023, in Chila Union and Mithakhali Union in Mongla, with BRAC staff. On 30th May 2023, I observed another courtyard meeting in Sundarban Union. Walshe et al. (2012) argued that in-depth interviews only allow participants to describe what they do, but in contrast, observation enables researchers to see what participants actually do. Furthermore, they claimed that since observation is a privileged approach to unlocking a specific organisation's "black box," it helps

researchers understand and evaluate participants' attitudes and behaviours (Bonta et al., 2008). Each meeting had about 22 to 25 participants. These observations were very useful for understanding the community's relationship with BRAC, their motivational spirit, and their interest in working as community representatives. Usually, Climate Action Group meetings are held in their local areas. In these meetings, they discuss performance, share experiences, address challenges and opportunities related to their roles as community representatives, and plan future actions. It was a valuable opportunity to grasp the sense of volunteering and community participation in their natural environments.

I also had the opportunity to observe a one-day ‘Practical Workshop for Water Tank Maintenance’ on 24 May 2023 in Chila, organised to train CAG members from all six unions. The aim of this workshop was to teach members about the water tank maintenance process, improve their skills and capacity, and create opportunities for income-generating activities (IGAs) for local volunteers. After the training, all CAG members received a competency certificate enabling them to work not only for BRAC beneficiaries but also for anyone in the community. Attending this workshop was a valuable opportunity for me to understand the true objectives of developing CAGs and their future plans.

In the second phase of data collection, I conducted follow-up interviews with two CAG members via WhatsApp in February 2024. These follow-up conversations were mainly reflective, aiming to clarify emerging themes from the first phase and to explore participants’ deeper interpretations of their roles in co-production and community accountability. Such reflective follow-up interviews are valuable in qualitative research, as they enable participants to engage with preliminary findings, confirm interpretations,

and offer additional insights that enhance the richness and credibility of the data (Seidman, 2013; Silverman, 2021; Yin, 2018). This phase also provided an opportunity to evaluate whether participants' perceptions of collaboration, empowerment, and accountability had shifted over time, thereby contributing to a more dynamic understanding of the ongoing co-production process.

4.3.5 Interviews with the NGO Staff

To understand how accountability is integrated at the organisational level, I interviewed BRAC staff across various hierarchies: project officers, area managers, capacity-building officers, M&E officers, project managers, Programme managers, and Programme heads. This multi-level sampling enabled me to compare frontline experiences with strategic decision-making at the head-office level. First, I interviewed branch-level staff, then those based at the head office. Before entering the field, I developed a generic interview guide that was refined as the research progressed and customised for each interviewee based on their background and role. Mindful of social-symbolic work, I aimed to understand BRAC's strategies for assessing community needs and implementing a need-based approach, as well as their attitudes towards community engagement throughout the project lifecycle.

I sought to explore their perspectives and reflected on the four modes of co-production. I was also keen to identify their views on social accountability mechanisms. Concerning social-symbolic work, I endeavoured to gather information about the discursive, relational, and material dimensions of their development activities. I conducted in-depth, one-on-one interviews, recognised as some of the most important and frequently used techniques for gathering data in qualitative research (Mcintosh

and Morse, 2015; Liamputtong, 2010). In-depth interviews facilitate extensive dialogue between participants and the researcher, enabling the achievement of research objectives through participants' rationalities, ideologies, norms, values, and experiences (Cridland et al., 2016).

Interviewing the branch-level staff was very intensive, especially those at management level. For instance, the project manager, capacity building officer, monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning officer usually leave the office for field visits around 10 a.m. after discussing the daily plan, addressing daily problems, or dealing with urgent communications from the head office. The hotel I was staying in was only 15 minutes from the office. Each day, I arrived by 8.30 a.m. and took the opportunity for informal discussions, observing their daily action plans, noting the management's attitudes towards field staff, and assessing the team spirit of the whole branch. I also asked questions about any unclear issues I encountered from beneficiaries or CAG interviews, my field observations, and so on. During the first week of my field visit, I had the privilege of meeting the Programme head and the Programme manager at the Mongla Branch office when they came for field visits. The Programme head was very welcoming and supportive of my data collection efforts, permitting the Programme manager and branch project manager to share general documents and reports. Every morning before heading out for interviews, I requested permission to review their various documents, such as project proposals, CAG guidelines, training modules, monitoring and evaluation reports, courtyard meeting rules, and other relevant publications. This greatly assisted my understanding of the information obtained from beneficiaries and CAG members during interviews. I usually returned from the field by 3.30 or 4 p.m. and then spent time back in the office until closing hours. The time spent

in the office provided valuable opportunities for rapport building, assisting with field visits, and making observations.

After completing the data collection in Mongla, I returned to Dhaka and planned to interview the head office staff. Since the very beginning of my interest in collecting data from BRAC, all the management staff have been very cooperative and welcoming. However, conducting interviews with the Programme Manager and Director was the most challenging part of my data collection due to their time constraints. I had to make numerous phone calls and send email correspondence to arrange a schedule for interviews, as most of the time, they are out of the office for field visits. Finally, they allowed me to interview them. I had a very intensive interview with the Programme Head. This was one of the interviews I took advantage of to clarify many findings from the field. I also had a telephone interview with him before I left Bangladesh to learn more information. I recorded this interview with my digital voice recorder and took some notes in my journal. The Programme Head was very cooperative and explained the actual factors of practising social accountability in the context of Bangladesh. He is also a PhD student and greatly appreciates the importance of my data collection. That's why, from the very beginning, he facilitated opportunities for me by engaging other staff from the project. It was a great privilege to have someone from a similar journey.

Finally, interviewing the Director was the most exciting moment for me. I first met the Director and the Programme Head through three Zoom meetings when I requested them to collect data from BRAC. I also had the opportunity to meet him in Mongla during his visit to the office with the Royal Danish Ambassador and his team for project evaluation. The Royal Danish Embassy funds the CCP. During that visit, I had a very

brief discussion with him, but it was a busy occasion. That is why I was not particularly eager to interview him on that day. The director suggested I meet him at the head office. Unfortunately, on the scheduled interview day at the Head Office, I had to end the interview early again. He had to travel to Thailand for an emergency health check-up. Despite being in such a rush to prepare for the trip, the Director still allowed me to interview him for about 20 minutes and suggested I contact him in future for further assistance. Meeting the Danish Ambassador and the team was a unique opportunity to hold an informal discussion, observe their protocol, and understand the vibe of the donor-NGO relationship, their current view of the project performance, and their future plans and attitude towards the project. This added extra value to my data collection process.

4.3.6 Interviews with Government Representatives

According to the CCP proposal, members of the Climate Action Group are actively engaged with local government representatives. Each CAG has a steering committee, and by rule, every CAG's committee is responsible for maintaining liaison with the elected Upazila Chairman, Ward Members of the local government, and the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO). These are the government authorities to whom BRAC is not directly accountable, but they remain the local representatives of the government who observe and support NGOs' development activities. To gain a third-party perspective, I decided to interview the Upazila Chairman, a few Ward Members, and the UNO of Mongla Upazila to understand third parties' views and attitudes towards CCP.

I successfully interviewed the Upazila Chairman twice: first at her residence, and then via telephone. Securing an appointment to interview this political figure proved to be

quite challenging, but in my case, it was surprisingly straightforward. The first time I met her was at the Upazila Chairman's office, where BRAC was distributing materials for water tank installations. I expressed my interest in interviewing her and provided her with the project information sheet. She was curious about my hometown, so I told her its name, and she was delighted because her daughter-in-law is from the same district. Though it was a coincidence, it greatly facilitated my access to interview her despite her busy schedule. She was exceptionally hospitable and cooperative, answering all my questions with great respect.

From the Upazila Chairman, I wanted to gather information on how BRAC works to identify the true needs of the community and involve local people in development. I also aimed to understand transparency, accountability, and BRAC's acceptance within the community. I sought the opinion of a local leader as a third party to better understand the realities happening in her community. I also attempted to interview a few Ward Members but was unsuccessful. These political leaders are often in public contact and engaged in community work. Due to time constraints, I couldn't fit into their schedules. However, as I had a lengthy and detailed interview with the Upazila Chairman, I obtained all the information I was seeking.

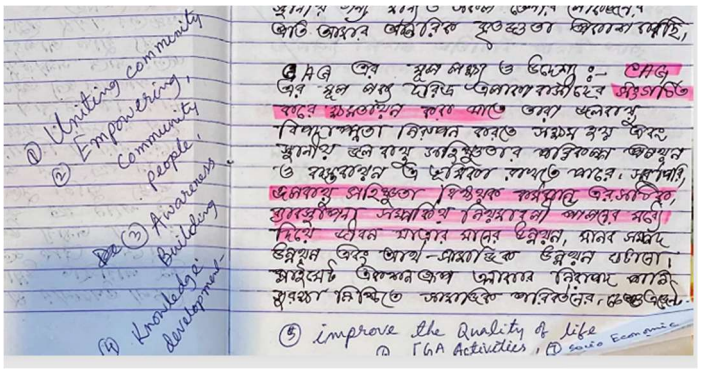
My last interview in Mongla was with the UNO, which proved to be the most challenging task. Due to Bangladesh's bureaucratic system, obtaining information from a government official is very difficult. I had to follow a systematic process to meet the UNO. However, with the help of BRAC's project manager, I eventually secured an appointment to interview him at his office. He requested the UNO and explained that this interview was solely for academic purposes to support my PhD research. After numerous phone calls, he finally agreed to speak with me and scheduled the

appointment. However, at least twice, he had to reschedule due to his busy schedule, as he is often engaged in public meetings and visits (Li, 2022). From UNO, I aimed to understand their overall views on BRAC, their CCP, and how they function as a development partner with the government. I wanted to learn how effectively CCP engages the community in its projects and meets local needs. It was a fruitful 20-minute interview, which provided me with valuable insights into the GO-NGO partnership and the community development process within BRAC's CCP Programme.

4.3.7 Participant Journals Entry and Researcher Reflexivity

In addition to in-depth interviews (both face-to-face and by telephone) and field observations, I gathered information through the participant's journal and the researcher's field journal. Before the data collection field visit, both supervisors strongly advised me to collect some data using journal entries. Following my supervisors' guidance, I included participant journals to gain a longitudinal perspective on community engagement. In qualitative research, we often aim to understand the lives, motivations, and experiences of others. By employing methods like in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, we usually obtain a single perception of individuals. However, using diary approaches enables researchers to achieve a deeper, more consistent understanding of lived experiences and also alters the power dynamics between researcher and participant (Rauch and Ansari, 2022). In interviews and FGDs, participants may sometimes feel interrogated as the researcher asks questions and expects responses. But maintaining diaries offers participants greater freedom to discuss what they want, where, and when they wish (Meth 2003).

At the grassroots level in Bangladesh, not everyone has sufficient literacy skills to keep a diary. That's why I lacked confidence in collecting data through diary methods. However, CAG members are capable of maintaining diaries. I discussed this with the project manager and sought assistance. Following the project manager's suggestion, I selected six CAG members from six unions in Mongla: four women of different ages, professions, interests, and abilities, and two men. Among the women were a social worker, a teacher, a community leader, and a housewife. One man was a retired schoolteacher, and the other was a young social worker. The office invited all six members to a meeting at the Mongla office. During the meeting, I briefed them on how to maintain the diary and provided a written information sheet (see Appendix 5). The journal was a ruled exercise book, and I also supplied some pens and pencils. The participants received instructions on completing the journal and the return dates. In the journal, they wrote about their own experiences working with BRAC, motivation factors, training opportunities, personal opinions, and emotional issues, all written spontaneously. Each journal became a unique, detailed resource for my study.



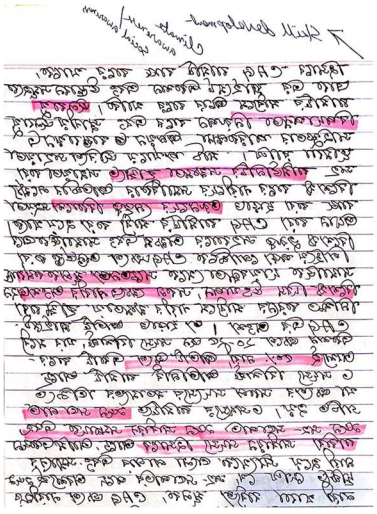


Figure 4.1: Pages from the journal entry (Author's photo, 2023)

To improve research quality, reflexivity emphasises the researcher's awareness of their own presence in the process (Somekh and Lewin, 2005). Writing in a journal broadens the range of ideas and perspectives beyond what is captured during interviews (Weiner and Giveon, 2013). The research journal can be utilised to observe, inquire, analyse, synthesise, and take action. Altrichter and Holly (2005) argued that the journal entry may specifically include data collected through observation, interviews, and informal discussions; off-the-record information; additional materials such as pictures and letters; contextual information; and ideas and plans for future research stages.

From the beginning of my data collection, I kept a digital diary in Word, where I documented the methodological steps taken, including the names and contact details of key individuals, their availability for interviews, and other logistical information. Alongside this, I maintained a handwritten notebook journal throughout the fieldwork period. In this personal journal, I recorded any new or noteworthy information that arose during interviews, as well as observations about body language or emotional expressions that are not easily captured by an audio recorder but are nonetheless meaningful (Altrichter and Holly, 2005). After completing an interview, I often paused to jot down brief notes on my impressions and observations. Keeping daily notes in both the digital and handwritten journals provided an important space for reflection, helping me recognise my assumptions, refine my questions, and adjust my engagement strategies as the research progressed (Mulhall, 2003).

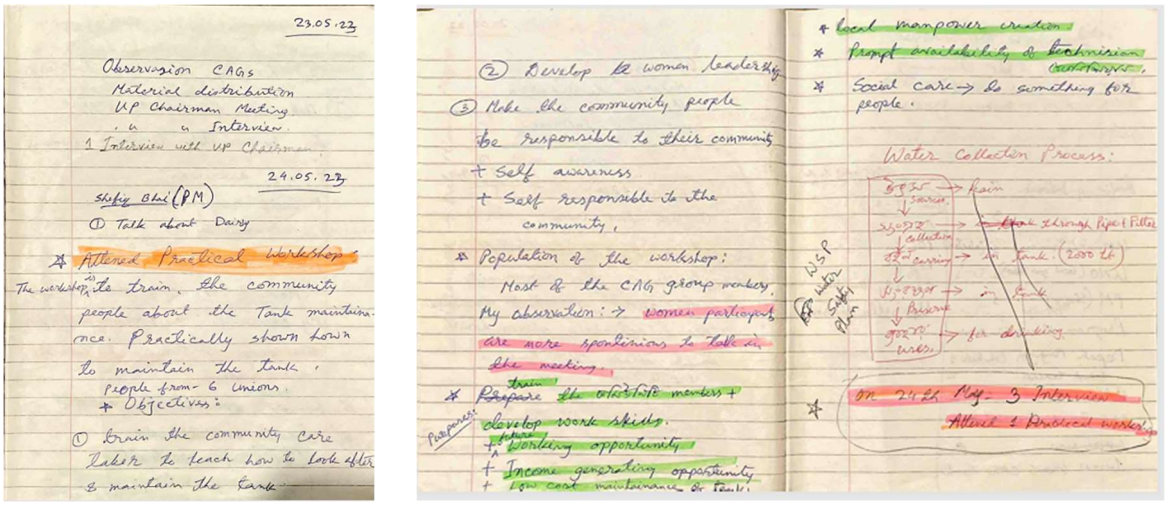


Figure 4.2: Pages from my diary (Author's photo, 2023)

4.3.8 Secondary Data

Secondary data collection involves utilising existing information gathered for other purposes that is relevant to the current study (Johnston, 2014). For this research, secondary data provided a valuable means to explore BRAC's organisational motivations, situational contexts, and the resources it mobilised to promote co-production practices with its direct beneficiaries and surrounding communities. I gathered data from various sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, BRAC's annual and thematic reports, and research papers published by BRAC's own research and evaluation department (see Appendix 7). By analysing these materials, I gained longitudinal insights into BRAC's strategies and interventions, which would not have been possible through primary data collection alone.

Secondary data is particularly valuable for understanding organisational practices because it offers a macro-level perspective and rich context that complements field-level observations. According to Saunders et al. (2009), secondary data support

triangulation, allowing researchers to verify findings from interviews and observations with documentary evidence. In this study, BRAC's published reports illustrated the evolution of its development methods, while academic studies provided critical analysis of its role in fostering community engagement. This combination enhanced the interpretation of primary data and strengthened the overall validity of the research.

The use of secondary data also aids in understanding social-symbolic work—the practices through which organisations create meaning, legitimacy, and shared understandings (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). BRAC's narratives in its reports and publications often reflect its symbolic efforts to position itself as a facilitator of empowerment and co-production. Analysing these texts reveals how, over time, BRAC adopted changes and took initiatives to develop a community-centric, sustainable development approach, framed its identity, and communicated its values to internal and external stakeholders. This framing is not merely descriptive but performs symbolic work by legitimising BRAC's interventions and motivating collective action. Therefore, secondary data acts as a lens for examining how BRAC shaped the cultural and symbolic context in which the multi-sectoral development initiatives occurred.

4.4 Methods of Data Analysis

Conducting qualitative research in the social sciences, especially when engaging with participants from diverse educational, social, and economic backgrounds, presents significant challenges because the data collected is often unstructured and extensive (Huberman and Miles, 2002; Strauss, 1987). Besides interview transcripts, the researcher must manage field notes capturing participants' emotions, body language, and contextual observations, along with organisational descriptions and documents,

all of which can become cumbersome to analyse systematically. As a result, the researcher's interpretive skills, experience, and judgement are vital in creating coherence and structure within the data while maintaining the authenticity and integrity of participants' voices (Srivastava and Hopwood, 2009). A rigorous, systematic approach to coding and thematic analysis is essential to transform this raw material into meaningful findings without losing its richness or depth (Miles et al., 2014).

However, I built a solid foundation in qualitative research methods through formal training during the first eighteen months of my PhD Programme at the University of Essex. I successfully completed two advanced modules on research methodology in the social sciences, including courses specifically focused on qualitative data collection and analysis. Additionally, my experiences during the MA by Research greatly contributed to the data analysis for this research.

Among the available methods for qualitative analysis, thematic analysis (TA) has proven to be the most suitable approach for examining the complex data collected in this study. First proposed by Boyatzis (1998) and subsequently refined and systematised by Braun and Clarke (2006), TA is regarded as one of the fundamental methods in qualitative research because it facilitates the identification and organisation of patterns or themes across extensive data sets, highlighting what is most significant and relevant to the research aims and questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Additionally, TA supports both inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) development of themes, thereby linking emergent findings to the study's theoretical framework and research questions (Boyatzis, 1998). Furthermore, TA moves beyond surface-level or semantic coding to explore the latent meanings within participants'

narratives, uncovering underlying ideas, assumptions, and ideologies that deepen the interpretation of findings (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006).

It also recognises how participants interpret events through their lived experiences, situating this sense-making within a broader social and institutional context, which allows for a nuanced understanding of co-production and accountability practices (Willig, 1999). Lastly, TA explicitly values researcher reflexivity, acknowledging that the analytic process is active and interpretive, and that some themes may be prioritised over others based on the researcher's judgement, theoretical perspective, and engagement with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Riessman, 2008). In my research data, I employed a four-step thematic analysis process, guided by the work of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Barbour (2013). Firstly, I familiarised myself with the data; secondly, I generated initial codes manually; thirdly, I identified themes by clustering related codes; and finally, I reviewed and refined these themes.

4.4.1 Stage 1: Familiarising with the Collated Data

Familiarising oneself with the collated data is one of the most crucial steps in the data analysis process. It typically involves listening to recordings (if interviews are recorded), transcribing the data, reading the transcripts, and reviewing field notes in an iterative manner, moving back and forth between the transcripts and relevant theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Huberman and Miles, 2002). In my case, the data analysis used an iterative, multi-stage process, beginning with the transcription and translation of interview recordings and participants' handwritten diaries into English. I was particularly fortunate because I personally conducted all the interviews and non-participant observations. As a result, I was already familiar with the

data I collected. All interviews were conducted in Bangla. Since Bangla is my first language, I am deeply familiar with the local norms, values, and cultural beliefs of the participants. This familiarity enabled me to understand almost every word and its contextual meaning during the interviews.

I began analysing the collected data soon after returning to the UK. As a result, the information from all interviews and observation notes was still fresh in my mind, which greatly aided my interpretation of themes. My initial step involved repeatedly listening to the recordings and transcribing them into a Word document, followed by reading through the transcripts. Repeated listening and reading helped me understand the participants' emotions, body language, and the nuances of particular words they emphasised. For example, while interviewing CAG members, I noticed that the youth groups are determined to be involved with the CCP to build a climate-resilient community. In contrast, during interviews with beneficiaries, I observed that they were reluctant to say anything negative about the project; instead, they were more interested in expressing their needs and seeking additional support from the project.

While reviewing and interpreting the data, I remained aware that the beneficiaries' tendency to give positive or cautious responses could lead to social desirability bias (Bryman, 2016; Silverman, 2021). Their respect towards BRAC staff and the expectation of ongoing support may have shaped how they presented their accounts. To address this, I used reflexive note-taking and cross-verified the beneficiaries' statements with data from other sources, including CAG members, BRAC staff, and field observations. This triangulation method helped balance the analysis and ensured that my interpretation remained rooted in a wider range of perspectives rather than relying solely on self-reported experiences. Recognising these biases early in the

familiarisation phase also informed my subsequent coding and thematic interpretation, ensuring the findings reflected both what participants said and the underlying contextual factors influencing their responses.

4.4.2 Stage 2: Generating Initial Codes

Coding is a core element of qualitative data analysis, transforming raw data into meaningful, interpretable categories that can be organised into higher-order themes (Boyatzis, 1998; Tuckett, 2005). As Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasise, coding is not merely a technical step but a crucial analytical process, and “the excellence of research rests in large part on the excellence of coding” (Strauss, 1987, p. 27). I have analysed the data systematically through simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2009; Saldaña, 2021), enabling multiple layers of interpretation within individual data segments. I combined deductive and inductive approaches (Saldaña, 2009) and applied codes derived from existing literature on co-production, specifically focusing on various modes of co-production and relevant topics such as representative co-production, to evaluate the presence of co-production with vulnerable groups in the case under analysis.

In doing so, I employed open coding (also known as unrestricted coding) to systematically examine interview transcripts, field notes, observational records, and documentary sources included in this study. Open coding enabled me to break down the data into discrete segments and assign provisional labels to capture meaningful concepts and actions. A detailed list of the initial codes generated during this process is provided in Appendix 6. The primary aim at this stage was to explore the data inductively, identifying patterns, ideas, and relationships that could later be linked to

the theoretical arguments underpinning the study (Saldaña, 2009). For instance, while reviewing the transcripts, I observed that one of the most common pieces of information from CAG members was their participation in awareness-building training and meetings organised by the CCP. Initially, I thought these activities aimed to increase awareness about climate change. Later, I realised that all the training and awareness activities focused on skills development, leadership skills, creating opportunities for income-generating activities, and building self-efficacy to encourage greater involvement in community activities addressing the climate change crisis.

Afterwards, I employed axial coding, a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the data that examines one set of codes at a time (Strauss, 1987). The primary goal of axial coding is to identify and establish relationships among the codes to develop meaningful categories. During this stage, I re-examined the initial codes generated during open coding and investigated how they were connected by searching for patterns, causal relationships, and shared contexts. I grouped related codes into categories and subcategories, which helped me gain a clearer understanding of the data's underlying structure. This iterative process facilitated the refinement of emerging themes and ensured they accurately reflected participants' experiences and perspectives. For example, 'self-efficacy' is a strong trait and an essential skill for involvement in the co-production process; at the same time, it is also a significant element in building social capital, which is vital for the social accountability mechanisms of NGOs.

Axial coding helped me narrow down the extensive data into meaningful codes and explore their possible relationships (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As coding is a vital stage in qualitative research, it must be be carefully examined through methods such as peer

debriefing (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Several researchers have emphasised the importance of peer debriefing during code development, as it allows researchers to spot potential blind spots—areas they may have overlooked or failed to include (Huberman and Miles, 2002; Seale, 1999). To strengthen the credibility of my findings, I regularly shared my initial codes with my supervisor and discussed their relevance and significance. These conversations were key in refining and confirming the coding framework.

4.4.3 Stage 3: Searching for Initial Themes

At this stage, I began identifying initial themes by grouping the codes generated during axial coding into broader patterns of meaning. This involved carefully reviewing all the codes and categorising those that shared a common feature or underlying idea. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest, theme development is an active and interpretive process rather than a purely mechanical one; therefore, I engaged in repeated reflection and comparison between the data, codes, and emerging patterns. I used this constant comparative method to identify similarities and differences across the triangulated data sources. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes (e.g., tacit knowledge integration, engaging local government) through thematic analysis. I created thematic maps to visually organise potential themes and sub-themes, which helped me identify connections, overlaps, and gaps within the data. This stage was iterative, involving constant movement back and forth between the coded extracts, the entire dataset, and the developing thematic framework to ensure that the emerging themes accurately captured the essence of participants' accounts.

For example, during this stage, several codes, such as “utilising tacit knowledge” and “planning with the community,” were grouped together under a potential theme labelled “community involvement”. However, by refining these initial themes, I was later able to establish a structured understanding of how community participation made people feel valued and responsible citizens. Consequently, I developed the main themes such as “valued citizens” and “uniting the community”. This process certainly reduced confusion and brought greater clarity to the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

4.4.4 Stage 4: Reviewing and Refining Themes

In qualitative research, it is not always feasible or even desirable to include every identified theme in the final analysis due to the large volume of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Consequently, it is essential to review the generated themes repeatedly to ensure their relevance and coherence with the research objectives, questions, and the study's theoretical framework. During this stage, I revisited each potential theme and examined whether the supporting coded extracts formed a consistent and meaningful pattern. I also evaluated whether each theme contributed to addressing the overall research aims. This process helped identify and merge overlapping or duplicate themes, and discard themes that were too weak, too narrow, or not directly relevant to the study's focus. For example, initially, I categorised the code “involving UNO” under the theme “GO-NGO partnership”. However, while reviewing the theme, I realised that “involving UNO” is not a process of GO-NGO partnership; rather, it is a strategy for sustainable community involvement. Consequently, I created a new theme, “sustainable approach”.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter outlined and justified the methodological approach used for this study. Using an interpretivist, single-case study design, it combined purposive and snowball sampling with various qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, documentary analysis, and participant journals, to develop a rich, multi-layered understanding of BRAC's Climate Change Programme. Ethical approval, reflexivity, and triangulation were key strategies to ensure rigour, credibility, and trustworthiness. Finally, the chapter explained the thematic analysis process used to derive meaningful findings from the data, linking empirical insights to the study's theoretical framework. Collectively, these methodological choices provide a solid foundation for the analysis presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5

Constructing the Organisation Towards Co-production

5.1 Introduction

NGOs around the world do not merely implement programmes and deliver services to marginalised people; they also shape the meanings, identities, and practices that structure their engagement with communities. Through their strategies, policies, and routine actions, NGOs influence how participation is interpreted, how collaboration develops, and how co-production is integrated into practice. Co-production is commonly understood as a collaborative process in which public service organisations and citizens leverage each other's assets and resources to achieve better outcomes or greater efficiency (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). It demands deliberate efforts to align organisational meaning-making with participatory values and to establish structures that facilitate shared problem-solving.

However, in marginalised economies such as Bangladesh, co-production is far from simple. Deeply rooted socio-cultural hierarchies, entrenched gender norms, limited civic voice, and pervasive power imbalances often hinder citizens' ability to participate meaningfully in development processes. These structural and cultural obstacles mean that citizen engagement cannot simply be "invited" or assumed; it must be actively fostered. In such contexts, NGOs face the challenge of encouraging participation where marginalised people may lack the authority, confidence, or social permission to act as co-producers of services.

For co-production to establish itself in these environments, NGOs must deliberately engage in organisational activities to design, legitimise, and uphold participatory practices. They need to create new understandings of participation, foster trust and

relationships that challenge traditional hierarchies, and provide structural support that enables collaboration. In essence, co-production becomes an organisational accomplishment, something that must be continuously created and maintained within the NGO's routines.

Against this backdrop, this chapter addresses the first research question of this thesis: *"How do NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to embed co-production in their organisational routines and establish active citizen participation in their development activities?"*

To answer this question, the analysis highlights both the motivational (e.g., normative, instrumental) and situational aspects (e.g., power structures, socio-cultural factors) of BRAC's approach, as well as the resources and structures it has mobilised to enable co-production with direct beneficiaries and wider community members. Its primary objective is to examine how BRAC, as a globally recognised development organisation, constructs and sustains organisational arrangements that facilitate co-production with citizens and communities. The analysis interrogates both the *practical* and *symbolic* dimensions of this process: how BRAC operationalises co-production in everyday routines, and how it frames, legitimises, and communicates co-production as part of its organisational identity and mission.

This chapter applies the social-symbolic work lens (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) to examine how NGOs embed co-production into their organisational routines to encourage active citizen participation in development activities. The concept of social-symbolic work encompasses the deliberate, reflective efforts of organisational members, collective actors, and networks to shape social-symbolic objects—such as practices, identities, and meanings—within a specific institutional context (Lawrence

and Phillips, 2019). This theoretical perspective is based on three interconnected dimensions: discursive work (the creation of narratives, frames, and vocabularies of motive), relational work (the development and negotiation of social ties, roles, and identities), and material work (the design and deployment of tangible resources, structures, and technologies). These dimensions typically occur together in most instances of social-symbolic work and collectively demonstrate how organisations enact changes that are both practical and symbolic.

Guided by this framework, this chapter adopts an academic praxis perspective, connecting the discursive, relational, and material dimensions to examine how BRAC's over five decades of development thinking and practice have influenced its adoption of co-production, with particular emphasis on its Climate Change Project (CCP). This approach allows for an exploration not only of what BRAC does to involve citizens but also of how these practices are framed, legitimised, and integrated into organisational routines.

The analysis unfolds in two stages. First, it utilises secondary data, including organisational reports, policy documents, and historical records, to trace how BRAC has consistently implemented development initiatives. Based on community involvement and including co-production. This historical perspective helps to situate the CCP's co-production practices within a broader organisational trajectory rather than viewing it as an isolated initiative. Next, the chapter shifts to empirical evidence from the CCP to explore how co-production was integrated through specific mechanisms. It examines how the discursive strategies employed to legitimise co-production, the relational dynamics that fostered trust and collective action, and the

material arrangements that embedded co-production within the project's operational framework.

5.2 The Community Participation and Construction of BRAC

This section examines how BRAC gradually developed its participatory approach by navigating various socio-political challenges in Bangladesh. Emerging from the post-independence period, BRAC positioned community participation as the core of its development vision. In response to entrenched patriarchy, elite capture, donor reliance, and political instability, which often limited grassroots empowerment. BRAC continually reshaped its organisational strategies, modifying programmes, narratives, and institutional structures to legitimise and integrate citizen participation into the organisation's daily routines.

Through initiatives such as the Village Organisations (VOs), *Polli Shomaj*, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), and the Community Empowerment Programme (CEP), BRAC transformed participation from an experimental practice into an enduring organisational norm. Analysed through the lens of social-symbolic work, these initiatives reveal how discursive, relational, and material practices were mobilised to overcome social resistance, construct new meanings of citizenship and empowerment, and stabilise co-production as part of BRAC's institutional identity. This gradual evolution directly addresses Research Question 1 by demonstrating how BRAC embedded co-production through ongoing negotiations between the ideology of participation and the realities of socio-political constraints.

To clarify the stages through which BRAC constructed its participatory philosophy, Table 5.1 synthesises the organisation's gradual evolution from early relief work to the

institutionalisation of co-production. The table distils how each initiative—Village Organisations, Polli Shomaj, Participatory Rural Appraisal, and the Community Empowerment Programme—contributed distinct forms of discursive, relational, and material social-symbolic work. Together, these initiatives illustrate the cumulative organisational learning that enabled BRAC to embed co-production as a routine development practice.

Table 5.1: BRAC's Gradual Construction of a Co-productive Organisational Model

Phase / Initiative	Participatory Focus	Key Social-Symbolic Work	Contribution to Co-production
Village Organisations (1970s–)	Collective groups; savings; microfinance	Relational (trust-building); Material (credit tools)	Introduced co-management and early shared decision-making
Participatory Rural Appraisal – PRA (1990s–)	Participatory analysis and community planning	Material (maps/tools); Discursive (recognition of local knowledge)	Normalised co-commissioning and community-led planning
Polli Shomaj (1998–)	Women's voice; rights-based mobilisation; political participation	Discursive (rights vocabulary); Relational (women's networks)	Expanded citizen agency; challenged gendered power hierarchies
Community Empowerment Programme – CEP (1998–)	Federations; advocacy; psychosocial support; community media	Relational (collective action); Discursive (identity work); Material (radio, funds)	Institutionalised co-governance and community-led service delivery

Outcome: Embedded Co-production	Participation becomes an organisational norm	Integrated discursive–relational–material work	Co-production is formalised as a structural, not project-based, organisational practice.

Note. Table prepared by the author based on BRAC documentation, secondary literature, and field analysis.

Table 5.1 summarises the sequential development of BRAC's participatory model, illustrating how each programme contributed specific forms of discursive, relational, and material social-symbolic work. Taken together, these stages show how BRAC incrementally embedded co-production as both an operational practice and an organisational identity.

5.2.1 Bridging the Humanitarian-Development Nexus through Co-production

Humanitarian and development initiatives have long been central to BRAC's organisational identity, shaping its mission, strategies, and community engagement since 1972 (Afsana, 2012; Banks et al., 2024). The organisation conducts both types of work simultaneously, reflecting its holistic vision that crisis response and long-term development are mutually reinforcing processes vital for community resilience. BRAC's early development approach was based on collective empowerment through the creation of Village Organisations (VOs) under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) in the 1970s (Nazneen et al., 2024). Initially established through microfinance activities in the 1980s, the VOs linked local communities—mainly poor rural women—

to credit, savings, and training, thereby promoting both financial inclusion and social empowerment. These groups served as catalysts for institutional building and poverty alleviation, enabling the poor to participate in the nation's development process (Ahmed et al., 2015; Banks et al., 2020; Roborgh et al., 2024).

Functioning as platforms for collective action, mutual support, and empowerment, VOs embodied the principles of co-production through shared decision-making, collaborative problem-solving, and mutual accountability. Members actively participated in managing savings and credit, monitoring defaults, and overseeing collective repayment systems (Chowdhury et al., 2014; Mannan, 2015). Regular meetings to identify local needs reflect the co-commissioning stage of the co-production cycle. As Bovaird and Loeffler (2013) note, co-production enables professionals and citizens to combine their capabilities to achieve improved outcomes. In BRAC's case, VOs facilitated citizen engagement along the entire "value chain" of co-production—spanning co-planning, co-design, co-managing, and co-governing (Bovaird, 2007; Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; Jetté and Vaillancourt, 2011).

Recognising that village-level engagement often overlooks women's needs within patriarchal systems, BRAC later shifted VOs to focus on women as a distinct target group, employing income-generating and social development activities to enhance agency and inclusion. Women's participation in planning and implementing health, family planning, and education programmes demonstrated the value of co-production in improving service quality and addressing poverty (Chen, 1986; Nazneen et al., 2024). Meijer (2011) described this as offering "substitution" and "supplementary" value—complementing the public sector's efforts—echoing Young's (2000) argument

that NGOs contribute additional resources while citizens work as co-producers of social services.

Addressing power imbalances and ensuring local participation in humanitarian responses are vital for sustainability (Roepstorff, 2020). Within BRAC, VOs plan and manage both social and economic activities, supported by field staff who provide training, credit, and logistical assistance (Ahmed and Rafi, 1999). This approach aligns with Bovaird's (2007, p. 847) concept of "collective co-production," in which professionals and citizens engage in long-term partnerships that contribute significant resources for mutual benefit. Although humanitarian and development fields operate through different funding cycles and organisational logics, they are closely interconnected, especially in contexts marked by natural disasters and displacement—the very environments that define BRAC's historical experience (OECD, 2017; Roborgh et al., 2024). BRAC's localisation strategy highlights this integration by ensuring that local actors retain decision-making authority and resources to design and oversee community-led responses.

From a social-symbolic work perspective, BRAC's localisation efforts exemplify how organisations shape social and symbolic structures through intentional practice (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Its focus on relationship-building and participatory organisation reflects relational work, while credit provision and awareness training embody material and discursive work—creating tangible and symbolic conditions for sustained participation. In doing so, BRAC bridges humanitarian urgency with long-term development, institutionalising co-production as both a practical mechanism and a symbolic expression of community empowerment.

5.2.2 Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA)

In line with BRAC's mission to "empower people and communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, disease and social injustice," Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) plays a vital role in its bottom-up, community-driven development approach. PRA is a participatory research and planning tool that enables local people to evaluate their needs, resources, and priorities and develop contextually relevant solutions (Chowdhury et al., 2014; Kaikobad, 2024). By positioning communities as active agents rather than passive recipients, BRAC ensures local ownership and sustained engagement throughout project cycles (Taher and Rahman, 2018).

Loeffler and Martin (2015) identify four stages of public engagement—information, consultation, participation, and co-production—which collectively enhance citizens' influence in service delivery. Through PRA methods such as mapping, ranking, and seasonal calendars, community members collaboratively identify and prioritise local issues, thereby reflecting co-commissioning in the co-production process (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2020). This approach recognises and affirms local and indigenous knowledge, ensuring community expertise informs decision-making (Minj and Khakshi, 2015; Gazley and Cheng, 2020).

From a social-symbolic perspective, PRA represents the integration of discursive, relational, and material elements that institutionalise co-production within BRAC's organisational practice (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Discursively, PRA opposes the dominant top-down development discourse by recognising the "knowledge of the poor" and reframing expertise as shared and contextual. Training materials, manuals, and participatory workshops create a new vocabulary of empowerment, inclusion, and mutual learning, redefining beneficiaries as partners in knowledge creation.

Relationally, PRA fosters trust, collaboration, and reciprocity between BRAC staff and community members. The process of joint data collection and problem-solving encourages cooperative relationships and collective responsibility for outcomes. These relational practices help bridge hierarchical gaps between institutional actors and local participants, embedding co-production through shared ownership.

Materially, PRA relies on tangible participatory tools, such as community maps, ranking charts, and seasonal calendars, which serve as boundary objects that connect expert and local perspectives. These objects make local realities visible, promote transparency, and facilitate collective interpretation, giving physical form to participatory ethics. By aligning these dimensions, BRAC embeds co-production as both a cultural norm and operational routine. PRA enables communities to co-design, co-deliver, and co-assess interventions, linking local knowledge with institutional learning (Chowdhury et al., 2014). Moreover, the approach supports both immediate problem-solving, such as addressing poverty, illiteracy, and climate challenges, and proactive actions that strengthen long-term resilience and adaptability (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

Overall, PRA demonstrates how BRAC operationalises social-symbolic work to embed co-production within its development practice. Discursively, it redefines the language of participation; relationally, it fosters collaborative networks; and materially, it provides the tools that make shared learning tangible. Through these interconnected processes, PRA transforms development into a collaborative, learning-oriented endeavour that exemplifies BRAC’s commitment to inclusive and sustainable community empowerment.

5.2.3 Participatory Approaches of Development

Since its inception, BRAC has been recognised for its participatory approaches, actively involving citizens in various forms of co-production (Banks et al., 2024; Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Nazneen et al., 2024). Community participation in BRAC's activities dates back to its founding in 1972, initially driven by charitable responses to the 1970 Bhola Cyclone and the 1971 Liberation War (Zaman et al., 2022). The continuity of these efforts demonstrates how BRAC's developed a co-productive model of development. At the grassroots level, BRAC's core strategy is to involve communities in co-planning, co-delivery, and co-assessment of development projects to ensure sustainable, locally relevant solutions (Zaman et al., 2022). This approach embodies the relational dimension of social-symbolic work, strengthening both interpersonal and collective bonds through active stakeholder participation (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

A central example of a co-productive approach is Polli Shomaj ("Rural Society"), launched in 1998 to support local governance and empower rural women politically, socially, and economically (Rashid and Alim, 2005). These community-based groups provided spaces for women to voice concerns, access resources, and make collective decisions (Qayum et al., 2024). Over time, Polli Shomaj became a key mechanism for linking gender, class, and political inclusion within BRAC's development strategy, reflecting the organisation's increasing awareness of complex power dynamics in rural Bangladesh (Banks et al., 2024; Qayum et al., 2020).

Through the discursive dimension, *Polli Shomaj* transformed local language and narratives around women's rights and participation. It introduced rights-based discourse at the village level, where such vocabulary was previously absent (Qayum,

2021; Qayum et al., 2024). In a patriarchal, high-power-distance society, BRAC's interventions helped women articulate new understandings of "equal rights," "entitlements," and "participation," legitimising their public engagement (Rashid and Alim, 2005). By providing scripts, slogans, and training materials, BRAC created a shared language for advocacy, aligning with social-symbolic work that shapes power relations and community norms (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Whittington, 2006).

Discursive interventions were strengthened through vocational and technical training that conveyed narratives of empowerment and dignity. These tangible resources enhanced women's ability to challenge traditional hierarchies and redefine their social roles. The relational dimension of social-symbolic work was equally important. Beyond adopting new vocabularies, Polli Shomaj transformed everyday interactions among women, within households, and with local authorities by building trust and collective identity (Samadder and Akter, 2015). Regular meetings and joint advocacy established networks of reciprocity and accountability, shifting women from isolated individuals to organised actors capable of negotiating with powerholders (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Qayum et al., 2024). These practices normalised women's participation in public governance and fostered a lasting sense of collective agency.

Connecting women's groups also strengthened bonding and bridging social capital, enhancing their capacity to navigate elite influence and bureaucratic barriers (Banks et al., 2024). Such relational work—building, maintaining, and transforming interpersonal ties—demonstrates how BRAC operationalised social-symbolic work at the community level (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

Nonetheless, the establishment of Polli Shomaj faced considerable socio-cultural and institutional obstacles. Deep-rooted patriarchy, resistance from elites, religious

conservatism, low literacy rates, and family obligations restricted women's mobility and leadership (Alim and Sulaiman, 2009; Qayum et al., 2012). Despite these difficulties, BRAC continually adjusted its participatory strategies to align with evolving development agendas and local realities (Banks et al., 2024). Its blending of humanitarian responses with long-term empowerment demonstrates an approach that, in Roborgh et al.'s (2024) words, is "humanitarian in nature and developmental in solution." Through participatory methods like Polli Shomaj, BRAC has increasingly positioned itself as a co-productive organisation—integrating collaboration, negotiation, and empowerment into its organisational practices.

5.2.4 Community Empowerment Programme (CEP)

The Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) is one of BRAC's flagship initiatives that engages rural poor communities at the grassroots level (Munrat, 2016; Nazneen et al., 2024). It focuses on the organisation's mission for community empowerment, especially women, so that they are aware of their rights, empowered to claim their entitlements, and able to resist exploitation (BRAC, 2020). Established in 1998, CEP has reached over one million women, promoting collective empowerment through women-led institutions and federations (Nawaz, 2018). The programme builds human, social, and political capital by enhancing women's ability to participate in decision-making, access safety nets, and address violence against women and children through collaboration with local government and service providers (BRAC, 2020).

More than just a poverty-alleviation programme, CEP acts as a transformative project that reshapes identities, narratives, and social structures—aligning with the core concept of social-symbolic work. Through training, mentoring, and mobilisation, BRAC enables women to shift from being "dependents" to active citizens and micro-

entrepreneurs, thereby redefining their self-perception and social recognition. These processes demonstrate the relational aspect of social-symbolic work, through which relationships create new social value and legitimacy within communities (Hampel et al., 2017; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

BRAC's institutional approach is implemented through women's federations that meet regularly to discuss community issues and lead collective actions (Munrat, 2016; Nawaz, 2018). Members address crises such as child marriage and domestic violence, mobilise resources, and manage community funds to support vulnerable women. These practices combine material and discursive work—using tangible tools such as loans and savings mechanisms to foster economic independence while reframing poverty and gender inequality as narratives of hope and dignity (Thornton et al., 2012).

Through the CEP, volunteers organise themselves to promote peace and social cohesion. CEP is dedicated to raising awareness about mental health in the community and providing vital psychosocial support to victims of domestic violence and other social injustices. Accordingly, CEP established groups of *Monobondhu* (psychosocial support providers) to offer Psychological First Aid to survivors of violence and their family members (BRAC, 2020). Creating *Monobondhu* aims to provide ongoing assistance and support for creating, sustaining, or disrupting shared meanings, identities, and relational structures within a social setting. This occurs through discursive work, such as crafting narratives, using language, telling stories, and framing, to reduce stigma and foster psychosocial resilience in rural communities. In terms of relational work, it involves building, maintaining, and reshaping social ties and networks. Most importantly, it illustrates efforts to shape relationships as independent forms of work, viewing such work as intertwined with the discursive and

material aspects of social-symbolic work. Consequently, it focuses on multidimensional social-symbolic objects rather than relationships as mere connections (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

CEP also established Radio Pollikontho 99.2 FM, the community radio, to provide a wider range of information that empowers rural communities and amplifies the voices of the poor and marginalised. The Right to Information Act is utilised to enhance community access to information. Developing Radio Pollikontho creates deliberative spaces where people can call in, comment, or debate issues. This makes the radio a discursive public sphere for rural Bangladesh, where many other forums may be closed or inaccessible. Pollikontho produces community-driven, participatory radio programmes on topics such as health, education, women's rights, domestic violence, childcare, agriculture, climate change, and social justice. In doing so, it becomes a platform for marginalised voices to amplify perspectives of women, youth, the poor, and minorities, whose voices are often absent from dominant public discourse (Islam, 2016).

This channel serves as a space for generating new narratives that challenge fatalism ("nothing will change here"), silence around taboo issues (e.g., gender violence), and disempowering beliefs. It functions as a repository of local cultural meaning by broadcasting local songs, stories, humour, and proverbs, which strengthens cultural identity while embedding progressive messages (Rahman, 2023). This discursive symbolic work helps reshape shared stories, vocabularies, and interpretive frames that people use to understand their lives and futures. The radio channel aids in democratising knowledge by blending expert and local experiences, challenging top-down development communication, and creating hybrid knowledge spaces. This

discursive work fosters a sense of “we”—a collective identity as a rural community working towards common goals.

CEP’s activities collectively integrate the discursive, relational, and material dimensions of social-symbolic work. Discursively, it redefines rural women’s roles through rights-based narratives; relationally, it builds networks of trust, cooperation, and leadership; and materially, it deploys financial, educational, and technological resources—such as community radio—to sustain participation (Kallinikos et al., 2012; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). In essence, CEP embodies BRAC’s co-productive development ethos. By uniting citizens, professionals, and volunteers around shared goals—“empowering vulnerable communities and eradicating injustice”—BRAC fosters active participation in both social and institutional transformation (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; Pestoff and Brandsen, 2013). Through its integration of discursive meaning-making, relational collaboration, and material empowerment, CEP demonstrates how BRAC institutionalises co-production as both a developmental practice and a sustained organisational culture.

Taken together, these participatory initiatives— Village Organisations, Polli Shomaj, PRA, and CEP—demonstrate BRAC’s gradual construction of a co-productive growth model rooted in its organisational culture. Across these programmes, the organisation has mobilised discursive, relational, and material forms of social-symbolic work to navigate complex socio-political realities, including patriarchy, elite dominance, and donor influence. Through ongoing organisational learning, BRAC has transitioned co-production from a project-based activity to a structural and symbolic process that shapes both community empowerment and organisational identity.

This section examined how BRAC gradually built its participatory philosophy through initiatives such as Polli Shomaj, Village Organisations (VOs), the Community Empowerment Programme (CEP), and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA). Throughout these initiatives, BRAC used discursive, relational, and material forms of social-symbolic work to embed co-production into its organisational practices.

5.3 Reconstructing Participation: Organisational Learning and the Creation of Research and Evaluation Division (RED)

While BRAC's community participation initiatives in Bangladesh have been widely recognised for their innovative and inclusive approaches, they also face significant challenges that limit their transformative potential. Structural inequalities and power relations, such as deeply rooted class hierarchies, gender norms, and elite capture, often marginalise the voices of women, the poor, and minority groups within participatory processes (Tanima et al., 2020). The villages of Bangladesh are not socially and economically uniform; rather, they are highly stratified along various lines, including gender, caste, religion, and class (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017).

Alongside the power structure and community crisis, BRAC also faced challenges in navigating the NGO–government–donor partnership model, which primarily centres on neoliberal principles. This manifests in individualised service delivery programmes, such as loans, grants, healthcare, and education stipends, rather than collective, community-based services (Fateh, 2022). In the domestic context, increased government scrutiny and limited institutional support posed obstacles for BRAC's mobilisation efforts (Karim, 2021; Muhammad, 2015).

In international contexts, BRAC faces pressures to prioritise donor accountability over beneficiary needs. Donor expectations for swift results complicate the implementation of long-term programmes focused on structural change (Banks et al., 2015; Qayum, 2020). BRAC is capable of delivering services; however, it struggles to achieve structural change or scale beyond short-term initiatives. Consequently, the organisation has increasingly adopted service-delivery programmes that depend on individual enterprises rather than collective mobilisation efforts aimed at fostering long-term structural change (Fateh, 2022).

Moreover, tensions arise around managing community expectations, as participation does not always result in immediate material benefits, leading to scepticism or withdrawal (Sharma and Babu, 2022). Institutional and programme constraints, such as top-down decision-making and weak feedback mechanisms, sometimes diminish the influence of local voices on programme design and policy (Ahmed et al., 2023). Sustainability remains a crucial concern, as short project cycles and volunteer burnout threaten the long-term success of participatory mechanisms. Finally, cultural tensions and the risk of instrumentalising participation as a mere procedural requirement rather than a meaningful practice challenge BRAC’s efforts to promote legitimate community empowerment.

Faced with these multi-layered constraints, BRAC recognised that achieving transformative participation required not only programmatic changes but also more profound organisational learning and reflexivity. As BRAC leaders anticipated, initiatives focused on engaging rural communities were not enough to build strong societies. This led BRAC executives to re-evaluate the organisation's mobilisation strategies with the rural poor, particularly women, in communities characterised by

conflicting class and gender interests (Ahmed and Rafi 1999; Qayum et al., 2024). These lessons underscored the need for a more comprehensive understanding of rural society.

Consequently, in 1975, the organisation established a Research and Evaluation Department (RED) to develop a comprehensive understanding of traditional rural institutions and structures. BRAC's creation of RED is a deliberate effort to develop a technical intervention, a form of social-symbolic work. This involves intentionally constructing meanings, identities, and legitimacy that facilitate and maintain collective action (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Researchers at BRAC conducted a series of studies recognising that an effective strategy for rural development in Bangladesh requires a thorough understanding of traditional institutions (BRAC, 1983; Datta, 1979). Collectively, studies by the research division have demonstrated that in rural Bangladesh, the poor experience not only a lack of resources but also local power structures that limit their access to resources (Lewis and Hossain, 2008; Qayum et al., 2024).

These insights, combined with BRAC’s extensive history of challenging entrenched power structures, gender norms, and community inequalities, led to a rethinking of its participatory strategies. Instead of viewing participation as a fixed method, BRAC increasingly saw it as an adaptive, reflexive, and context-specific practice. The next section demonstrates how these organisational learnings were applied in the Climate Change Project (CCP), providing evidence of BRAC's reshaping of its participatory approaches through co-production in complex socio-cultural environments.

5.4 The Architecture of Co-production: Organisational Work Shaping CCP Dynamics

Building on this evolving organisational understanding, BRAC sought to embed more context-sensitive and inclusive participation within its programme structure. The Climate Change Project (CCP) provides a clear platform for observing this shift in practice. The following analysis examines how BRAC's organisational work within the CCP aimed to institutionalise co-production by translating participatory principles into operational routines, collaborative relationships, and discursive practices in a development context characterised by socio-economic and cultural complexity, such as in Mongla.

5.4.1 Situatedness of the Climate Change Project: The Purposeful Objective

BRAC has been recognised as a "pioneering" and "pace-setting" NGO, with its success rooted in its philosophy and identity as a learning organisation (Lovell, 1992). The organisation continues its holistic approach to developing humanitarian responses, including its leadership in tackling new development challenges and emergencies such as the climate change crisis (Roborgh et al., 2024). Its coordinated efforts towards need-based development services and resilience-building activities reflect the organisation's humanitarian and development objectives. To operate the Climate Change Project (CCP), BRAC adhered to the same principles—improving safe drinking water security to address water insecurity needs and helping communities build resilience against the impacts of climate change. In doing so, BRAC launched the CCP in Mongla, one of the most climate-vulnerable coastal cities, where every household faces a critical need for safe drinking water. The following comment from the Programme Head illustrates the contextualisation of the project's aims:

> *Mongla is one of the most climate-vulnerable areas among all the coastal regions of Bangladesh. We can still observe the devastating impacts of Cyclone Sidr and Cyclone Amphan on every part of the community. Furthermore, salinity intrusion is a silent disaster in Mongla, contaminating and destroying cultivated lands such as gardens or agricultural fields, fisheries, and all other traditional businesses in the community. BRAC advocates for localisation practices, and therefore, CCP has begun working in Mongla to provide humanitarian support to this vulnerable community. We are now planning to expand the project to offer water and livelihood support in Mongla (PH, 2nd interview).*

BRAC established a new CCP branch in Mongla to deliver efficient services and support the country's most climate-vulnerable communities. In line with social-symbolic work, this decision highlights how actors deliberately shape reality. Social-symbolic work influences perceptions of institutions, concepts, norms, aesthetics, values, and emotions (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012), which constitute organisational context. The CCP, as a social symbolic object, emphasises the ‘place’ and is physically present to address the community's crisis caused by climate vulnerability. The locations where organisational activities take place can greatly influence actors, their actions, and outcomes (Lawrence and Dover, 2015). The placement of organisational activities also significantly impacts participants, their behaviour, and the results of their actions. Establishing local branches becomes a symbolic anchor within the community. It integrates CCP into local narratives to deliver services effectively and monitor project outcomes. The presence of a local branch allows for the co-creation of meaning between the CCP and communities — residents begin to see the organisation as part of their social fabric. This practice exemplifies the relational aspect of social-symbolic work, which involves positioning the organisation as a collective actor, collaborating

with communities to shape relationships (Lawrence and Dover, 2015; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). A physical presence in the local community signals long-term commitment, trustworthiness, and legitimacy in the eyes of residents, government officials, and other NGOs.

While interviewing the Deputy Manager from the Head office, it was stated:

> *BRAC always feels the need to work closely with the people. That's why we have branches for various projects in every district of Bangladesh. Concerning the CCP, our motivation is that if we are serious about supporting communities most affected by climate change, we must be present where they are, not just formulate policies and plans from Dhaka. That's why almost every week, our staff at different levels from the head office visit the local branches (DM, 2nd interview).*

This perspective aligns with the concept of social-symbolic work, which highlights how organisations intentionally shape shared understandings of institutions, norms, and identities (Phillips and Lawrence, 2012). By establishing the project office locally, BRAC indicates that climate change is not just an abstract policy issue but a real, place-based challenge that requires ongoing engagement. During my stay in Mongla, I observed that each week, some head office staff visited the field, attended community meetings, and participated in workshops and meetings organised by the local branch. This deliberate choice to stay physically close performs vital relational work, building trust and legitimacy. It signals the CCP's long-term commitment and helps to overcome scepticism that development projects are temporary or donor-driven. The presence of local staff enables more frequent interactions, faster problem-solving, and visible accountability, all of which enhance community co-production. While interviewing one of the Project Officers, he explained the strategy of the CCP's doorstep services:

> *If anyone missed the courtyard meeting, I would then visit their individual house. We want to ensure they are covered on all the topics we intend to teach them, to provide safe water for every beneficiary (PO2).*

Another Project Officer narrated that:

> *We maintain a very trustworthy relationship with our beneficiaries. They rely on us and occasionally seek personal assistance, such as health advice, referrals to reputable doctors, bank loans, or employment opportunities. We do our best to support them from a humanitarian viewpoint. They hold high expectations of us and also show great respect and care in return. They always attempt to listen to our advice as well (PO1).*

As a coastal and underprivileged region of the country, Mongla's communication and transportation facilities are inadequate. Mongla covers a total area of 1,461.20 km². The CCP is a community development project; therefore, every staff member is required to conduct fieldwork on a daily basis. To facilitate this for the field staff, the head office established a sub-branch in addition to the main branch office in Mongla. The main branch office accommodates the managerial, accounting, and administrative staff, as well as the training, monitoring, and evaluation department, and logistics support staff. The sub-branch is managed and supervised by an Area Manager, who oversees six Project Officers working on the project. Dividing the offices into two branches improves the efficiency of field visits, allowing closer proximity to the community and streamlining project operations. The Programme Head explained:

> *From the Head Office, we formulate policies and mechanisms for the project. Nonetheless, our main component is our field office. We constantly need to support them with smooth operations so that we can ultimately reach the project's targets and objectives. Having two branches is costly, but it is also convenient for the field staff, which saves us time and transportation costs (PH, 2nd interview).*

Establishing two local branches broadens opportunities to engage with the local community. Localisation helps build relationships, understand the context, and identify the most effective solutions to tackle the climate crisis in Mongla. For example, one of the CAG members remarked:

> *In the community meetings, we discussed many issues. We shared our daily life experiences and hardships with them. BRAC people asked us how we are managing the water crisis and what we can do to solve these problems. It was a valuable experience sharing opportunities with the villagers through BRAC. The head office staff were present at the meeting. They listened to us carefully, took notes, and took photographs. They asked us many questions about water-related problems (CAG 1).*

This material and relational aspect of social-symbolic work enables the organisation to operate smoothly and achieve sustainable outcomes for the project. Having two local branches of BRAC's CCP in Mongla significantly bolsters the programme's co-production practices. Pestoff et al. (2012) argued that there is a 'glass ceiling' on citizens' participation in private and public service provision, whereas NGOs are better able to engage citizens in co-production. In co-production, collaborative practices for generating knowledge and solutions between diverse actors require ongoing engagement, mutual trust, and the integration of multiple knowledge systems, including scientific expertise and local or indigenous knowledge. A local presence in Mongla—a region highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, including sea-level rise, salinity intrusion, and cyclonic storms—enables CCP to engage more directly with affected communities, local governments, and other stakeholders. This proximity fosters deeper contextual understanding, builds trust, and creates opportunities for inclusive participation in problem identification, solution design, and implementation.

Moreover, a local branch strengthens capacity for regular knowledge-sharing forums, training activities, and adaptive experimentation, thereby empowering local actors and giving their voices a say in decision-making processes. It also allows the CCP to build stronger institutional partnerships, improve monitoring and feedback loops, and enhance the scalability and sustainability of interventions. The existence of two branch offices tackles logistical and operational challenges while providing an institutional foundation for promoting the principles and practices of co-production, contributing to more context-sensitive and resilient climate change adaptation efforts.

The Programme Head's comments on this strategic decision regarding local presence reflect this point:

> *To ensure our project runs smoothly, one of our key strategies is to keep the relevant authorities informed and in the communication loop. We consistently maintain liaison with local government authorities, members of NGOs, as well as the local elite and community. We work for the people, secure funding for the people, and also seek support from the community where we operate. If we fail to build trust within the community, we may be forced to close our project and leave the area (PH).*

Taken together, the localisation of CCP through its physical presence, branch structure, and routine engagement shows how BRAC establishes the material and relational foundations needed to embed co-production in a climate-vulnerable context. By integrating itself into the everyday lives of Mongla's residents, the organisation decreases social distance, builds trust, and creates conditions where communities can participate as genuine co-producers rather than passive recipients of aid. However, these structural arrangements rely heavily on the people who carry them out. The next section therefore explores how BRAC's recruitment strategy influences the identities,

capacities, and motivations of staff, and how intentional selection of personnel acts as another form of social-symbolic work that facilitates co-production in practice.

5.4.1.1 Reshaping Manpower: Purposeful Recruitment Strategy

BRAC employs a strategic approach to manpower selection that aligns with its mission-driven, people-centric, and impact-focused philosophy (Ahmed et al., 2023). It follows a competency-based recruitment strategy and uses a structured hiring process to assess both technical and soft skills. Over time, BRAC has developed a distinctive approach to manpower selection that supports its mission of empowering people and communities facing poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice. Their strategy is especially notable for its focus on local talent development and community-based recruitment (Ferdous, 2018).

For the CCP, BRAC recruited 24 staff for the head office and 32 staff for Mongla. CCP is overseen and supervised by BRAC's Head Office in Dhaka, the capital. The top management team comprises a Director, a Programme Head, a Programme Manager, a Deputy Manager, a Specialist in the Advocacy, Communication, and Knowledge Department, and other managers and officers. Senior staff participate in BRAC's policy and strategic decisions, while mid-level managers handle operational and supervisory tasks, as well as implementing organisational decisions, including those of Programme Managers and Deputy Managers. Field officials in Mongla include the Project Manager, Area Managers, Accountants, Capacity Building Officer, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer, Project Officers, and support staff. CCP's key stakeholders include donors, funders, regulators, beneficiaries, civil society, and officers in other NGOs and businesses.

A considerable number of BRAC's senior staff have pursued higher education, including PhDs and post-doctorates in Western countries, supported by various local and international funding sources (Chowdhury et al., 2014). In CCP, the Director, Programme Head, GIS Specialist, and some other staff members hold PhDs in Management and Social Development and have dedicated many years to working for BRAC. A significant number of mid-level staff are also highly qualified from overseas and top-ranking universities in Bangladesh. The Deputy Manager asserted that:

> *I was successful in my interview for this position because I recently earned my master's degree in environmental management and sustainability from Australia. I also have experience working with both national and international NGOs, which enhanced my CV and supported me in my daily tasks. Additionally, I am from the Khulna division, which gave me extra points as a local in the person specification (DM, 2nd interview).*

The CCP purposefully recruited senior-level staff internally to manage and oversee the project, aligning with the organisation's mission, vision, and strategies. Mid-level and operational staff were recruited through a combined approach. Some team members had worked with BRAC for many years on various projects before joining CCP, while others were newly recruited specifically for the project. Those from outside BRAC bring extensive experience in Bangladesh's social development, climate change, and environmental sciences. The project also adopted a gender-balanced recruitment approach, with a strong emphasis on recruiting women, particularly for roles that involve community engagement. This strategy can be analysed through the lens of social-symbolic work, which involves the intentional construction of meanings, identities, and legitimacy within social frameworks (Lawrence et al., 2010; Zilber, 2008). BRAC regards recruitment as a pathway to social transformation, embedding

symbolic narratives of empowerment, justice, and grassroots development within its hiring processes. This aligns with the concept of identity work, where recruitment materials and organisational discourse portray employees not just as staff but as agents of change, shaping both internal self-conceptions and external perceptions of the organisation. According to the Programme Head:

> *During the recruitment process, we aim to assess a person's attitude towards social work. Even in our job description, we emphasise this aspect more than the work itself. If you visit our recruitment webpage, you will see it written: " Working at BRAC is not like any other job. It is a platform where you can bring about real change for people who need it the most." (PH 2nd interview).*

This type of recruitment language functions as a medium for the discursive dimension of social-symbolic work by creating narratives that depict employment as a mission-driven, morally significant endeavour. In line with Zilber's (2008) notion of discursive symbolic work, in which language shapes institutional meanings and social roles, BRAC employs language that emphasises empowerment, social commitment, and community service. Their recruitment materials and job advertisements often describe roles not only in technical or functional terms but as opportunities to contribute to poverty reduction, gender equality, and national development (BRAC, 2020). This kind of language actively performs identity work, encouraging prospective employees to see themselves as agents of change, and legitimacy work by aligning individual roles with BRAC's broader institutional goals (Suddaby et al., 2014).

Such discursive strategies attract candidates who share BRAC's mission and help institutionalise its values, thereby strengthening its legitimacy within the wider development sector. The organisation adheres to inclusive hiring practices, with a particular emphasis on local community involvement and gender diversity, which

serves as legitimacy work, reinforcing the organisation's credibility and authenticity in promoting equitable development. The organisation engages in meaningful work by framing employment as a moral commitment linked to national progress and social justice, thereby embedding wider societal values into individual roles (Lawrence et al., 2010). One of the PO shared her thoughts on why she chose to join the CCP. She described:

> *As a woman, I prefer working with BRAC's project because of its respectful attitude towards women. I feel I can collaborate with my male colleagues with dignity and respect. Society also treats us differently when we work under the banner of BRAC because they understand we tirelessly strive to bring about change and justice in society. We face many challenges, but our orientation training and motivational activities help us become effective social workers (PO 1).*

Through this institutional work, BRAC distinguishes insiders from outsiders based on shared values and social commitment, fostering a cohesive organisational culture. Consequently, BRAC's recruitment strategy promotes the human resource function as a form of symbolic action that reinforces and reproduces its institutional identity and societal legitimacy. BRAC's recruitment strategy plays a pivotal role in cultivating a culture of co-production by selecting individuals who are not only technically qualified but also socially attuned to the communities they serve. In co-production practice, the collaborative process between service providers and users works together to design and deliver services that depend heavily on mutual trust, shared agency, and local participation (Osborne et al., 2016).

BRAC's recruitment strategy operates on two distinct but complementary levels: management and frontline, both supporting the integration of co-production into its organisational routines. At the management level, BRAC deliberately appoints

Programme Managers and Coordinators who share its participatory ethos and are trained to craft interventions that prioritise citizen engagement. This level is vital for fostering a supportive environment for co-production by shaping policies, allocating resources, and institutionalising participatory planning and monitoring mechanisms. From analysing the CCP's organogram, I observed that most of the top-positioned staff are recruited internally.

At the front-line level, BRAC recruits primarily from local communities (BRAC, 2020), ensuring that field organisers and community development workers are culturally aware and socially integrated. These staff members act as trusted mediators who translate organisational priorities into locally relevant actions and bring community perspectives back into programme planning. As one Project Officer noted:

> *Because we are from here, they listen to us, and we can speak for them when decisions are made (PO 5).*

This policy dissolves traditional hierarchical boundaries, encourages co-learning, and fosters collaborative problem-solving between BRAC personnel and beneficiaries.

Together, these two layers constitute a reinforcing mechanism for co-production: management legitimises and allocates resources to participatory approaches, while frontline staff put them into practice daily. Recruitment and training processes highlight values such as empathy, participation, and social commitment (Westley et al., 2014), embedding co-production into organisational culture rather than viewing it as a temporary project. In this way, recruitment functions as a form of social-symbolic work, signalling to both employees and communities that participation is valued and expected, and aligning administrative roles with a shared sense of ownership over development outcomes (Khatun, 2016).

5.4.1.2 Reshaping Manpower: Purposeful Staff Development and Capacity Building Strategy

BRAC is portrayed as a learning organisation dedicated to continuous investment and commitment to advancing knowledge and practice in development (Banks et al., 2024). Since its inception, BRAC has significantly fostered an organisational culture that promotes learning (Ahmed et al., 2023; Banks et al., 2024). The organisation encourages a culture of ongoing learning by developing and sharing knowledge across programmes and departments, with an emphasis on capacity building and knowledge enhancement. BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division (RED) is one of the country's largest multidisciplinary research bodies, conducting over a hundred research projects both nationally and internationally (Chowdhury et al., 2014). The division plays a crucial role in designing BRAC's development initiatives, monitoring progress, documenting achievements, and conducting impact assessments. This research supports BRAC's programme decisions, improving performance and ensuring that development efforts are evidence-based, effective, and responsive to community needs (Chowdhury et al., 2014).

BRAC's expansion and growth can be attributed to effective leadership (Cho and Sultana, 2015). Human Resource Development (HRD) has actively provided training to improve rural individuals' and staff's technical and organisational skills, promoting participatory and compliant management (Howes and Sattar, 2013; Lovell, 1992). BRAC allocates 7% of its budget to training and staff development. Each day, BRAC receives hundreds of job applications. After recruitment, young graduates undergo training in development methodologies, motivational techniques, rural engagement, awareness raising, primary healthcare, operations management, and various

specialised skills. Staff also receive regular refresher training (Ahmed et al., 2023; Lovell, 1992; Roborgh et al., 2024).

At the early stage of the CCP, BRAC provided a three-day residential “Staff Foundation Training” for all levels of staff to educate the team about the project's importance, objectives, and operational mechanisms. The residential training also fostered opportunities for rapport-building with the team from the project's inception. Since then, the project staff have frequently received competency-based training and capacity-building activities. The project also offers training on Gender and Safeguarding, Capacity Building on Planning, and Capacity Building on Communication and Stakeholder Engagement. Alongside formal training, the project staff regularly participate in various workshops, seminars, and special talks on climate change and social development. The Project Manager of the Mongla branch described:

> *I have been working with BRAC for 13 years. The organisation fosters a culture of continuous learning. I believe the position I currently hold is the result of various skills development training, including management and operations, leadership, IT, and handling critical situations, as well as many other workshops I have attended in the past. The organisation owns 18 Training and Learning Centres (TLCS), which provide training for staff across the country. TLCs are resourceful, modern, systematic, and inherently attractive, motivating us to learn (PM, 2nd interview).*

One of the Project Officers mentioned that:

> *BRAC’s training programmes focus on specific goals. Climate change is a serious crisis. I was unfamiliar with many scientific terms and their effects. Since joining the project, I have attended various training sessions and workshops. Most importantly, the training has helped us develop the skills to effectively communicate messages about the complex impacts of climate change to the grassroots population, who are unaware of*

> *one of the biggest crises they face. Motivating and assisting them to understand this crisis remains a challenging task (PO4, 2nd interview).*

The organisation strongly emphasises staff development to improve employee skills, leadership capacity, and long-term career growth for both its staff and beneficiaries. The strategy focuses on continuous learning, leadership development, diversity, and innovation to create a workforce that supports its social impact mission (Banks et al., 2024). Its intellectual and educational tools have gained a leading position. BRAC has established a Centre for Development Management (CDM), which plays a crucial role in delivering leadership and management development programmes. The CDM serves as a centre for training and capacity-building initiatives to enhance the skills of BRAC's personnel and stakeholders. BRAC prioritises fostering effective leadership, strategic thinking, and operational excellence among its staff through programmes such as the Management Development Programme (MDP). These programmes support BRAC's mission to promote sustainable development and organisational strengthening. The MDP for staff, launched in 1990, now extends beyond BRAC to include various foreign institutions. It is a strategic initiative to develop leadership and managerial competencies within the organisation (Mair et al., 2012).

BRAC’s staff development strategy ensures that employees are continually progressing both professionally and personally. For the Mongla branch, the CCP designated a Capacity Building Officer (CBO) to train staff members, beneficiaries, and other community participants. According to her:

> *I joined the CCP as a new staff member. Since then, I have undertaken multiple training sessions and attended seminars and workshops, which have helped me become a confident trainer. One of the most important skills I have developed is communicating*

empathetically with the grassroots population. I am really pleased about this (CBO, 2nd interview).

The Project Manager of the Mongla branch described:

All staff regularly attended training and workshops for our project. After joining the project, all management staff and POs were required to participate in various training sessions and workshops to improve their skills, share knowledge, and gain further understanding of the climate crisis to operate more effectively. All our training sessions and workshops are designed by experts but based on field research. This provides one of the best opportunities for BRAC's staff, as they receive various skills development training to run projects smoothly (PM).

The management team regularly engages in training, workshops, and seminars focused on leadership, programme management, and motivational skills. BRAC is committed to participatory learning, involving stakeholders and community members in the educational process to ensure that programmes and interventions align with local needs and objectives. The Human Resource Department (HRD) and BRAC University act as the main training providers for the organisation. The organisation creates comprehensive training modules, materials, and other resources essential for effective learning and training facilities. The CBO also remarked that:

One of the things I really appreciate is our training materials and modules. They are full of information, yet very precise and innovative. They are engaging, easy to explain, and effectively deliver messages to the right audience. They provide sufficient materials to ensure a clear understanding and convey the message effectively to everyone (CBO, 2nd interview).

Various training initiatives and staff development opportunities act as forms of social-symbolic work within institutional settings. These purposeful learning programmes are

instrumental in shaping and reinforcing BRAC's organisational logics. They contribute meaningfully by integrating staff development into a broader narrative of social justice, sustainable development, and ethical leadership. Through these programmes, career progression is not solely framed as individual success but is connected to collective goals and mission-driven service, thus aligning personal growth with institutional purpose, which highlights the relational aspect of social-symbolic work. Different training and workshop initiatives exemplify the interaction between the discursive and material dimensions of social-symbolic work.

From a discursive perspective, these programmes serve as platforms where BRAC articulates its core values, development narratives, and ideologies. Through lectures, manuals, training modules, group discussions, and storytelling, BRAC frames development not merely as economic upliftment but as a process of empowerment, rights realisation, and social transformation. These discursive practices enable participants to internalise organisational scripts that redefine their roles—from beneficiaries to agents of change or from staff to ethical leaders—thus reinforcing shared symbolic orders (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Simultaneously, BRAC's training embodies a material dimension through the structured environments, physical resources, and visible rituals it employs. Uniforms, training certificates, organisational signage, role-specific toolkits, and even the design of training spaces serve as tangible markers of inclusion, recognition, and status. These material artefacts function as symbols of legitimacy and belonging, transforming abstract ideals into embodied experiences. By combining discursive messaging with material expressions, BRAC's training programmes do more than transmit knowledge—they actively construct a symbolic world where organisational values are made visible, felt, and lived. This integration aligns with the theory of institutional work,

which recognises that symbolic systems are sustained not only through language but also through physical structures and embodied practices that reinforce institutional logics (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

5.5 Flexible and Adaptive Structure: Purposeful Loyalty Culture

BRAC displays several typical features of a centralised, hierarchical organisation (Ahmed et al., 2023). A development project's standard organogram follows a structured hierarchy that supports effective administration, implementation, and monitoring. The organisational culture is heavily shaped by its leadership, while, in turn, the culture within an organisation can influence its leadership's development (Bass, 1985). Although the organisation has a hierarchical structure, the charismatic leadership of BRAC's founder, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, inspired his staff with values aligned with the organisational vision and objectives. BRAC also plans to provide Organisational Culture and Values Training (OCV) to its entire team to foster these values (Cho and Sultana, 2015). Sir Abed introduced a distinctive element to BRAC's workplace culture in Bangladesh—the "Bhai Culture" (Brotherhood Culture), which affects employee interactions, leadership styles, and organisational loyalty (Ahmed et al., 2023).

The Bhai Culture is an informal workplace norm in Bangladesh in which employees—especially men—address one another as "Bhai" (meaning "brother") to foster camaraderie and maintain social harmony. Various motivational and organisational cultures of values training have cultivated a strong commitment to the mission; employees often develop a deep emotional connection to BRAC's poverty alleviation and social development goals. This emotional influence leads to a long-term employment history within the organisation, particularly among senior staff. Many

employees remain with BRAC for decades, reflecting a sense of job security and organisational attachment (Cho and Sultana, 2015). One of the Area Managers from the engineering department expressed:

> *Our CCP staff are like a family. We have harmonious relationships with each other, and everyone supports each other in doing our jobs. If I face any problems in the field, our project manager will offer his best support to resolve them. Under my supervision, there are six Project Officers. All of them are hardworking and honest in their work, and we work with a good team spirit for the project (AME).*

This example illustrates CCP's internal organisational culture, emphasising the relational aspect of social-symbolic work by deliberately fostering trust, mutual recognition, and a shared identity within organisational behaviour.

During the data collection period, I observed the Mongla branch office maintaining a lively working environment and a dedicated workforce. The head office staff frequently visit the branch, and the branch staff dedicate their time to them, sometimes even outside of their usual working hours. Most of the POs are young, energetic individuals motivated to work for the CCP to bring positive change to climate-vulnerable communities in Mongla. A large number of field staff are recruited from the local community, demonstrating a strong sense of belonging and a willingness to collaborate with the CCP for a worthy cause. It is also noted that outside of project work, the office fosters a good social and support system. For example, the office has hired an Office Assistant and a Cook to prepare lunch for the staff, and during lunchtime, everyone eats together. This social interaction helps staff recharge, engage in informal work-related discussions, and build interpersonal relationships with colleagues.

The organisation introduced various recognition schemes to motivate employees, including BRAC's Values Award, the Award for Performance of the Year, and the Fazle Hasan Abed Award. Besides fostering an interactive and cohesive relational culture, the organisation provides several monetary incentives, such as festival bonuses. BRAC employs a moderate salary structure to reduce adverse effects on the competitive job market (Ahmed et al., 2023). In addition to salaries, the organisation offers festival bonuses, transport allowances, daily allowances, mobile phone allowances, and health insurance. It also provides pensions and gratuity payments to permanent staff. Employees are also recognised through BRAC's awards, like the Sir Fazle Hasan Abed Values Award. This accolade is awarded to staff members who consistently uphold BRAC's four core values:

- ***Integrity*** *– Acting with honesty and strong ethical principles.*
- ***Innovation*** *– Finding creative solutions to development challenges.*
- ***Inclusiveness*** *– Engaging all people, especially the marginalised.*
- ***Effectiveness*** *– Achieving impactful results with efficiency* (Fateh, 2022).

These awards demonstrate BRAC's commitment to its core values and its dedication to promoting excellence within its community. They are manifested in tangible forms and practices that illustrate values, status, and institutional identity.

BRAC's recognitional awards, such as the Sir Fazle Hasan Abed Values Award, exemplify how social-symbolic work functions across material, relational, and discursive dimensions within organisational life. Materially, these awards are embodied in tangible artefacts, such as cash, certificates, trophies, and formal ceremonies, that solidify abstract values like integrity and inclusiveness into visible,

enduring forms. Relationally, the awards foster networks of influence and moral leadership by publicly recognising individuals who embody BRAC's core values, thereby strengthening trust, motivation, and value alignment across teams and hierarchies. Discursively, the awards help shape and circulate narratives that legitimise BRAC's institutional identity, linking personal behaviour with collective ideals through speeches, publications, and internal communications.

The organisation also publishes pictures, comments, and details of the ceremonial events on BRAC's webpage to motivate others. (BRAC, 2024). Through this multidimensional symbolic infrastructure, BRAC promotes a value-driven organisational culture that aligns symbolic meaning with material practices, social relationships, and ideological narratives (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). These values and mission-driven practices represent the sociological aspect of social-symbolic work. The strategy-as-practice perspective views practitioners as complex entities, shaped by their social existence, socio-cultural and rhetorical skills, all of which influence how they operate (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Van Kleef et al., 2012; Voronov and Vince, 2012).

Employees take pride in BRAC's impact, reinforcing a shared sense of purpose linked to the co-production principle. The sense of inclusion fostered by this approach was also evident among staff, from senior management to the lowest levels. It is observed that the Director and Programme Head of CCP consistently refer to "we," "our value," and "our goal" rather than explicitly naming the organisation. The success factors embedded in the organisational culture include improvements in opportunities for vulnerable communities, social awareness, prioritisation of women's fundamental issues, safeguarding, participatory management, decentralisation, unwavering and

visionary leadership within a democratic organisational framework, reforms in national systems and policies for sustainability, and a shared set of core values. Participatory management fosters a supportive and collaborative workplace environment. The familial atmosphere encourages long-term commitment to the organisation and facilitates effective conflict resolution.

As a homegrown international organisation and development NGO, BRAC maintains its ‘face value’ within the country. Cho and Sultana (2015) argued that the growth of BRAC as an NGO and social enterprise is carefully examined, revealing that Sir Abed's leadership significantly contributed to its development into a successful, sustainable, and international organisation. He demonstrates strong self-confidence, a future-oriented mindset, effective leadership, and a propensity for risk-taking and innovation. Additionally, he emphasised the importance of transparency and efficiency in management. BRAC is governed by a board that includes three committees: Finance and Audit, Investment, and the Executive Management Committee. Each committee comprises distinguished professionals, activists, and reputable entrepreneurs who bring their diverse skills and experiences to the organisation's governance. They conduct external and internal audits for each project, under the oversight of the organisation’s Monitoring and Evaluation department. The organisation's discipline and transparency management systems foster a positive and loyal working environment. According to one of the engineers:

> *Working in CCP is challenging. BRAC doesn’t compromise on quality. However, it is worthwhile because we feel secure in our jobs. Organisational transparency is important to me. If I can prove myself after leaving CCP, there is a strong chance of joining another project. I will not be unemployed. It also has a strong brand image and international reputation. As BRAC staff members, we are highly respected (AME).*

5.6 Bridging Divides: Building Trust Across Community Lines

Additionally, the CCP concentrates on community boundaries. For instance, in Mongla, these boundaries are not only geographical but also social, occupational, and institutional, and the CCP undertakes significant boundary work to negotiate them. A clear example is the geographical division between the embanked and unembanked areas. Communities within the embankments often perceive themselves as comparatively safer and prioritise different adaptation strategies (e.g., improved drainage systems) compared to those outside, who face recurring tidal floods and focus on elevated housing or access to freshwater. To address this urgent issue from the outset of the project, CCP held community meetings in every Upazila, inviting residents from all parts of the village, and collected opinions from community representatives to identify the best solutions for tackling the climate crisis and to develop the climate resilience plan. According to the Programme Manager:

> *We engaged our community members in the planning process. For example, to install our community interventions, we held a meeting with representatives from all unions of the Upazila. They advised us on which school or madrasa would be the best location for our community tanks. We then discussed the matter with the authorities and formed a Water Management Group from the institute to plan who would maintain these tanks (PMH).*

To ensure the smooth operation of this strategy, the CCP's field staff deliberately held joint meetings with representatives from both areas, symbolically bridging the physical and experiential divide so that adaptation planning reflects a shared understanding of climate risks. One of the Project Officers explained that:

> *Through the awareness meeting, we raised awareness about protecting our Sundarban[2]. Mangrove forests, Golpata, and Keoras are valuable assets in this area. How to protect them to maintain the ecosystem, create earning opportunities by cultivating them, and protect the area from climate vulnerability (PO 2).*

Another important community boundary is gendered participation in decision-making. In Bangladesh, society is patriarchal, and traditionally, men dominate public meetings. Women's voices are often excluded despite their vital knowledge about water use, food security, and caregiving. BRAC's CCP employs women representatives in mixed forums, performing inclusion work that shifts the social order of whose voices are valued in co-production. This intentional bridging of gender boundaries redefines who is authorised to speak for the community and expands the range of solutions considered. For instance, in every volunteer group, community performance activities, and steering committees, CCP engaged 50% of women from the community. One community member explained:

> *Joining the CAG has made us more confident women. As you know, the CAG rule requires 50% women. However, not all women have had the same opportunities as I did. I have been working as a social worker in my area for a long time, but some women did not have this chance. After attending CAG meetings and training, I have noticed that many of them have improved their skills. They are no longer shy; if someone from the head office visits us, they are willing to speak and answer questions (CAG 1).*

Livelihood boundaries also shape the situation. Mongla is home to fishers, day labourers, shrimp farmers, and small trader groups who often experience climate

[2] It is the world's largest mangrove forest. The islands are also of great economic importance as a storm barrier, shore stabiliser, nutrient and sediment trap, a source of timber and natural resources, and support a wide variety of aquatic, benthic and terrestrial organisms.

impacts differently and hold conflicting priorities. Shrimp farmers tend to favour saline-tolerant infrastructure, while crop cultivators advocate for the preservation of freshwater. The CCP organises multi-stakeholder dialogues to highlight these tensions and transform them into shared resilience challenges, moving away from zero-sum conflicts. This boundary-spanning work is essential to prevent community efforts from becoming fragmented. Additionally, there are institutional boundaries between local government representatives, NGOs, and informal community leaders. BRAC intentionally involves Union Parishad members in project planning meetings and employs participatory vulnerability assessments as a “boundary object” that all actors can engage with, regardless of institutional affiliation. This strategy reduces mistrust, promotes a shared language of climate risk, and symbolically unites government, civil society, and citizens around a common agenda for adaptation and resilience-building.

All these dimensions relate to the symbolic formation of social connections and responsibilities that support cooperation and a shared goal (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). CCP achieves this through its grassroots structures, especially via Project Officers, who are mainly local ‘field workers’ representing the integration of institutional knowledge and community trust. Embedding service delivery within the community's social understanding enables the organisation to communicate proximity, solidarity, and respect effectively. These aspects of solidarity, mutual trust, and respect serve as symbolic actions that nurture a sense of belonging, emotional commitment, and relational reciprocity that go beyond simple transactional interactions.

As the analysis of the Climate Change Project demonstrates, BRAC’s approach to co-production is not limited to individual programmes but is rooted in deeper organisational processes that influence how participation is enacted across various contexts. Before

reaching the conclusion of this chapter, it is helpful to consolidate these organisational dynamics through a focused synthesis of the core elements of social-symbolic work that enable BRAC to embed co-production as a routine organisational practice. Table 5.2 summarises these elements — such as physical presence, membership arrangements, co-production spaces, staff development, and organisational culture —and illustrates how each contributes to maintaining co-production through discursive, relational, and material mechanisms.

Table 5.2: Social-symbolic Work Underpinning BRAC's Embedding of Co-production

SSW Elements	SSW Mechanisms	Aims	Predominant Dimensions
Physical Presence	Establishing CCP main and sub-branches in Mongla; routine field visits; doorstep support for households	Strengthen proximity, legitimacy, and everyday interaction; normalise co-production as routine practice	**Relational + Material**
Membership	Local recruitment; gender-balanced staffing (50% women in CAGs and WMGs); involvement of diverse livelihood groups	Enhance representation and integrate local knowledge; reinforce shared identity and community ownership	**Relational**
Co-production Space as a Unit	Community meetings, PRA exercises, courtyard sessions, multi-stakeholder dialogues	Provide inclusive forums for joint problem-solving; bridge social, gender, and livelihood boundaries	**Relational + Discursive**

SSW Elements	SSW Mechanisms	Aims	Predominant Dimensions
HR Development	Foundation Training, Training and Learning Centres (TLCs), leadership programmes, CBO-led workshops	Embed participatory values; develop skills for climate communication, community engagement, and adaptive practice	**Discursive + Material**
Nurturing "Bhai" Culture	Values-based leadership, teamwork norms, recognition schemes, practices encouraging social cohesion	Foster loyalty, mutual support, and emotional commitment; reduce hierarchical distance and promote collective purpose	**Relational + Discursive**

Table 5.2 illustrates how these organisational elements collectively strengthen BRAC's participatory ethos by embedding meaning-making practices, trust-based relationships, and enabling structures into daily routines. These interconnected aspects of social-symbolic work support stabilising co-production as both an operational approach and an organisational value, thus linking BRAC's past participatory initiatives with the modern practices examined in the CCP.

5.7 Conclusion

The synthesis shown in Table 5.2 highlights how BRAC's organisational routines, cultural norms, and structural arrangements work together to maintain its commitment to co-production. These mechanisms—such as physical proximity through local branches, inclusive membership practices, participatory decision-making spaces, ongoing staff development, and a loyalty-driven organisational culture—demonstrate

that co-production within BRAC is gradually created through programme design and deeper, institutionalised processes of social-symbolic work. Overall, these practices normalise participation as a routine organisational expectation rather than just a project-level strategy.

This chapter demonstrates that BRAC actively engages in social-symbolic work to embed co-production into its organisational routines and culture. Driven by its mission to empower communities to eliminate poverty, illiteracy, disease, and injustice, BRAC intentionally develops policies, structures, and practices that make community participation not just possible but expected. From establishing Village Organisations, Polli Shomaj and the Climate Change Project (CCP) in Mongla, BRAC consistently presents citizens as co-producers of solutions rather than passive recipients of aid.

This analysis shows that BRAC's approach combines discursive, relational, and material efforts to institutionalise co-production. Discursively, BRAC promotes empowerment narratives that legitimise participation, presenting it as both a right and a duty. Relationally, it builds proximity through local branches, fosters trust-based relationships via boundary-spanning roles, and encourages inclusive decision-making by enforcing rules such as 50% women's representation. Materially, it supports these practices with recruitment pipelines, training infrastructures, participatory planning tools, and recognition systems that emphasise and reward co-productive behaviour. Together, these aspects ensure that co-production is not just occasional but genuinely embedded in organisational routines.

In response to Research Question 1, this chapter finds that NGOs embed co-production by orchestrating interconnected social-symbolic practices that (a) redefine identities and authorisations, (b) normalise collaborative problem-solving, and (c)

integrate participation into organisational systems and incentives. In BRAC's case, this orchestration creates a replicable framework comprising physical proximity, intentional recruitment and staff development, inclusive forums that bridge gender, livelihood, and institutional divides, and participatory tools that function as boundary objects. These mechanisms turn community diversity into a productive resource, fostering collective resilience rather than entrenching fragmentation.

Conceptually, this chapter deepens the understanding of co-production as an organisational achievement, not merely a participatory method, but one sustained through symbolic and structural efforts. Empirically, it offers novel insights into how an NGO translates a co-production ethos into everyday practice in climate-affected areas. Practically, it introduces a model for how NGOs can implement co-production on a larger scale by aligning discourse, relationships, and resources in mutually reinforcing ways.

Chapter 6

Transforming Selves and Shaping Systems: Co-production for the Creation of Public Value

6.1 Introduction

Co-production is widely recognised as a transformative approach within public and community services, offering opportunities for more responsive, inclusive, and resilient forms of value creation (Osborne et al., 2016; Osborne et al., 2022). In development contexts, it is often celebrated for enabling citizens and professionals to combine their assets, knowledge, and capabilities to design and deliver better solutions (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). Its participatory philosophy—reflected in the "Four Co's" of co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery, and co-assessment—positions individuals as active contributors rather than passive recipients (Nabatchi et al., 2017; McMullin, 2022).

However, in marginal economies like Bangladesh, these promises cannot be assured. The very conditions that make co-production desirable also make it difficult to achieve. Socio-cultural barriers—including ingrained gender norms, patron–client relationships, hierarchical values, and respect for authority—often limit grassroots participation, while structural issues such as poverty, unstable livelihoods, and low education levels restrict individuals' ability to engage. Long-standing aid dependency reinforces expectations that NGOs will provide and communities will receive, with power imbalances influencing which knowledge is acknowledged. Although co-production scholarship increasingly emphasises the empowerment potential of participation, much less attention has been given to how co-production functions in aid-dependent environments where identities, expectations, and relationships are shaped by deep-

rooted hierarchies. The question of how beneficiaries and NGO workers reshape their roles under such constraints, therefore, remains largely unexplored.

Within this challenging environment, the chapter explores the second research question of the thesis:

“How do individual actors (staff and citizens) reimagine their roles towards co-production to ensure beneficiaries’ participation in development activities to meet social needs?”

To answer this question, the chapter draws on social-symbolic work theory, which emphasises the discursive, material, and relational processes—such as meaning-making, identity construction, and boundary negotiation—that enable actors to reinterpret their roles. This perspective helps to understand co-production not just as a set of participatory methods but as a deeper process of identity and relationship transformation, through which individuals in aid-dependent contexts gradually shift from dependency-oriented roles towards more empowered and collaborative forms of participation.

Using BRAC’s Climate Change Programme (CCP) in Mongla, Bangladesh, as the empirical setting, the chapter demonstrates how community involvement, resource mobilisation, and capability enhancement function as interconnected forms of social-symbolic work. These practices help transform the mindsets of both staff and citizens, encouraging them to see themselves—and each other—as co-producers of climate resilience. The following sections explore these dynamics further, showing how co-production becomes rooted in personal transformations within a climate-vulnerable context.

6.2 Community Involvement: Building Spaces for Lasting Impact

The core idea of co-production is citizens working together with service providers to achieve a common goal (Pestoff, 2020). Co-production is therefore more than just a technical process; it signifies a meeting of minds where residents and public service providers collaborate to develop shared solutions (Osborne et al., 2013). Such collaboration fosters opportunities for sustainable and contextually grounded outcomes (Pestoff and Brandsen, 2013). For NGOs, involving communities is vital for accurately identifying needs and designing development strategies that reflect the lived experiences of those communities (McMullin, 2022).

BRAC's CCP embraced this principle by making analytical and pragmatic choices grounded in evidence-based activities. By involving citizens not merely as recipients but as active partners, development initiatives can foster trust, strengthen social bonds, and cultivate shared ownership of both challenges and solutions (Osborne and Strokosch, 2022; Pestoff et al., 2012). This participation is particularly important in climate adaptation, where local knowledge is essential for developing resilient and acceptable strategies. In this way, community involvement functions not only as a mechanism for service delivery but also as a pathway for creating long-term social impact and resilience. CCP's work in Mongla was intentionally aimed at community members to help them increasingly see themselves as co-producers rather than passive recipients, and for professionals to become facilitators. This shift is gradual and must be nurtured through organisational practices that reshape people's sense of agency, responsibility, and contribution.

6.2.1 Creating Spaces for Participation

To promote a climate-resilient community and assist citizens through targeted aid, such as providing rainwater harvesting facilities to the most vulnerable population in Mongla, the CCP established inclusive spaces for community participation. Addressing critical issues like the climate crisis by involving vulnerable groups is vital, as they are disproportionately impacted by climate change (Kagan and Dodge, 2023). Their experiences provide essential insights for effective responses (Darjee et al., 2023; Bremer and Meisch, 2017). Deliberate actions are needed to democratise co-production by including marginalised perspectives (Durose and Richardson, 2022) and to remove systemic barriers such as limited access to information, insufficient resources, and widespread mistrust—factors that often hinder involvement and risk perpetuating inequalities (Fledderus et al., 2015). To build a climate-resilient community, the CCP initiated activities by engaging in discussions with the community and inviting them to actively participate in the development intervention. As one of the Project Officers stated:

> *To achieve our goal, we adopted a distinctive approach to development. We do not plan to offer spoon-fed services; instead, we want the community to understand the actions they need to take to change their situation and develop better preparation and adaptation strategies through their own initiatives and resources. We aim to support them with both tangible and intangible assistance. For tangible support, as you can see, we are providing them with technology-based water tanks. For intangible support, we are empowering them to tackle their own battles against climate change. We deliver effective awareness-raising training, provide assistance, and foster a locally led development approach. We are harnessing the community's potential (PO 4).*

BRAC is recognised for its participatory approach, which emphasises citizen involvement in identifying community needs before project implementation (Chowdhury et al., 2017). The CCP adopted consultative methods and took proactive steps to encourage behavioural change and sustain community engagement. The strategies, aligned with co-production principles, were integrated from the beginning of the project, demonstrating CCP's dedication to a collaborative, community-focused response to climate change. One key way the CCP promotes co-production is through organising community meetings. These gatherings are not merely informational; they serve as platforms where residents can voice concerns, prioritise issues, and discuss potential solutions. By creating such spaces, the CCP shows that participant perspectives are not only valued but also essential. This inclusive approach allows community members to see themselves as active contributors rather than passive recipients. For instance:

> *The first step we took to engage the community was to inform them about our strategy. Following a baseline survey, we invited the community to learn about our efforts to address the climate change crisis. We called for a community meeting in each Ward within all unions and invited all local leaders, such as the Union Chairman and Ward Members, respected individuals, and the public from across the village. Our aim was to ensure the messages reached everyone. We also asked them about their water-related problems and other issues connected to climate change. It was an open discussion, and everyone participated enthusiastically (PO 3).*

The following Figure 6.1 describes the gradual initiatives the CCP has taken to create spaces for the marginalised

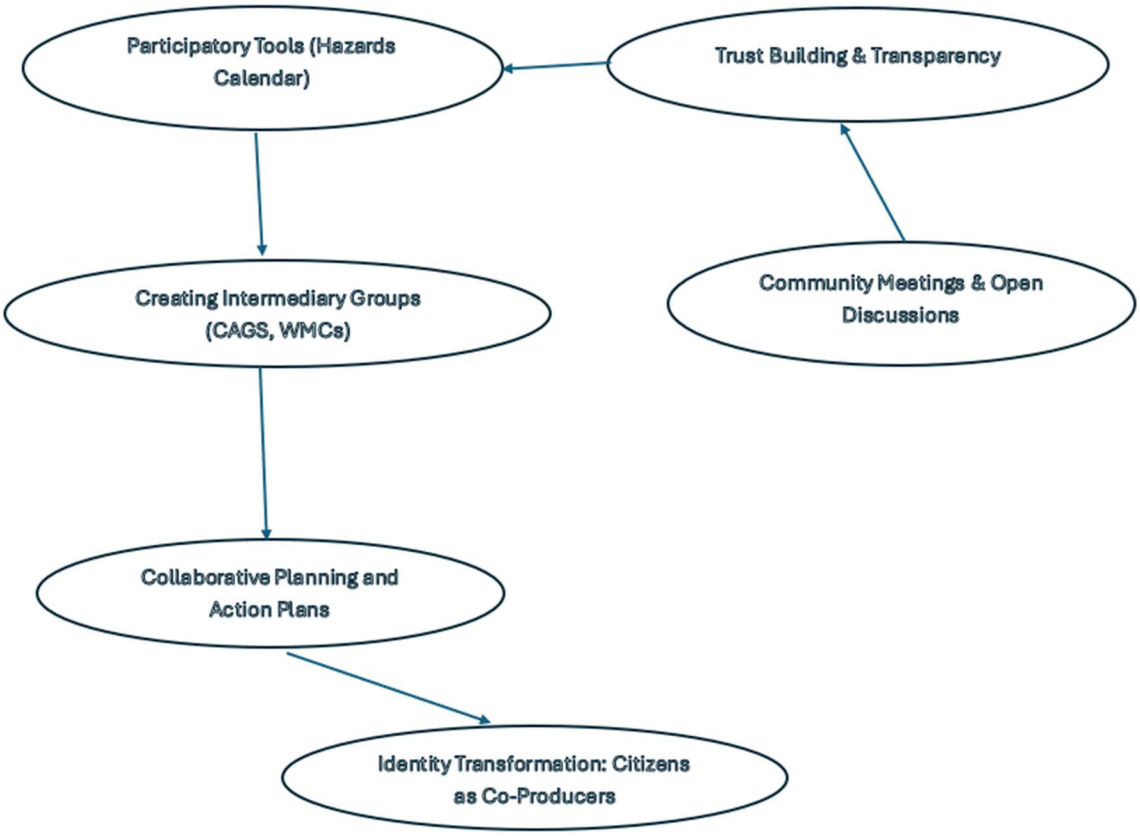


Figure 6.1: Creating Spaces to be Co-productive

Figure 6.1 illustrates the step-by-step process through which the CCP created participatory spaces for marginalised groups to become co-producers. Beginning with baseline assessments and introductory meetings, CCP built trust and transparency, followed by ward-level community gatherings where residents identified climate-related challenges and shared local knowledge. These spaces gradually developed into formal structures, such as Climate Action Groups (CAGs) and the Water Management Committee (WMC), allowing community members to take on roles in planning, monitoring, and decision-making. The figure shows how these incremental initiatives collectively fostered a collaborative environment, enabling residents to participate in the development intervention and to progressively transition into co-producers.

CCP's kick-off meetings in each ward are systematically organised to achieve various objectives related to co-production. These meetings primarily focus on building trust and inviting individuals to become development partners in the project. CCP promotes transparency and respects local knowledge and voices by openly sharing its strategy and encouraging community-wide participation from the outset. This approach is vital for successful co-production, as emphasised by Loeffler and Bovaird (2021). Additionally, by engaging both local elites and the broader community, the CCP aims to establish legitimacy for the project, which seeks to develop intermediary groups that support the co-production process (Haug, 2023).

Participation in these meetings did not happen automatically, as many typically see themselves as recipients of aid rather than as co-producers. CCP, therefore, used a set of strategies to encourage involvement. Staff members leveraged their longstanding presence and reputation in Mongla to build trust and emphasised that the meetings were not about receiving charity but about co-creating solutions. To motivate attendance, they highlighted the urgency of the climate crisis and framed participation as both a right and a responsibility, especially for those most affected. During the meetings, facilitators used participatory techniques such as open-floor discussions, small-group dialogues, and priority-setting exercises, enabling participants to plan how they could collaborate to tackle the climate crisis. These approaches made the co-production initiatives more inclusive, reinforcing the idea that local knowledge was valued as expertise. As one of the CAG members asserted:

> *I am a local resident; I am aware of local issues and how we handle them daily. They wanted to learn from us about our survival strategies and everyday struggles (CAG 2).*

During one of the observations at the courtyard meeting, I noticed that a Project Officer was encouraging the people by saying:

> *We are the residents of this area. Climate change is causing many problems in our daily lives. But due to all these issues, can we leave our land? All the participants replied 'no'. The PO was questioning again, 'What are the solutions?' Then he added, 'As we cannot leave this place, we have to initiate so that we can prevent our suffering. We all must work together (Observation notes).*

Creating these participatory spaces and brainstorming strategies shifts participation from mere consultation to fostering a sense of personal responsibility. By connecting with social symbolic concepts—such as rituals of inclusion, deliberative practices, and recognition of local knowledge—residents' self-perceptions are reshaped, encouraging community members to move beyond passivity and become active co-producers of change. This participatory approach provides participants with the opportunity to express their concerns and negotiate collective agendas. Drawing on social-symbolic theory, these meetings can be viewed as processes that forge new identities and shared meanings, aligning individual self-perceptions with a collective responsibility for climate resilience (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). The following quotation from one of the Project Officers highlights the project's motivation for this approach, creating space for community co-production:

> *From the project's name, you might realise that our main goal is to build resilience to address the climate change crisis and help beneficiaries access safe drinking water from rainwater. We aim to support the community through engagement initiatives. We involve people at all levels, from government officials to grassroots populations, employing various methods and strategies. We involved the UNO (the highest government authority at the upazila level) as a member of our Advisory Committee, the local government's Department of Public Health Engineering*

> *(DPHE) for community interventions, the UP Chairman and WARD members, local elites, and grassroots populations in our CAGs and WMC. We assigned different roles to various groups with a shared goal: "building resilience to climate change, learning better adaptation strategies, and ensuring safe drinking water" (PO 3).*

Building on these participatory spaces and trust, the CCP created opportunities for the community's formal involvement by establishing various intermediary groups. One of the significant groups is the Climate Action Group (CAG). The community members voted to select the CAG members and formed formal groups that will act as catalysts for vulnerable communities in Mongla. Through the creation of CAGs and other local forums, CCP provides structured opportunities for diverse groups, including women, youth, local leaders, and marginalised households, to participate in the project's implementation. These groups are not only consulted but also entrusted with responsibilities such as identifying local priorities, monitoring project activities, and mobilising wider community participation. By coupling inclusive membership criteria with capacity-building workshops, CCP enhances participants' skills and confidence, enabling them to see their contributions as both legitimate and necessary. In this way, the Programme fosters a sense of ownership and shared accountability, positioning residents as co-producers of climate solutions rather than passive recipients of NGO-led interventions. One of the top management staff expressed their motivation behind this plan and the actions of the CCP:

> *In BRAC, it is common practice to listen to the people they aim to serve. Regarding climate change, the most affected individuals are those residing in coastal areas, regardless of their location within the country. They are the victims. We engaged these people for our project. In every ward, we established various community groups. CAGs are the most vital ones. CAG members come from diverse backgrounds, including local elites, community leaders, young social workers, and*

> *retired individuals from all parts of the villages. To ensure gender equality, we make sure that 50% of the CAG members are female (DM).*

In social-symbolic work, the concept of people's participation refers to how individuals create, interpret, and transform shared symbols, meanings, and values that shape society (Pradies et al., 2021). This perception recognises that humans are active agents in constructing culture, identity, and social systems rather than passive recipients of external structures. Such ideas emphasise how individuals contribute to and alter the collective symbols that give social life meaning. In BRAC's CCP, opportunities for community participation are created through the commitment to learn from the community, making members feel responsible and valued for changing their situations and overcoming social crises through their own efforts.

Alford (2002) argued that there are three categories of people involved in the co-production process: "clients", who primarily act individually and receive private value; "volunteers", who mainly bring value to others (usually in interactions with service providers and clients); and "citizens", who mainly work with others to bring collectively enjoyed benefits. In this research, the "clients" are the direct beneficiaries of the CCP project, those who received household-level Rainwater Harvesting Systems (RWHS) interventions. However, other co-producers in this project include CAGs, WMC, Union Parishad members, and relevant government authorities, such as the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), the Department of Health, the Department of Education, and the CCP's staff. In co-production literature, it is evident that the wider the range of groups sought as co-producers, the greater the potential benefits available (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016).

In co-production strategies employed by NGOs, involving beneficiaries in development activities often elicits positive emotions and encourages community ownership (McMullin, 2022). Participation can foster a sense of empowerment, as individuals feel their voices are valued and recognise their influence over outcomes that directly impact their lives (Filipe et al., 2017). Within the CCP, this process also required self-reflection from both parties. For citizens, transforming from the role of “aid recipients” to that of “co-producers” meant recognising their lived experiences as valuable expertise and embracing responsibility for shaping solutions. For staff, it involved shifting from being service providers and technical experts to facilitators and collaborators who could listen to and learn from community members. These identity shifts were reinforced through participatory practices such as joint planning of awareness activities. For example, to ensure the clarity and local relevance of action plans, CCP’s staff developed ‘Apad’ (Hazard) Calendars in collaboration with community members. As one of the Project Officers described:

> *We developed an 'Apad (Hazard) Calendar' with the community. To do this, we followed the Bangla calendar, making it easier for grassroots people to understand and connect with the messages. In this calendar, community members identified the most crisis-prone times of the year for them, especially concerning access to safe drinking water. It also highlighted the risks of disasters, cyclones, floods, and other climate-related crises. We created this calendar in collaboration with the community. Based on it, we organised and planned our activities and motivational training. This calendar helps them prepare in advance for the seasons, organise themselves, and take action for disaster preparedness to face their challenges (PO2).*

Alongside identifying the year's most vulnerable times and crises, the CCP also develops action plans in collaboration with the community. During a community meeting with local government representatives and other members, the CCP planned

the community interventions. They identified the most suitable locations for installing community water tanks and developed operational and monitoring plans. The CCP also engaged community members to create their annual action plans based on the community's needs and knowledge. As highlighted by a CAG member, the “involving and planning” approach helps community members to contribute:

> *During the meeting, the BRAC staff allowed us to discuss our problem and also inquired how we could resolve it. After examining all issues, we developed an action plan based on our Apad calendar so that we can be prepared (J 3).*

CCP encouraged residents to identify the times of year when they were most vulnerable to climate impacts. This exercise not only helped create a co-designed calendar of awareness activities but also symbolically positioned citizens as decision-makers and staff as enablers of locally led strategies. Through such mechanisms, both professionals and residents were persuaded to “believe” in co-production as a shared endeavour rather than a top-down intervention.

The CCP’s participatory approaches were not neutral acts of inclusion but intentionally designed practices aimed at reshaping how both staff and community members understood themselves. Meetings, planning exercises, and awareness activities were structured to foster trust and a sense of belonging, but more importantly, to cultivate the idea that beneficiaries were not passive recipients but active co-producers. For citizens, these engagements encouraged a reframing of identity — from vulnerable aid-dependent groups to empowered planners with valued tacit knowledge. For staff, they required a shift from the role of expert service providers to facilitators and collaborators. This intentional self-work, on both sides, demonstrates that co-

production is sustained not only by material outcomes but also by carefully crafted practices that symbolically and practically reconfigure relationships, generating trust, ownership, and a shared sense of responsibility for climate adaptation.

6.2.2 Developing a Sense of Ownership and Contributors

Bringing the community together, assessing their needs through community discussions, and planning future development activities foster trust and reliability in the project. BRAC is among the leading NGOs in Bangladesh, having contributed to multi-sectoral development interventions for over 50 years. From discussions and observations with various group members and beneficiaries, it is evident that the community maintains a trustworthy relationship with CCP. As highlighted by beneficiaries and local leaders regarding this long-term service provider, with respect and trust in the development sector in Bangladesh:

> *BRAC has supported our community and has been active in our area for many years. I was a member of their microfinance Programme for a long time. This climate change initiative also benefits us greatly. Receiving the tank is a valuable support. BRAC is very transparent; they carried out a thorough assessment before providing us with the tank. In my village, those who receive the tank genuinely need it. They have delivered their services to the most deserving people (Ben 3).*

> *The BRAC staff hold us in high regard. Didi (the female staff), the manager, and all the other staff are very kind. When they arrive, they show us great respect. They come to us to offer assistance. They also have other Programmes in our area. They provide TB medicine in our village. I am their representative in my village, distributing medicine to patients with tuberculosis. I receive 1,000 TK per month from them for my work. Their TB treatment Programme staff are also very friendly (Ben 4).*

In the service delivery system, NGOs typically provide products free of charge, with beneficiaries receiving these services. However, in the rainwater harvesting project, CCP adopted an ownership-and-contribution approach rather than a passive service acceptance model. The beneficiaries agreed to pay BDT 2,500.00 to BRAC for the tank. The purpose of these contribution fees is to foster a sense of ownership among beneficiaries and encourage them to take responsibility for the tank's maintenance. At the same time, they should feel valued as contributors to the community, helping to alleviate the suffering of the ultra-vulnerable within it:

> *During the community meeting, we informed everyone who would receive a tank that they would need to pay 2500.00 Tk. There are several logical reasons for this proposal. When people receive free products, they tend not to value them highly. We wanted our beneficiaries to feel that they are not getting the tank for free; rather, they are purchasing it at a low cost. We also informed them that BRAC would use this fund to provide water tanks to more vulnerable communities those are unable to pay the deposit. Consequently, the beneficiaries would feel appreciated as contributors to their community (PM).*

Community funds, through which residents contribute financially to support more vulnerable groups, act as mechanisms for resource mobilisation and social-symbolic practices. These contributions demonstrate membership, responsibility, and solidarity, enabling individuals to see themselves as active agents shaping their environment rather than passive recipients. This aligns with Tripathi and Rizvi's (2022) argument that shared practices and symbols can strengthen group cohesion and reinforce collective identity. In the context of co-production, such financial contributions function as intentional rituals fostering the self-work necessary for both agency and a sense of belonging. By participating, grassroots members perform their roles as co-producers,

cultivating hope and optimism as they observe tangible improvements in their communities. Witnessing the results of their collective efforts further consolidates this redefined identity, motivating ongoing engagement and reinforcing the relational foundations upon which co-production relies (Pestoff, 2020).

The individual beneficiaries also feel a sense of ownership when they pay for the products they receive from CCP. Almost every beneficiary expressed a sense of ownership over their deposit payment:

> *They proposed that we pay 2500 Tk for the tank, and we have no objection. If I wanted to purchase a tank, it would cost nearly 50,000 Tk, which I will probably never manage to save. I feel as though I bought it for 2500 Tk. Even though I paid a very small amount, I still feel satisfied because I did not receive it for free. It is now my own asset. I believe I should take care of it as if it were my own child. It is so important (Ben 2).*

Some also expressed themselves as contributing actors to the community:

> *BRAC offers a variety of free services, including medicines and agricultural supplies. However, this time, they asked us to pay 2500 Tk. They explained that this fee would be used to purchase additional tanks for those unable to afford them. I feel happy when I think I am somehow helping my neighbours to ease their suffering (Ben 9).*

This collaborative process enables grassroots individuals to actively participate in designing, implementing, and managing services or projects that directly impact their lives. This inclusive approach helps enhance the quality of outcomes and fosters a sense of ownership within grassroots communities. Bovaird and Loeffler (2012) argued that co-production relies on the level of user involvement in co-planning, co-design, co-financing, and co-delivery of services, promoting a sense of ownership. The communal contribution also addresses the relational aspect of social-symbolic work between

dominant and marginalised groups, empowering grassroots individuals to reshape their relationships with society and redefine symbols with significant roles and potential (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

Overall, the CCP's practices demonstrate that community involvement in climate adaptation is both a practical and a social-symbolic process. Through participatory meetings, collaborative planning tools such as the Apad Calendar, contribution mechanisms, and the creation of intermediary groups like the CAGs and WMC, CCP fostered spaces where residents could renegotiate their identities and roles. These practices helped shift community members from being seen—and seeing themselves—as aid recipients to becoming recognised co-producers with valued knowledge and shared responsibility. For staff, the process similarly required symbolic identity work as they moved from expert service providers to facilitators and collaborators.

6.3 From Dependency to Agency: Resource Work for Co-production

In co-production, value is not created solely through participation but through the mobilisation of resources that enable communities to act as partners in shaping outcomes (McMullin, 2022). Resources may be tangible, such as technologies or financial contributions, or intangible, including knowledge, skills, trust, and social networks. Together, these resources form the foundation on which beneficiaries and intermediary groups can move beyond dependency and begin to see themselves as co-producers of development (Tuurnas et al., 2016). These resources are multidimensional. The material dimension includes tangible assets, such as rainwater-harvesting systems and financial contributions, that provide the physical means for resilience. The discursive dimension encompasses awareness-raising, training, and

knowledge-sharing activities that reshape how individuals understand climate challenges and their roles in addressing them. The relational dimension involves building trust, fostering reciprocity, and establishing networks of support that enable citizens and staff to collaborate as equals (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). For CCP, resourcing extends far beyond technical solutions: it symbolically and practically fosters agency, ownership, and shared responsibility. This highlights how the CCP's resource mobilisation constitutes material, discursive, and relational forms of social-symbolic work that underpin co-production by shaping how communities understand problems, interact with staff, and see themselves as capable actors.

Awareness-raising training and activities within the CCP added value to the community by equipping residents with knowledge, confidence, and collective strategies to respond to climate challenges. These initiatives went beyond technical instruction; they were designed as symbolic and relational practices that encouraged participants to see themselves as capable actors whose experiences and insights mattered. By demystifying climate risks and demonstrating practical adaptation techniques, training enabled beneficiaries to transition from passive recipients of aid to informed co-producers of resilience strategies. In this way, awareness-raising became both an intangible resource and a form of social-symbolic work, fostering agency, ownership, and a stronger sense of collective responsibility for the CCP's operations. In SSW terms, these practices represent discursive work that redefines beneficiaries' identities and relational work that strengthens the symbolic foundations necessary for communities to act as co-producers (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

6.3.1 Enhancing Knowledge and Building Social Awareness

One of the key strategies in BRAC's development programmes is its long-standing approach of Advocacy, Communication and Social Mobilisation (Paul et al., 2015). Since its inception, nearly all BRAC social development projects have adopted this strategy to raise awareness, develop skills, and expand knowledge among communities (Banks et al., 2024). CCP's rainwater harvesting programme similarly embraced this culture of teaching and learning by increasing community awareness of the climate crisis, adaptation strategies, and the utilisation of local resources through a variety of awareness-raising methods. These multifaceted strategies of community awareness and knowledge development foster confidence and strengthen community attitudes towards addressing critical issues like climate change. The purpose of these activities is articulated in the following staff explanation:

> *Climate change is a complex issue. To develop sustainable solutions, we firstly need to raise awareness within the community and then provide appropriate remedial support. That is the primary aim of our Advocacy, Communication, and Knowledge Development department. Using a variety of methods and strategies, we inform everyone about climate change issues and teach them how to adapt and mitigate their impact (SAKD).*

The value of these activities is also demonstrated in beneficiary accounts, illustrating how awareness-building efforts have equipped community members with knowledge and confidence:

> *Apa (female staff) also teaches us how to improve and change our lives. We regularly hold awareness meetings. She educated us about various adaptation and mitigation strategies. During our weekly meetings, we discussed strategies for coping with climate change. Last week, we learned about the importance of home gardening and planting. In the past, we also discussed hygiene, sanitation,*

women's health, water safety protocols, and preparedness for cyclones and other disasters. They also discuss where to seek help (Ben 3).

To ensure that awareness messages reach people of different educational backgrounds and comprehension levels, CCP uses a variety of user-friendly methods. Training modules are created based on field insights, and Capacity Building Officers and Project Officers lead most community-level workshops and awareness sessions. As the Capacity Building Officer explained:

While preparing any modules, we carefully focus on explaining concepts in simple language, providing real-life examples, discussing past events related to climate change (e.g., 'cyclone Sidr'), and adding numerous pictures to help visualise and make it easy for everyone to understand. We consider their educational and comprehension levels. After considering all these factors, we develop training modules, posters, flipcharts, and other materials. Most of the flipchart modules contain pictures and text. If someone cannot read or understand the text, they can infer the message from the pictures. In meetings and workshops, they can discuss and analyse to gain a better understanding. We explain these in the local dialect and use simple language (CBO).

This practice reflects both material and discursive dimensions of social-symbolic work. Training materials and visual aids serve as tangible tools that aid learning, while the intentional use of local language, straightforward narratives, and culturally meaningful examples constitutes discursive work, shaping perceptions of climate change and how individuals view their own roles in addressing it (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). As Parker (2014) notes, discourse is "a system of statements which constructs an object," and CCP's meaning-making practices actively develop new understandings of climate risks and adaptation options. These communication efforts exemplify discursive social-

symbolic work, in which simplified language, images, and storytelling shape how climate risks are perceived and who is recognised as knowledgeable.

CCP's awareness-building materials therefore play a crucial role in shaping how climate change messages are understood, accepted, and acted upon—especially among grassroots populations. Adapting language and communication styles to Mongla's cultural and socioeconomic context helps ensure that messages resonate with community realities. The fact that many staff members are locals further enhances this connection, as they are familiar with local dialects and communication norms. By aligning discourse with local communication practices, the CCP undertakes symbolic work that legitimises community knowledge and shifts interpretive authority toward grassroots actors—an essential mechanism for co-production.

The effects of these strategies are clear in beneficiaries' reflections on their learning experiences:

> *In our awareness meeting, Apa teaches us very effectively. She explains things simply so that everyone can understand. She brings along many pictures, posters, and books. She carries a large bag full of materials. She shows us pictures and asks what we understand from them. We see reflections of our climate-vulnerable situations on the posters (Ben 11).*
>
> *She (Project Officer) showed us large posters and books. Those who cannot read can learn from pictures. We can see our life stories in her pictures (Ben 12).*

These reflections demonstrate how discursive tools assist in identity work, allowing participants to see their lives reflected, validated, and regarded as meaningful knowledge for co-productive engagement.

Beyond workshops and training, CCP also employs mass awareness methods like street theatre, which are deeply rooted in local cultural practices:

> *BRAC is helping our community improve its situation. They are raising awareness about how we can adapt to the challenging climate change scenario. A few months ago, there was a cultural programme in our village. The theatre performance explored the impact of climate change, the damage plastic causes to our soils, and the effects of creating 'Gher' anywhere (unplanned polders for shrimp farming) on local land, which increases water salinity. It was a very educational drama (Ben 13).*

Street theatre functions as a cultural and symbolic activity, using narrative performance to democratise knowledge and foster shared understandings essential for co-production.

During my observations of CAG meetings and practical workshops, communication was consistently simplified by using everyday language, relatable examples, and visual aids such as posters, flipcharts, and diagrams. These methods made technical issues more understandable and meaningful to communities with different literacy levels.

Awareness-raising and knowledge-building activities also functioned as intentional mechanisms for self-transformation. By learning about climate risks, adaptation practices, and everyday strategies such as home gardening, water safety, and disaster preparedness, beneficiaries began recognising their own capacity for action. Many expressed that they could link their daily survival tasks to broader adaptation planning, and that their ideas were acknowledged and incorporated into CCP activities. Such recognition shifted their perceived roles from being "taught" to being "knowledge holders," fostering confidence and self-worth, and enabling them to view themselves

as capable social actors. This identity shift—from passive recipients to knowledgeable actors—illustrates identity work within the SSW framework and serves as a precondition for meaningful co-production.

Discourse plays a vital role in shaping co-production practices. As Steele (2016) argues, co-production involves a systematic process of raising awareness starting with people's existing worldviews. Discursive practices challenge dominant narratives of disadvantage and create opportunities for empowerment, especially in contexts influenced by austerity and marginalisation (Booth, 2019; Røhnebæk and Bjerck, 2021).

All these awareness-building activities, therefore, contributed not only to the transmission of information but also to the shaping of new roles and identities through discursive and relational work. By using simple language, visual communication, and culturally familiar methods such as theatre, CCP transformed awareness sessions into symbolic acts of recognition that validated community experiences as legitimate knowledge (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). This discursive work gradually reshaped community members' perceptions, encouraging them to recognise the value of their knowledge and to connect their everyday strategies with broader climate adaptation planning. Thus, discursive, relational, and identity work within awareness-building activities collectively create the symbolic infrastructure that enables co-production to take root.

As community confidence grew, members began viewing themselves as active partners in the project. Beneficiaries described feeling "changed" because they were not only learning but also contributing—such as prioritising issues, shaping awareness calendars, and proposing items for CAG agendas. Training provided them with the

skills to engage meaningfully with staff, and seeing their contributions reflected in project decisions strengthened their sense of ownership. This process aligns with Filipe et al.'s (2017) argument that co-production can enhance agency and self-worth. In this way, awareness-building acted as a catalyst for co-production, transforming identities, fostering agency, and enabling grassroots participants to act as co-producers of climate resilience in Mongla.

6.3.2 Valued Citizens

BRAC's approach to social development generally combines emergency aid with long-term initiatives focused on empowering local communities (Roborgh et al., 2024). Within this broader philosophy, a key aim of the CCP is to cultivate a sense of agency, ownership, and belonging among grassroots populations so that individuals start to see themselves as valued members of society. Participation from diverse groups, including those who are marginalised, encourages more inclusive practices that recognise and appreciate a wide range of contributions (Røhnebæk and Bjerck, 2021). To promote this culture, the CCP combines awareness programmes with opportunities for vulnerable communities to engage directly in development discussions and in formal meetings with higher authorities, both within and outside the organisation. These opportunities play a vital role, both relationally and symbolically, by repositioning community members not merely as beneficiaries but as legitimate representatives and actors. The Area Manager explained:

> *Our aim is not only to provide water tanks in Mongla but also to promote a sustainable environment for all and identify the best available nature-based adaptation strategies. One of our main goals is to raise awareness about people's rights and to train them on how and where to advocate for their needs. Our CAG members join us to attend various meetings of GOs and NGOs, where we introduce them as*

> *volunteers and community representatives to relevant authorities. CAG members plan and implement climate-resilient water solutions, as well as strategies for agriculture, health, sanitation, and other community issues, and pursue these initiatives with the relevant authorities. We support them in taking action. Currently, they are organising activities for World Environment Day, including rallies and submitting agendas to the UNO. Next year is our Parliament election, during which they will submit their six-point demands to political and independent candidates to encourage action on climate change impacts (AM).*

Such direct engagement with institutional actors helps build symbolic capital—recognition, respect, and legitimacy—which boosts confidence and fosters a sense of value among community representatives. This dynamic is clear in the reflections of CAG leaders:

> *Since I joined CAG, more people in my community have become familiar with me. BRAC introduced CAG members to various government departments, UN agencies, and NGOs as their volunteer leaders. People now recognise me as a local representative for climate resilience actions. This gives me a sense of satisfaction and self-worth. We attend meetings with government officials and have the opportunity to meet them; they show us respect and treat us well. This is very important for someone like me. I hope to use this relationship to support my community (CAG 6).*

Other CAG members expressed similar sentiments of value and contribution.

> *I am the secretary of CAG. As the secretary, I believe I am making a difference; I am doing something for people in my community, helping them to the best of my ability. I find it challenging to manage my time due to my family responsibilities. Still, I love this work because by joining this group, I have had the opportunity to learn about other people's lives, thoughts, feelings, suffering, and pain. We discuss our problems and try to find solutions. Throughout my life, I have dreamed of doing something for*

others. Joining CAG as a secretary has made me feel valued and like a contributor to society, much like the BRAC staff (CAG 5).

When we attend government meetings or visit other NGO offices, we sit with them and listen attentively. They communicate respectfully with us, treat us well, and offer tea and snacks. We feel valued and respected. This means a great deal to us. Introducing myself as a CAG volunteer is an honour for me (CAG 3).

Sometimes, BRAC's head office and donor staff visit us and attend our meetings. They converse with us and discuss our concerns. We feel appreciated that such senior people come to us and sit with us. It is an honour for us. They speak so kindly. We learn a lot from them (J 5).

These examples illustrate the relational aspect of social-symbolic work, as co-production is strengthened through respectful interactions that enhance community members' social standing and acknowledge their knowledge and experiences as valuable. Such recognition also bolsters local leadership roles and fosters the confidence necessary for continued civic engagement.

Community members also highlighted the value of their tacit and experiential knowledge, which the project acknowledged and integrated into its practices.

We felt valued because BRAC is asking the rural community to support the project. It is for our benefit. We are suffering greatly. Water salinity is such a problem here that neither the wealthy nor the poor are exempt from this suffering. If they want to solve this issue, we should help them. With that feeling, I was happy to join the group. People voted for me to join because they know me as an active volunteer in this area. I am a volunteer in the government's Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP). We help people during cyclones and any disasters in our area (CAG 2).

Recognising such tacit knowledge is a crucial form of symbolic work, as it validates local expertise and positions community members as essential partners rather than

passive recipients. Women's participation also emerged as another area where relational and symbolic work influenced feelings of value and belonging. The Capacity Building Officer explained:

> *Participating in our training and awareness development meetings boosts the confidence of female groups. Our training improves their understanding of climate change, social crises, women's rights, and safe water management skills. It encourages them to feel confident and valued through their knowledge (CBO).*

CAG members also acknowledged the transformative potential of women's involvement:

> *When women are able to earn money for the family, it strengthens their position within the household. It boosts their confidence in supporting the family and helps protect them from abuse. The CAG meeting supports us in empowering women. We can sit with the male group and share our opinions. It is important (J 4).*

These reflections show how co-production can strengthen gendered identities and relational roles, thereby enhancing women's status both at home and within the community, and broadening their opportunities to participate as valued citizens.

Beneficiaries similarly conveyed feelings of respect and appreciation during their interactions with CCP staff:

> *They are educated, upper-class individuals. When they visit us, they greet us with Salam (Islamic greeting) and speak politely, which makes us happy. They genuinely care about us. The villagers receive a lot of support from BRAC (Ben 6).*

> *BRAC is helping us to improve our lives. They provided us with the tank. Didi also visits us regularly, asks about our problems and how we are doing, and teaches us how to live better. We meet every month at one of our neighbours' houses. She educates us about*

climate change and how to use this tank to collect and keep clean water. Sometimes, the manager also visits our home and offers us a lot of good advice (Ben 4).

These relational encounters, characterised by respect, attentiveness, and care, involve the relational work that builds trust and fosters the mutuality essential for co-production. Overall, these practices promote the development of informed, engaged, and responsible citizens capable of meaningful, co-productive engagement. By providing knowledge, encouraging critical thinking, and enabling direct participation in discussions with institutional actors, CCP helps establish the social capital necessary for collective action (Haug, 2023; McMullin, 2023). Social capital—rooted in networks, relationships, and trust—nurtures mutual respect and enhances individuals' sense of worth within their community. Through this relational and symbolic work, grassroots populations gain recognition that their worth is not determined by money or power, but by their contributions, knowledge, and active participation in shaping community resilience.

6.4 Enhancing Capabilities to Co-produce

Capacity building within the CCP played a vital role in empowering grassroots populations to engage as co-producers rather than simply recipients. Through practical training, workshops, and skills development activities, community members gained the knowledge and confidence to meaningfully participate in decision-making processes and project implementation. These initiatives equipped beneficiaries with both technical skills (such as safe water management, disaster preparedness, and home-based adaptation techniques) and relational skills (such as group discussion, collective problem-solving, and negotiation). By strengthening these abilities, the CCP supported the transformation of individuals into active contributors who could work alongside staff

and other stakeholders, thereby embedding co-production into the routine practices of building climate resilience in Mongla.

6.4.1 Capacity Building

Key aspects of effective co-production include leveraging individuals' existing strengths, facilitating rather than delivering services, developing peer support networks, reducing barriers between service providers and beneficiaries, and fostering mutuality and reciprocity (Voorberg et al., 2015). By enhancing skills, information, and resources, BRAC empowers individuals to actively participate in improving their lives instead of remaining passive recipients of aid (Kabir et al., 2024; Roborgh et al., 2024). Alongside social mobilisation, advocacy, and awareness activities, CCP also involves extensive capacity-building efforts for the community in Mongla. Capacity building enables vulnerable groups to improve their abilities, develop essential skills, and achieve lasting improvements in their lives. This strategy empowers marginalised communities to lead the co-production process for their own development (Røhnebæk and Bjerck, 2021). It involves strengthening the skills, knowledge, resources, and institutional frameworks necessary for communities to control their own development. To implement this strategy effectively, the project mobilises material, discursive, and relational dimensions to ensure positive service outcomes.

Aiming for a sustainable impact and a climate-resilient community, capacity building is essential for addressing economic shocks, natural disasters, and other challenges. It creates opportunities by enhancing problem-solving and resource management skills. Based on individuals' abilities and social needs, CCP has implemented targeted capacity-building, training, and learning activities for different groups, delivered through various modes. Marginalised groups receive vital training to operate and

maintain their water tanks; household-based doorstep services help them develop practical skills and ensure they benefit from having a tank at home. For CAG members, training on climate change, leadership, and motivation helps build confidence in communicating with authorities and strengthens advocacy and lobbying capacities. CCP regularly conducts field-level and office-level training, workshops, and seminars.

A Capacity Building Officer has been appointed at the local office to plan and organise annual training programmes based on community needs. Each ward also has a Project Officer responsible for organising training sessions, awareness meetings, workshops, and skills development sessions to ensure the community is equipped to participate in climate resilience activities. For technical training, Project Engineers conduct capacity-building activities, including practical workshops, the introduction of tools to masons for community interventions, and skills development for Water Management Committees. The branch Project Manager explained how these roles and systems work together.

> *To maximise the service, we have a knowledge management team. We employ a Specialist in Advocacy and Knowledge Development at the head office. They train field-level staff to enhance their leadership, communication, and motivational skills, enabling them to engage effectively with grassroots populations. This department develops various training materials, awareness resources, placards, posters, flipcharts, video documentaries, and other educational tools. These are ongoing trainings delivered through both formal and informal methods. Under my supervision, I have two Area Managers (AMS). AMs are responsible for supervising POs and supporting them at the field level. We also have a Capacity Building Officer to provide proper training and an MEAL officer to monitor, evaluate, and ensure accountability for the project. All these roles are based in Mongla (PM).*

The Capacity Building Officer further elaborated:

> *We provide door-to-door training services for beneficiaries. We organise awareness and motivation sessions to educate them about basic climate change concepts, their rights, and how and to whom they can raise their demands. We prepare them to participate in IGAs, boost family income, and decrease financial vulnerabilities. Furthermore, we inform them about other social issues such as early marriage, women's health concerns, and more (CBO).*

Project Officers are the key frontline staff responsible for identifying and assessing community needs by discussing with the community. After assessing the community needs, they plan collaboratively with the Project Manager, Project Engineers, and Capacity Building Officer to organise capacity-building activities. From the Head Office, the Knowledge Development Department coordinates all activities and provides appropriate materials and guidelines for their delivery. All materials are developed based on field needs and reviewed using field assessments, monitoring, and evaluation reports. As one Project Officer described:

> *We provide extensive support to CAGs to enhance their knowledge and capacity, recognising them as catalysts and changemakers in their communities. Our main responsibilities involve helping CAGs with capacity building. We offer skills development opportunities through group sessions and occasionally one-on-one support to keep them motivated (PO3).*

Typically, CAG members are not direct beneficiaries of the CCP; instead, most are local representatives from diverse backgrounds and skill sets who can speak on behalf of the community. To bring them together around the shared goal of “building a climate-resilient community,” the CCP conducts a range of capacity-building activities to ensure the project’s sustainable impact. The Deputy Manager outlined this strategy:

> *The role of CAG members is to raise awareness about climate change within the community. We trained them on the crisis and the indicators of climate change. Now, they are sufficiently knowledgeable to discuss basic topics related to climate change, such as temperature increase, sea level rise, and the growing salinity of water and soil. We also trained them to improve their leadership and advocacy skills, including training on tank maintenance so they can apply these skills to IGAs. Additionally, we support them in an advocacy system to help them claim their rights (DM).*

Another Project Officer added:

> *We also provide practical training to beneficiaries, CAG members, Water Management Committees, and caretakers. For beneficiaries, we demonstrate how to operate the tank, collect water, clean it, and filter it. We do the same with the caretakers involved in our community interventions. Additionally, we give the caretakers a toolbox and teach them how to use the tools. For the Water Management Committee, we offer hands-on training to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for effective management and oversight of the RWHS within their institutions (PO4).*

Community members recognised the value and impact of these capacity-building activities, noting their long-term benefits for individuals and the broader community. One CAG member wrote:

> *Some members of CAGs received training in plumbing, including how to maintain water tanks, clean filters, and perform repairs. This skill is vital in our area because every house needs a water tank to store water. CAG's plumbing training has created local job opportunities for many of us, especially women. It's a flexible home service that women can easily perform at their convenience (J 4).*

Another journal entry highlighted economic and time-saving effects:

> *Agriculture and poultry training allowed people to start small businesses, sell products at local markets, and earn income. Access to household water tanks saved women significant time from carrying water over long distances. Now, they can use this time to earn money through handicrafts, poultry, livestock, and other endeavours (J3).*

Almost all CAG members reported that the programme had a meaningful impact on their personal and social lives. For example:

> *CAG members have become more skilled than before. We have taken various lessons on how to improve ourselves to become an independent worker group for the community. The leadership development training has been very effective. Last year, BRAC taught us how to plan and organise events, stay in contact with people, and seek help from others. Now, we are more capable of planning, coordinating, and preparing for community awareness activities. We meet every three months to discuss our problems. Our thinking has improved. A few months ago, we prepared our 'water solution plan,' which includes most of the ideas, action plans, and strategies that came from the CAGs. The Project Manager and POs assisted us, but we were the main contributors. In the third year of the project, we will be responsible for running community awareness meetings. We are preparing for this next step (CAG 6).*

In this way, the CCP's capacity-building activities develop both technical skills and transferable knowledge, forming a core part of the project's co-production strategy. Learning to maintain tanks, engaging in advocacy, or leading community meetings not only provides new competencies but also supports identity work, shifting how people see themselves—from beneficiaries of NGO support to contributors to community resilience. These capabilities enable individuals and groups such as CAGs to co-design solutions, monitor interventions, and mobilise others, integrating their agency into project governance. Reports from CAG members on plumbing, agriculture, and

leadership training illustrate how capacity building produces both practical outcomes and symbolic ownership, thereby strengthening their identity as co-producers of climate adaptation in Mongla.

6.4.2 Developing Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a crucial element in establishing effective co-production practices. It signifies confidence in one's ability to take initiative, perform tasks, and attain goals, and it plays a vital role at various stages of co-production. This psychological factor nurtures a sense of personal agency, motivating individuals to collaborate and actively engage in change-making processes (Thomsen, 2017). In CCP, one of the primary objectives is to strengthen self-efficacy at all levels within the community. The project has launched a series of activities to involve people from diverse backgrounds and assign different roles to various groups.

BRAC recognises the heterogeneity of poor and vulnerable populations and designs customised development services to address their diverse needs (Hilton et al., 2016). It consistently implements integrated sets of services that promote positive and sustainable change within communities. In the CCP, BRAC adopted a similar approach. In Mongla, the impacts of climate change are significant and multifaceted, affecting agriculture, livelihoods, infrastructure, and public health. Rising sea levels and decreased freshwater flow have increased salinity in both water and soil, while unplanned polders created by wealthy and politically influential individuals have worsened the damage (Munna et al., 2022). In response, CCP did not restrict its services to direct beneficiaries but expanded its focus to include the wider community, engaging everyone in the development process.

CCP has engaged in activities that raise social awareness and offer training and learning opportunities, uniting community members from all levels to boost the self-efficacy of marginalised groups. This is crucial in shaping how individuals approach goals and challenges and in encouraging participation in co-production cycles. CAG members described these impacts:

> *The special leader group completes two days of residential training focused on leadership and motivation, developing communication skills, and liaising with the government, among other topics. This training enhances our confidence and motivation when working with people (CAG 4).*

> *We have been attending various meetings with BRAC staff at GO NGO offices, which has boosted the confidence of CAG members in discussing their rights and needs (J3).*

Scholars contend that community motivation and the capacity to co-produce are essential for effective co-production (Alford, 2009; Thomsen, 2017; Van Eijk and Steen, 2014). In Mongla, where marginalised groups face daily struggles to meet basic needs, involving them in community activities is complex. Therefore, fostering self-efficacy in vulnerable communities is a key initial step in creating space for co-production. Engaging vulnerable communities often necessitates representative co-production as an alternative to direct involvement (Eriksson, 2019). To enable representatives to participate voluntarily with the required capability and motivation, CCP has established opportunities to promote the seven key principles of co-production. Lokot's (2019) work underscores the participation of marginalised populations in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programmes that impact them, highlighting the importance of equitable power distribution among stakeholders in meaningful and inclusive ways. Below, three interconnected aspects of these efforts

are explored: addressing unequal power relations, co-creating knowledge, and promoting equitable partnerships.

6.4.2.1 Tackling Unequal Power Dynamics

From its inception, the CCP recognised that co-production in a vulnerable community like Mongla could not succeed without addressing entrenched power hierarchies. Instead of limiting participation to traditional consultation, the project deliberately involved higher authorities and local elites alongside grassroots actors through the establishment of advisory committees, CAGs, and other volunteer forums. These arrangements created structured platforms for stakeholders to deliberate, signalling that decision-making was a shared responsibility rather than the sole domain of government or NGOs. In doing so, the CCP aligned with co-production principles, bridging citizens and professionals together to broaden access to powerholders while legitimising the voices of those most affected by climate change. As one senior government officer explained:

> *I was included in their Local Advisory Committee, which comprises our UP Chairman, Ward Members, and DPHE members. This approach helps us stay informed, as they present reports and update us on their activities (UNO).*

By formalising these spaces of encounter, the CCP lowered barriers between local authorities and marginalised citizens. In CAG meetings, grassroots participants could directly communicate with Union Parishad Chairmen and Ward Members—interactions that would otherwise have been challenging. As one journal entry noted:

> *Our local elected Chairman and ward Members are part of our CAG group. We meet every three months, with the Union Chairman chairing the meeting. It is a valuable opportunity for us to meet them face-to-face, discuss our needs, and seek solutions.*

They are influential figures, and it is not always easy to reach them, but during the CAG meetings, we can directly approach them.

The diagram below summarises how CCP configured its invited spaces to bring grassroots citizens, local authorities, and project staff into shared forums for dialogue, negotiation, and co-production.

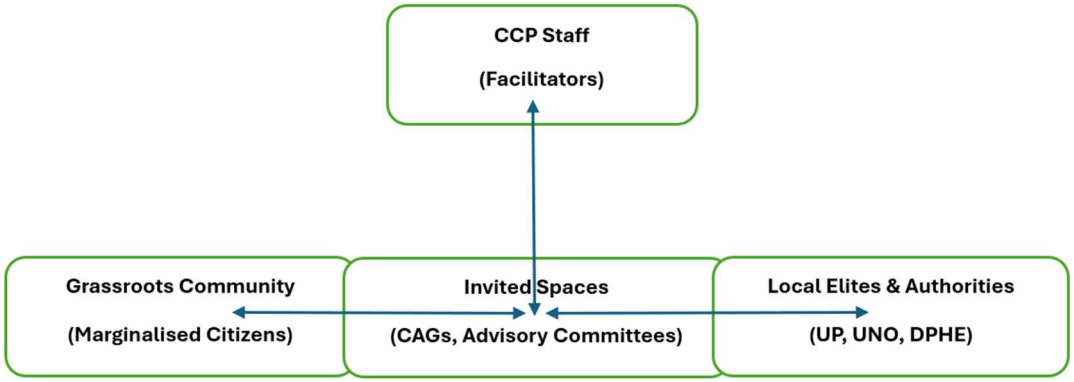


Figure 6.2: Bringing citizens and powerholders together in the same institutional spaces

These encounters also carried symbolic importance, changing how community members viewed their relationship with authority. What was once an intimidating power dynamic started to feel more like an equal conversation. As another CAG member reflected:

We are now more aware of our rights and know where to seek assistance. Meeting government officers, the UP Chairman, and BRAC staff, and sitting with them in the same room, has increased my confidence. I am no longer shy about speaking to them; instead, I feel comfortable discussing our community problems (J2).

By bringing citizens and powerholders together in shared institutional spaces, the CCP facilitated information exchange and engaged in relational social-symbolic work that

helped rebalance relationships. These practices encouraged grassroots populations to participate more actively, strengthened their confidence, and improved their self-efficacy. Addressing unequal power dynamics was thus not an incidental outcome but a deliberate co-production strategy that enabled marginalised groups in Mongla to act as local partners in shaping climate resilience.

At the same time, these relational practices were embedded within the CCP's institutional design, reflecting what Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Cornwall (2002) describe as the paradox of invited spaces: while such spaces empower marginalised voices by providing access to decision-making, they can also discipline citizen agency by channelling it through organisational frameworks. This tension is acute in Bangladesh, where bureaucratic procedures, hierarchical political cultures, and clientelist relationships often limit genuine community influence. The Programme Head articulated this challenge:

> *In Bangladesh, bureaucracy is very strong, and the grassroots population lacks the strength and opportunities to voice their concerns to higher authorities. They are used to following instructions rather than questioning authority. Our role is to act as a bridge, bringing both sides together. That is why we involve Union Parishad members and government officers in our committees, while also preparing the community through training and awareness so they can speak with confidence. Without this careful balance, the dialogue would not have taken place. We cannot expect to change this situation overnight, but we have started the process to foster future changes (Programme Head, 2nd interview).*

This perspective demonstrates that the CCP's work extended beyond logistical coordination to include the relational aspects of social-symbolic work. It intentionally created spaces, rituals, and encounters that acknowledged community voices within a

bureaucratic culture. Such relational work does not eliminate structural hierarchies but symbolically modifies interactions, enabling marginalised groups to participate as credible actors in co-production. CCP's efforts thus exemplify the dual nature of co-production in Mongla: advisory committees and CAGs provided some opportunities for marginalised citizens to engage with powerful actors and foster confidence, recognition, and legitimacy, yet these encounters remained influenced by the paradox of invited spaces. Co-production could reconfigure relationships and foster new forms of inclusion, but it also necessitated ongoing negotiation within entrenched bureaucratic systems. This tension highlights both the potential and the constraints of using co-production as a means to promote climate resilience in Bangladesh.

6.4.2.2 Co-producing Knowledge

Knowledge co-production within CCP aimed to transfer information while transforming the roles of beneficiaries and intermediary groups by positioning them as active contributors to problem-solving. When local insights were gathered and incorporated into teaching materials, posters, dramas, and training sessions, community members saw their lived experiences reflected in the knowledge being produced. This recognition validated their daily struggles and survival strategies as legitimate knowledge, reshaping their sense of self from "recipients of NGO wisdom" to "owners of practical expertise." Such symbolic recognition generated confidence and encouraged individuals to step forward as co-producers in addressing climate challenges.

The process of developing and disseminating Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) and Behaviour Change Communication (BCC) materials exemplifies this transformation. CCP did not impose external narratives; instead, it

crafted content around local dialects, stories of past disasters such as Cyclone Sidr, and everyday practices like water collection, waste disposal, and home gardening. Beneficiaries recognised their own lives in these materials. As one participant explained, knowledge gained through drama performances and training sessions directly impacted practice:

> *Throughout the training, we learned many new things. They are simple tips, some of which we knew but had never practised. Now, however, we are aware of the dangers, so we are trying to be more careful. We no longer throw plastics here and there; we are planting more trees than before. They demonstrated this at the drama performance in our village (Ben 11).*

Another beneficiary noted:

> *At the meeting, Apa brought posters and showed us books and leaflets. They tell stories of our real lives. We can also see the future. She explained everything very simply. Always speak to us with a smile. Now we understand that if we care for our surroundings, our lives will change (Ben 8).*

These accounts demonstrate how co-produced knowledge can influence behaviour at an individual level while strengthening collective agency. Knowledge-sharing practices allowed grassroots individuals to become knowledge-holders themselves, capable of teaching and influencing others in their networks (Singh et al., 2022). Intermediary groups such as CAGs developed a stronger sense of responsibility and leadership through knowledge co-production. By learning to interpret climate risks, sharing messages within their communities, and lobbying local authorities, CAG members moved beyond advisory roles to act as advocates and facilitators of change. One CAG member described this transformation:

> *As a CAG member, we organise three monthly awareness meetings and regular training sessions on climate-related issues, water safety, water tank management, plumbing skills, and social awareness topics like early marriage prevention, domestic violence, and more. These training sessions have helped us learn a great deal. They have taught us how to respond to critical climate situations. For example, we now know that if there is a cyclone alert in our area, we need to follow specific steps, know where to shelter, and understand whom to prioritise. Likewise, we are learning many simple tips and pieces of information so that I can help my family and others in my village (CAG 5).*

The enduring nature of this knowledge is highlighted in another reflection:

> *Even if BRAC do not continue their project, we will still be able to support each other. The knowledge and skills we gained from them will remain with us. The tank maintenance training taught us practically and showed us every step; these skills are now ours. If I want to work as a plumber for tank repairs, I will be able to utilise my skills to earn a living. I received a tank from them and don't need to call anyone to repair it because they provided me with the training. I also taught it to my husband. We can use our skills to save money (CAG 4).*

The transformative effect of knowledge co-production lies in its discursive dimension of social-symbolic work: through language, stories, and shared meaning-making, it redefines what it means to be a participant in development (Phillips et al., 2004). By embedding community voices into messages and validating tacit knowledge, CCP dismantled the traditional expert–beneficiary divide and constructed new identities for grassroots actors as credible contributors. Knowledge co-production thus reshapes identities, transforming passive recipients into self-reliant contributors and embedding resilience and agency within the community (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). This discursive and relational process enables beneficiaries, intermediaries, and the

broader community to view themselves as co-producers of resilience strategies, motivating them to shape their environment in response to the climate crisis.

6.4.2.3 Ensuring Equitable Partnerships

Co-production has the potential to foster more equitable relationships, but only when grounded in deliberate efforts to address power imbalances, cultivate mutual respect, and create social and institutional conditions that enable meaningful engagement, particularly for marginalised communities (Gheduzzi et al., 2025). Scholars emphasise that co-production should not merely aim to increase efficiency in service delivery but also to transform relational dynamics among employees and citizens (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Osborne et al., 2016). To become meaningful co-producers, employees need environments where their experiences, contributions, and efforts are recognised as valuable expertise (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016; Durose and Richardson, 2022). Achieving equity in practice, however, is challenging in contexts shaped by entrenched hierarchies, where relationships between NGOs, government actors, and citizens are mediated by bureaucratic norms and unequal access to resources (Cornwall, 2008; Joshi and Moore, 2004). In such settings, co-production must be understood as a relational and symbolic process requiring intentional design, continuous negotiation, and a commitment to mutual respect and accountability.

CCP's focus on respect, accountability, and team spirit demonstrates an intentional effort to apply this principle in practice, ensuring that both staff and beneficiaries act as partners rather than merely service providers and recipients. Field observations reveal that CCP cultivated a strong team spirit and a genuine motivation to build partnerships with local communities. This was not just a logistical matter but a deliberate strategy to reshape power dynamics and recognition. Staff emphasised

respect and accountability as fundamental principles. As the Capacity Building Officer mentioned:

> *From the head office, we were strictly instructed to show great respect to the community. The Programme Head continually reminded us that our role exists because of the community members; otherwise, we wouldn't have the project (CBO).*

These commitments were evident in daily practices where cooperation and reciprocity were clear. Frontline staff were approachable yet firm, balancing trust-building with accountability. One CAG member reflected:

> *Apa is very cooperative with us, and we also support her. If she calls us to organise an event, we will gladly participate. We took part in a rally on World Water Day, which was attended by many people. Whenever anyone needs help, Apa tries to support us. However, she is strict about following all the rules (CAG 4).*

Within CCP itself, equitable partnerships are fostered among staff members, shaping their ability to co-produce effectively with communities. Management staff, project officers, engineers, and capacity-building personnel work in arrangements that give significant weight to the perspectives of frontline workers embedded in local contexts, alongside the technical expertise of head office specialists. This internal equity reflects the relational dimension of social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019), where ongoing practices build trust, recognition, and mutual legitimacy among actors. By fostering respect across hierarchical levels, CCP models the principles it aims to practise externally, reinforcing the idea that co-production must be enacted internally before it can credibly be extended to communities. One Project Officer described this team spirit:

> *We work collaboratively as a team and support each other as much as possible. In the local office, there is a good rapport between staff and managers. I enjoy helping*

> *vulnerable people to ease their suffering. Our entire team shares a similar spirit (PO 3).*

BRAC's discursive framing of co-production further emphasised equity as a shared responsibility. By explicitly recognising that community members understand their issues better than outsiders, CCP positioned local actors as legitimate partners in designing and implementing interventions. As one participant put it:

> *BRAC informed us that they wish to support us through our assistance. The HO staff said that, since we live in this area, we understand our problems better than they do, so they seek our help (CAG 3).*

These narratives demonstrate the relational dimension of social-symbolic work, where mutual respect, reciprocity, and recognition of tacit knowledge are fostered as symbols of partnership and collaboration. Such practices aim to transform service delivery, with staff shifting from providers to facilitators and community members from beneficiaries to co-producers. In this way, equitable partnerships are not only idealised principles but are put into practice through everyday interactions that build trust, accountability, and shared ownership of the climate resilience agenda.

The following figure summarises the transformation pathway identified in this chapter, illustrating how CCP built relationships, strengthened capabilities, and created participatory roles that collectively enabled community members to become co-producers.

Figure 6.3: CCP's Strategies for Self-transformation towards co-production

The diagram summarises how CCP's practices gradually transform community members from aid recipients into co-producers. Starting with CCP's efforts to strengthen community relations, the programme concurrently develops capacity and self-efficacy, inspiring people by framing climate action as urgent and a shared responsibility. These foundations facilitate participatory approaches such as discussions, small-group activities, and community priority-setting. Through these processes, local knowledge is recognised as expertise, and community members are assigned clear roles and responsibilities in planning and implementation. Collectively, these forms of material, discursive, and relational work lead to an identity shift from "beneficiaries" to confident co-producers of climate resilience.

6.5 Bridging the Humanitarian-Development Nexus through Co-production

To consolidate the findings of this chapter, Table 6.1 summarises the key forms of social-symbolic work through which staff and citizens reimagined their roles in BRAC's CCP. Across the empirical sections, four interconnected processes emerged—inhabiting co-production spaces, integrating tacit and technical knowledge, developing localised capacities, and building self-efficacy. Together, these mechanisms illustrate how material, relational, and discursive practices worked simultaneously to shift identities, redistribute agency, and enable community members and CCP staff to act as co-producers in a context of profound vulnerability.

Table 6.1: Social-symbolic work mechanisms enabling role reimagination in the CCP's co-production

SSW Element	Mechanisms	Aims / Results	Predominant Dimensions
Inhabiting co-production spaces	Facilitated dialogue; joint deliberation; negotiated discussions	Builds legitimacy for community representatives; enables staff to reposition as facilitators rather than directive experts	Relational + Discursive
Integrating tacit and technical knowledge	Co-producing artefacts (e.g., Hazard Calendar); representatives as epistemic boundary-spanners	Validates local knowledge; reduces expert–lay divides; supports shared problem framing	Discursive + Relational
Localised capacity building	Culturally attuned training; plain language; real-life	Builds community knowledge for further action; staff adapt communication styles;	Material + Discursive

SSW Element	Mechanisms	Aims / Results	Predominant Dimensions
	examples; mass awareness methods	strengthens mutual understanding.	
Building self-efficacy	Symbolic recognition; representative roles; leadership opportunities	Enhances confidence and motivation; supports identity shift from “beneficiary” to “co-producer”	Relational + Discursive

As Table 6.1 shows, CCP’s co-production practices were sustained by a constellation of social-symbolic mechanisms rather than by participation alone. Facilitated community spaces helped establish new relational norms that legitimised grassroots representatives and eased staff into facilitative roles. Integrating tacit and technical knowledge—especially through the co-production of practical tools—bridged epistemic divides and repositioned local knowledge as a legitimate basis for decision-making. Localised capacity-building practices provided interpretive and practical competencies, enabling residents to engage with climate adaptation on their own terms. Meanwhile, deliberate efforts to cultivate self-efficacy supported identity shifts from aid-dependent recipients toward confident contributors. Collectively, these mechanisms formed the symbolic infrastructure through which co-production became both thinkable and practicable in Mongla.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined how individuals within BRAC’s Climate Change Programme—both staff and citizens—reimagined their roles, moving from aid providers and

recipients to collaborative co-producers. It showed how this transformation was shaped through social-symbolic work in a marginal, climate-vulnerable context. The analysis revealed that in a highly vulnerable community, co-production did not develop naturally; instead, it was deliberately built through intentional practices and symbolic work. CCP's strategies—creating participatory spaces, empowering communities to enhance capabilities, and promoting equitable partnerships—illustrate how NGOs can realign the relationships among citizens, service providers, and local authorities.

The chapter showed that the CCP created inclusive and "invited" spaces where grassroots voices were not only heard but also included in planning and decision-making. These spaces served both practical and symbolic roles: they validated community knowledge, normalised dialogue with authority figures, and helped community members see themselves as legitimate co-authors of solutions rather than helpless recipients of aid. Through intermediary bodies such as Climate Action Groups, residents assumed responsibilities and roles that fostered shared accountability and a collective sense of ownership of adaptation measures.

The analysis also emphasised that co-production required resources for value creation. While tangible resources—such as rainwater harvesting systems—provided the material foundation for resilience, discursive resources were equally important. Awareness-raising, knowledge-sharing, and cultural performances transformed how people understood climate change, their vulnerabilities, and their ability to act. These practices demonstrate the discursive dimension of social-symbolic work, as narratives, language, and meaning-making processes reshaped identities and built confidence. Beneficiaries repeatedly described feeling "changed," now able to connect everyday

survival strategies with broader adaptation planning and recognise their own capacity to act.

Capacity-building became another key enabler of co-production. Training, leadership development, and technical coaching improved community members' advocacy skills, knowledge, and confidence, allowing them to engage with staff and government actors as credible partners. This process reflects the relational dimension of social-symbolic work: trust-building, reciprocity, and new norms of interaction that reduce social distance between citizens, NGO staff, and local elites.

However, the chapter also highlighted the tensions inherent in grassroots co-production. As Cooke and Kothari (2001) and Cornwall (2002) argue, "invited spaces" both empower and constrain. In Bangladesh's bureaucratic and hierarchical context, establishing equal partnerships remains challenging; existing authority structures can limit grassroots actors' ability to exert genuine influence. CCP's efforts to bring officials and villagers together created unprecedented opportunities for voice, but these interactions were necessarily mediated by organisational agendas and political hierarchies. Managing this paradox became a crucial part of the CCP's ongoing symbolic and relational work.

Overall, this chapter contended that the CCP's co-production practices are best understood through the lens of social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Material, discursive, and relational mechanisms were mobilised not only to deliver services but also to transform identities, relationships, and institutional expectations. Citizens became "knowledge holders," "contributors," and "decision-makers," while staff shifted from "experts" to "facilitators." These transformations were crucial for embedding co-production as both a practical reality and a symbolic order within

Mongla's climate resilience efforts. The chapter contributes empirically by demonstrating how co-production can be enacted by NGOs working in contexts of deep vulnerability, and theoretically by illustrating how social-symbolic work offers a compelling framework for understanding how co-production reshapes selves, relationships, and institutions.

Chapter 7

Embedding Co-production: Advancing Social Accountability of NGOs in Marginal Economies

7.1 Introduction

Social accountability within NGOs has become an increasing concern in development governance, particularly in marginalised and emerging economies where institutional capacities are weak, and socio-political hierarchies shape daily interactions. In Bangladesh, NGOs act as crucial intermediaries between citizens and the state, yet ensuring they remain accountable to the communities they serve is often challenging. Beneficiaries' reliance on NGO services, unequal power relations, and the influence of local elites can hinder citizens' ability to question or influence NGO activities. As a result, accountability tends to focus upward toward donors rather than downward toward communities, leaving many marginalised groups with limited voice and minimal influence over the services they depend on.

These challenges have led to increased interest in approaches that integrate accountability into everyday programme practices, rather than relying solely on formal reporting systems. Co-production is one such approach. When communities help shape services, decision-making, and oversight, accountability is based on relationships, shared responsibilities, and collective problem-solving. However, meaningful participation is rarely simple. Structural inequalities, gender norms, time poverty, and low literacy levels restrict many beneficiaries' ability to engage directly. As Chapter 6 showed, even when individuals gain confidence and capability, cultural and institutional barriers still limit how much they can challenge established authority.

Building on the previous chapter's focus on role reimagination and social-symbolic work, this chapter broadens the analysis to explore how these redefined roles function within a wider social accountability mechanism. In this context, it addresses the third research question:

"How, and in what contexts, can community co-production ensure NGOs' social accountability?"

To explore this question, the chapter draws on empirical insights from BRAC's Climate Change Programme (CCP) and investigates how intermediary groups—such as Climate Action Groups (CAGs), Water Management Committees (WMCs), Climate Youth Groups (CYGs), Theatre Groups (TGs), and Local Advisory Committees (LACs)—facilitated co-production at the community level. These groups helped bridge the gap between NGOs and broader communities, enabling participation from citizens who might otherwise be excluded. Positioned within their communities yet able to engage with institutional actors, these intermediaries served as facilitators, translators, advocates, and representatives throughout the programme. The chapter examines how these groups contributed to inclusive participation, local leadership development, and collective accountability in practice.

In situations where institutional fragility and socio-cultural obstacles impede grassroots participation, co-producing with community intermediaries provides a practical way to promote transparency, inclusiveness, and legitimacy in NGO initiatives. Simultaneously, intermediary groups must manage tensions arising from elite influence, dependency issues, and political sensitivities, balancing collaboration with contestation to shape the scope and effectiveness of accountability efforts. These

dynamics highlight both the opportunities and limitations of co-production as an accountability strategy in marginal economies.

By leveraging tacit knowledge, supporting advocacy and leadership skills, and institutionalising co-assessment practices, CCP illustrates how co-production can promote more participatory and responsible governance despite such constraints. These processes shift accountability from a mere compliance duty to a dialogic, reflective practice rooted in trust, negotiation, and shared learning. This chapter demonstrates how intermediary-led co-production can help NGOs overcome institutional and cultural barriers, enabling more grounded and sustainable forms of social accountability.

The chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, it explores how the CCP's intermediary groups developed a model of representative co-production. Secondly, it examines how empowering these representatives increased citizens' ability to become active co-producers and boosted their engagement with NGO accountability processes. Lastly, the chapter contends that social accountability in marginal economies requires a contextually suited model of representative co-production—one that mobilises tacit knowledge, challenges hierarchical relations, and incorporates accountability within ongoing interactions.

7.2 Community Engagement and Shared Responsibilities: A Path towards Social Accountability

Building on the idea that genuine social accountability arises from shared responsibilities and collective involvement, this section explores how intermediary or mediator groups support the co-production process between NGOs and grassroots

communities. Such groups play a vital role in empowering local actors to initiate meaningful environmental, social, and economic change, thereby fostering a sense of agency and possibility (Haug, 2023; Uster et al., 2024). Their work relies heavily on tacit knowledge and lived experience, recognising that community members possess deep contextual insight into their environment and the challenges they face. By elevating this knowledge, intermediary groups enhance the cultural relevance and contextual appropriateness of development initiatives, ensuring sustainability by enabling participation from diverse perspectives across operational and decision-making levels (Sicilia et al., 2016; Uster et al., 2025).

Beyond enabling participation, intermediary groups play a vital role in monitoring and assessing project progress (Haug, 2023). They assist communities in setting realistic goals, tracking progress, and adapting strategies to meet evolving needs. This ongoing feedback cycle ensures development efforts remain responsive and aligned with community priorities (Haug, 2023; Tuurnas et al., 2016). Acting as facilitators, advocates, and connectors simultaneously, intermediary groups can foster transformative change through more effective co-production between NGOs and communities. In doing so, they go beyond the traditional role of “beneficiaries” and assume a ‘third role’ as co-producers in development processes (Arnstein, 1969; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; Uster et al., 2022). Their capacity to bridge gaps in communication, understanding, and resources makes them essential for ensuring that co-production is inclusive, transparent, and genuinely responsive to grassroots needs, thus paving the way for social accountability among NGOs.

7.2.1 Intermediary Groups as Local Ambassadors

Intermediary groups operationalise the principle of shared responsibility by transforming community participation into structured, legitimate forms of co-production that connect NGOs with grassroots communities. The Climate Change Programme illustrates how representative co-production can make community involvement more meaningful and relevant to local contexts for improving social accountability. In marginal and vulnerable communities, direct participation in co-production is often hindered by deep-rooted social hierarchies, literacy barriers, and unequal power dynamics. To address these issues, BRAC's CCP adopted the concept of representative co-production (Eriksson, 2019). This approach recognises that co-production often occurs through the indirect involvement of service users, mediated by representatives acting on their behalf. These representatives collaborate to design, deliver, and assess services when direct, widespread participation is not possible. They act as intermediaries, linking different stakeholders—including government bodies, NGOs, private-sector actors, civil society organisations, and community members—thus bridging structural gaps and enhancing participatory governance (Eriksson, 2019; Haug, 2023).

The CCP's Rainwater Harvesting Project demonstrates how representative co-production can be institutionalised through a phased, community-led strategy. From the outset, the project adopted a step-by-step co-production model that incorporated intermediary groups to promote a locally grounded development approach. As the research partner, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) conducted both quantitative and qualitative research to identify project needs, assess effectiveness, and monitor progress using a results matrix (Kamal et al., 2024). Within the first four months, the CCP conducted a census survey across Mongla Upazila

using locally hired surveyors, followed by rigorous data verification to ensure transparency and credibility.

The formation of intermediary groups signified the shift from design to practice, embedding accountability mechanisms within community structures. People from government departments, Union Parishads, and various segments of the Mongla community were mobilised to create several participatory bodies and committees. These groups—comprising local leaders, youth, and representatives from civic and government institutions—were established to facilitate communication between the NGO and grassroots populations. Their aim was to promote collective ownership, encourage participatory decision-making, and embed accountability within local institutions. As the Specialist Coordinator of the Knowledge and Advocacy Department described:

> *Our main aim is to tackle the water crisis driven by climate change. This issue affects everyone in this community. Therefore, we are dedicated to involving the community in various ways. We do not want passive recipients of services. To secure the long-term success of our project, we aim to empower the community to become responsible citizens capable of addressing this devastating problem. We seek to foster resilience as a strategic response to the climate crisis (SKAD).*

These intermediary actors exemplify how co-production can generate public value by fostering collaboration, empowering service users, and incorporating grassroots insights into NGO systems. They facilitate co-production through enabling cooperation, increasing awareness, liaising with government officials, and advocating for community rights (Haug, 2023). Intermediaries primarily assist service providers in delivering services by conducting awareness campaigns, maintaining communication, liaising with local authorities, and advocating for their rights. This aligns with emerging

scholarship on public service ecosystems, which emphasises the collective efforts of multiple actors engaged in co-production (Osborne et al., 2022). The following comments from the branch Project Manager reflect an understanding of co-production as a voluntary collaboration between citizens and service providers, highlighting the role of CCP in creating value and establishing social accountability mechanisms.

> *In Mongla, the climate crisis persists. Water sources will never fully recover; salinity intrusion remains a serious issue. CCP is a three-year project, and we can only proceed if we secure additional funding. But for how long? We do not know. That is why we aim to create opportunities for locals to educate themselves about the climate crisis, adaptation strategies, and alternative facilities. They must be aware of their rights and know which departments to approach. We want to establish long-term, sustainable solutions. That is why we engage the community (PM).*

By uniting both local elites and marginalised citizens, intermediary groups help establish legitimacy and social capital, thereby strengthening the sustainability of the co-production process. Members come from diverse social backgrounds—including community leaders, social workers, retired professionals, youth, cultural organisations, NGOs, and government officials—allowing them to challenge powerholders while maintaining credibility. They are skilled at bridging the gap between vulnerable communities and service providers. Through engaging both local elites and the public, intermediary groups have built legitimacy for the project, supporting the long-term co-production process (Haug, 2023). CCP established several such groups: Climate Action Groups (CAGs), Water Management Committees (WMCs), Climate Youth Groups (CYGs), Theatre Groups (TGs), and Local Advisory Committees (LACs). All members were residents, self-motivated, and dedicated to climate adaptation and

behavioural change communication (BCC). This approach aligns with Lino et al.'s (2019) idea of creating a "latent space of co-production". As a Project Officer explained:

> *Our CAG members serve as our local ambassadors; we nurture their potential to act as a catalyst group for both the community and ourselves. We introduce them to government departments and other NGOs as representatives. They attend GO-NGO meetings and maintain close ties with UP leaders, engaging in advocacy and lobbying for community needs (PO3).*

Another officer added:

> *To address these climate crises, we adopted a locally led approach—raising awareness, identifying issues, and assisting the community in developing solutions through their own efforts. BRAC supports them in problem-solving, leadership, advocacy, and engagement with government departments (PO4).*

To clarify the distinct yet interconnected roles of these intermediary bodies within the co-production process, the following table summarises how each group contributes to CCP's participative ecosystem. It highlights the different forms of representation they provide, the specific roles they assume as co-producers, and the ways in which they translate community needs into actionable strategies. This overview demonstrates how intermediary groups collectively operationalise representative co-production on the ground.

Table 7.1: Intermediary Groups within the CCP and Their Roles in Representative Co-production

Intermediary Groups	Role as Representative Co-producers	Objectives and Contribution
Climate Action Groups (CAGs)	Community Representative co-produces as Catalyst Groups	Act as the collective voice of beneficiaries and the broader community; collaboratively develop solutions with CCP to enhance local climate resilience and encourage participatory decision-making.
Water Management Committees (WMCs)	Representative Implementers for co-delivery	Act on behalf of the CCP and the community to manage and distribute safe drinking water and ensure equitable access for local institutions and vulnerable households.
Climate Youth Groups (CYGs)	Representatives of Youth as Climate Ambassadors	Mobilise young community members to identify local vulnerabilities, raise awareness, and initiate grassroots adaptation and mitigation actions in partnership with CCP.
Theatre Groups (TGs)	Culture-based Co-producers	Utilise performance art, including street theatre, drama, and folk media, to raise mass awareness of climate change, adaptation, and resilience-building practices.

Intermediary Groups	Role as Representative Co-producers	Objectives and Contribution
Local Advisory Committees (LACs)	Institutional Partners	Composed of local government representatives who monitor CCP implementation, legitimise project activities, and facilitate coordination with public institutions.

Table 7.1 illustrates that the CCP's intermediary groups collectively embody representative co-production by transforming community participation into structured, accountable collaboration. Each group functions as a distinct type of co-producer, utilising contextual knowledge and social legitimacy to convert community needs into actionable strategies. CAGs amplify grassroots voices; WMCs operationalise solutions; CYGs and TGs expand co-production into cultural and youth spheres; and LACs formalise collaboration through institutional channels.

Together, these groups show that representative co-production is not just a single act but an ecosystem of shared responsibilities. By positioning intermediaries as both community representatives and organisational partners, CCP embeds accountability into the fabric of service delivery. This setup turns co-production into a political process of rights-claiming, where community representatives negotiate with powerholders, influence decision-making, and promote transparency.

In this way, the CCP's intermediary strategy demonstrates how NGOs can overcome barriers to direct participation in marginal economies by institutionalising co-production through locally anchored intermediaries. These representative groups act as the connective tissue between NGOs, communities, and local governments, facilitating a

reciprocal flow of knowledge, resources, and accountability. The model helps strengthen project sustainability and creates a replicable framework for embedding social accountability through participatory governance in development practice.

Maintaining this participation requires bolstering the capacity of intermediary groups. Observations and interviews with project staff indicate that one of CCP's main tasks is to raise awareness and improve the capacity of intermediary groups to advocate for vulnerable citizens and contribute to climate resilience. These capacity-building efforts help intermediaries see themselves as credible representatives who can promote social accountability. The following comments from CAG members reflect this sense of empowerment:

> *CAG's work is opening a new path for us. Our society is 'jotil' (bureaucratic). Higher authorities do not easily listen to public demands. But I believe they will change if people become more aware and demand their rights. Change takes time. Just as I could not attend college, I will send my daughter—who has a disability—to university. Our vision has changed (CAG 4).*

Another member added:

> *We have 54 CAGs with 1,512 members. We aim to be responsible citizens and protect our community. We are the change-makers. Through BRAC's support, including training, meetings, awareness activities, rallies, and advocacy, we hope to make Mongla climate-resilient and improve our lives (CAG 6).*

This practice of connecting communities through co-production to establish the appropriate claiming position at the grassroots level opens up opportunities to create a path for social accountability. Frey-Heger and Barrett (2021) argued that supporting developing communities in asserting their rights to self-determination and realising political, civil, economic, and social rights is vital for a project's sustainable success. It

asserts that community members and NGO beneficiaries should see themselves as 'rights claimers' within the broader development context, rather than solely in relation to NGO services (O'Leary, 2017). Subsequent studies on social accountability have enhanced understanding of the possibilities of accountability, highlighting the potential to empower 'others' (O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017). In her study, O'Leary (2017) shows how beneficiaries in rural India gained empowerment and self-determination through social accountability practices, which were perceived as initiatives created by the citizens themselves.

In Bangladesh, the introduction of intermediaries plays a crucial role in co-production, enabling diverse actors to collaborate in designing and delivering development solutions that reflect collective needs. These intermediaries serve as connectors, facilitators, and advocates, building bridges between communities, NGOs, and public authorities to ensure that community voices are heard. At the grassroots level, people often remain unaware of where or how to claim their rights (Chatterjee and Kundu, 2025). CCP fosters community leaders who advocate for local needs, thereby promoting social accountability. The next section explains how different types of intermediary groups were formed as co-producers to serve the wider community by promoting climate awareness, fostering resilience, and advancing contextually appropriate adaptation strategies in Mongla.

7.2.1.1 CAGs: Representatives of the Communities

Climate Action Groups (CAGs) serve as the primary mechanism through which BRAC's CCP converts co-production into community-led initiatives, fostering opportunities for local participation and social accountability. Initiated in the project's first year, CAGs were established as intermediary bodies representing the community

in planning, coordinating, and sustaining activities to secure safe drinking water and boost climate resilience. By harnessing the community's diverse skills, experiences, and age groups, CCP aimed to unite local actors around a shared goal: building a climate-resilient community and ensuring safe drinking water for all.

In grassroots contexts such as Mongla, beneficiary engagement in decision-making is often limited by socio-economic hierarchies, low levels of education, and a culture of reliance on external aid. Citizens frequently see themselves as lacking the capacity or legitimacy to influence those in power (OECD, 2020). This sense of detachment stems from structural barriers, the absence of a collective voice, time poverty related to insecure livelihoods, restricted access to information, and limited understanding of how to navigate bureaucratic systems (Pazzi and Svetlova, 2023). To tackle these issues, the CCP adopted a representative co-production approach, forming intermediary community groups able to interpret and advocate on behalf of less empowered citizens (Eriksson, 2019).

Within this framework, local representatives such as CAG and WMC members act as mediators between NGOs, government actors, and citizens. They draw on tacit knowledge and social legitimacy to identify local priorities, frame issues in institutionally recognisable terms, and ensure that community concerns are voiced in decision-making forums. In doing so, CAGs transform passive beneficiaries into indirectly yet meaningfully engaged participants in co-produced governance processes, reintroducing citizen voice into development practice and laying the groundwork for sustained accountability.

In highly vulnerable coastal communities like Mongla, social and cultural barriers further hinder citizens' willingness to demand their rights. To address these issues, the

CCP's participatory strategy aimed to involve alternative community representatives who could speak credibly and confidently on behalf of the most affected populations. Project Officers in each union facilitated the selection of CAG members as local representatives. This approach, aligned with Eriksson's (2019) concept of representative co-production, depends on individuals from within the community, sharing its social and cultural background, to bridge communication and advocacy gaps between NGOs and marginalised groups. As one Project Officer explained:

> *CAGs are our local volunteers elected by the community. In the community's eyes, they hold the greatest potential to lead and support others. Some are already engaged in social work and are well recognised by the government or local residents. A number of our CAG members have received government awards for their social work and contributions to the community. We draw on their leadership skills and recognition to showcase the potential of grassroots people and inspire others (PO 3).*

A CAG member's journal entry echoes this sense of civic motivation:

> *I am a social worker. I enjoy doing something useful for others. Due to my contributions to social work, the Prime Minister awarded me the 'Joyeeta' award. This recognition inspired me to serve people. Climate change is the biggest crisis in this area. I am very eager to work with BRAC to help my community overcome this suffering (J1).*

The CAGs were intentionally created to include community representatives rather than direct project beneficiaries, thereby minimising potential conflicts of interest and dependency. As DANIDA (2021) notes, climate action initiatives benefit from engaging capable intermediaries who can bridge the gap between community voices, local authorities, and technical agencies. Because CAG members were not reliant on BRAC for financial or material assistance, they were better able to speak openly about project

challenges and unintended consequences. Their legitimacy—derived from community election and social recognition—enabled them to question both NGO and government decisions in ways that direct beneficiaries could not. As one elderly beneficiary explained:

> *I am an elderly, uneducated person. I could not answer many of their questions in the survey because I did not know their answers. However, my son helped me. He also joined the CAG group, received training, and attends meetings with them. Today, my son is receiving training. Many youths from the village have also joined. They are capable of talking with 'Boro Officers' (high officials) of NGOs, the Upazila Chairman, and Members. If we face any problems, I will ask my son to speak with the BRAC staff member (Ben 5).*

Another participant reinforced this perception of trust and representation:

> *At the community meeting, BRAC suggested forming a CAG group from our ward. We proposed names, and our people happily joined the group. The Chairman and Members were also involved in the CAG. BRAC expressed special thanks to us for establishing this volunteer group. If we face any issues in the community, it will be easier to discuss them with the group. They are our people. Since the local Chairman and Members are involved, they can speak on our behalf (Ben 7).*

Through this structure, CAGs effectively bridge communication gaps between communities and institutions, providing a collective platform for dialogue and advocacy. The inclusion of local government representatives—such as Union Parishad Chairmen and Ward Members—further enhances their credibility and capacity to influence decision-making. As a CAG member reflected:

> *To establish our action plan, we maintain liaison with local government offices, such as the Upazila Agriculture Office and the Upazila Hospital, for health awareness*

activities. We also keep close contact with the Union Parishad Chairman, Ward members, and others (CAG Journal 3).

CCP organised 25 meetings with CAG members to implement Climate Actions for Safe Water (CASW), guided by the User Guideline on Safe Drinking Water Action Plan to Enhance Climate Resilience. A total of 1,512 CAG members—52% of whom are women—received training and helped develop 54 locally grounded water resilience solutions (BRAC, 2024). These activities illustrate how CAGs, as community co-producers, turn co-production into concrete accountability practices by coordinating, monitoring, and advocating for community-led initiatives.

As community representatives, CAGs facilitate actions to achieve broader outcomes for the locality. For instance, during the 12th National Parliamentary Election in 2024, CAG members from Mongla Upazila demonstrated effective policy advocacy with key policymakers. They demanded specific commitments to address the impacts of climate change. As part of a series of influencing efforts, representatives from 54 CAGs met with the main candidates in the Parliamentary Election 2024. The CAG leaders submitted a memorandum outlining demands for inclusion in the election manifestos of political parties and independent candidates. On behalf of the community, these CAG representatives helped organise platforms where citizens and powerholders could discuss concerns, share feedback, and co-create solutions (BRAC, 2024).

Organising and taking part in such activities on behalf of the community creates opportunities for vulnerable groups to identify local needs, develop effective plans, take action to meet those needs, and assert their rights before relevant authorities. These practices align with core principles of social accountability mechanisms. Social accountability can foster environments in which individuals rediscover their partial

understanding and reflexive awareness of their own and others' working conditions, as well as the capacity to recognise and value others' interests beyond purely instrumental concerns (Alawattage and Azure, 2019).

The CAGs thus embody the essence of representative co-production, acting as the legitimate voice of Mongla's communities within BRAC's Climate Change Programme. By mobilising trusted, capable individuals who are socially embedded yet independent of NGO patronage, CAGs bridge the gap among vulnerable citizens, local authorities, and development actors. Their actions—from planning water-related solutions to engaging in political advocacy—illustrate how intermediary groups can translate community needs into institutional agendas and foster accountability through dialogue and collective agency. Although their influence remains constrained by structural hierarchies, CAGs constitute a crucial step towards fostering a culture of participatory governance, where communities begin to act as active rights claimers rather than passive beneficiaries.

7.2.1.2 CAGs: Building Collective Questioning Power

In coastal Mongla, recurrent climate disasters and limited government support have led to a long-term reliance on NGOs for survival and resilience. This dependence has led to a sense of helplessness among beneficiaries, who often see NGOs as benevolent authorities rather than responsible service providers. As one elderly beneficiary stated:

> *They are high-level people. I cannot challenge them—ami gareeb ebong amar bidda nai [I am poor and uneducated] (Ben 4).*

This sense of inferiority and gratitude has historically discouraged communities from questioning or influencing project decisions (Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2010). Co-production with intermediary groups offers a way to challenge this behavioural pattern in emerging economies by fostering mutual understanding of community needs, recognising beneficiaries' rights, and promoting sustainable development. Prior studies suggest that NGOs and development agencies cannot be assumed automatically to promote the interests of poor and marginalised groups; social accountability approaches are therefore essential (Hopper and Tanima, 2018; Tanima et al., 2020). To establish such accountability, it is vital that vulnerable groups have a space in which to co-produce (Lino et al., 2019), thereby fostering closer relationships among citizens, NGOs, and other public service representatives. In CCP, this space is embodied in the CAGs, which enable representative co-production (Eriksson, 2019) by allowing group representatives to jointly and voluntarily evaluate and justify NGO activities. In doing so, they help open avenues for social accountability (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Brown and Dillard, 2020; Cooper and Lapsley, 2021; Dillard and Vinnari, 2019).

Recognising the deep-rooted dynamics of dependency and deference, the CCP introduced CAGs as part of its co-production strategy to shift passive reliance towards participatory accountability. CAGs exemplify representative co-production by transforming individual compliance into collective questioning power. By enabling community representatives to co-design, monitor, and evaluate project activities, CCP created a participatory infrastructure that legitimises community voices. Eriksson (2019) emphasises that representative co-production allows indirect participation through intermediaries who possess local legitimacy and interpretive capacity, enabling them to engage with institutional actors. Similarly, Haug (2023) highlights that

intermediary co-producers act as translators and facilitators, bridging communication and power gaps between service users and providers. Within CCP, CAGs fulfil this mediating role, acting as spokespeople who can “ask questions on behalf of those who cannot.” As one Project Officer noted:

> *CAGs are our local volunteers, elected by the community. Others respect them, and they can speak up for the people when individuals hesitate (PO3).*

Through this collective representation, CAGs offer a socially legitimate channel for feedback and critique. They transform private concerns into collective claims, allowing sensitive issues to be raised without endangering individual community members. For example, a CAG member explained:

> *If we face issues with water distribution or maintenance, we first discuss them within our group, then we approach BRAC officers collectively. They listen to us when we visit as a team (CAG 2).*

This collaborative questioning process demonstrates how co-production fosters accountability through dialogue rather than confrontation. It reinterprets the power relationship between NGO staff and community members as a partnership grounded in negotiation, transparency, and shared learning (Brown and Dillard, 2020; Alawattage and Azure, 2021). By enhancing this collective questioning ability, CAGs implement co-production as a social accountability tool. They not only assist in project delivery but also act as accountability intermediaries, overseeing project activities, advocating for equitable resource distribution, and ensuring that NGO commitments reflect local priorities. As one CAG leader noted:

> *When we see delays or problems, we ask for explanations. We are not fighting; we are helping them to do better for the community (CAG 4).*

Such practices align with O'Leary's (2017) notion of transformative accountability, in which community members act as rights claimants who hold institutions accountable through participatory processes. CCP's facilitation of CAGs thereby redefines the NGO–community relationship: rather than a hierarchy of giver and receiver, it becomes a partnership grounded in shared responsibility, transparency, and reflexivity. Through this mechanism, representative co-production allows NGOs to embed social accountability into everyday practice.

As CAGs develop from project participants into civic actors, they establish a feedback loop where questioning, monitoring, and collaboration continually improve project implementation. This process can enhance the responsiveness of NGO service delivery and lay the groundwork for sustainable, community-led governance, in which accountability is co-produced alongside development outcomes (Eriksson, 2019; Haug, 2023; Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Brown and Dillard, 2020; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021).

7.2.1.3 Challenges in the Process of Collective Questioning

While CAGs have opened an important pathway for community dialogue and collective questioning, their influence remains necessarily partial and evolving. Importantly, this should not be interpreted as evidence that co-production is ineffective. Rather, it reflects the realities of marginal economies where long-standing social hierarchies, donor-driven funding cycles, and institutional constraints shape how far questioning can be exercised (Hopper and Tanima, 2018; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2010). In such contexts, co-production rarely leads to immediate shifts in power. Instead, it contributes incrementally by enlarging the spaces in which citizens can speak, organise, and negotiate. The dynamics observed here

therefore illustrate the early stages of a slow, relational process through which community voice gradually becomes institutionalised.

Several CAG members reported that although they have been encouraged to speak out, develop leadership skills, and participate actively, they still face constraints when engaging with NGO staff, Union Parishad members, or government authorities. As one CAG member reflected:

> *We can discuss our problems, but not their mistakes. We are not yet fully capable of challenging them on everything. We are working with their support. That's why, sometimes, we need to be careful with our words* (CAG 2, 2nd interview).

She further elaborated:

> *The project is nearing completion. However, our mission to establish a climate-resilient community remains unfinished. Safe drinking water for all has yet to be guaranteed in every household in Mongla, which was the CCP's main promise. If they do not receive funding to renew the project, we cannot question why they failed to do so and to uphold the promise to the community* (CAG 2, 2nd interview).

These reflections highlight how, even within participatory frameworks, voice may be exercised within boundaries shaped by organisational comfort, donor expectations, and culturally embedded norms of respect and deference (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015). Such constraints do not invalidate co-production; rather, they reveal the social terrain through which questioning practices emerge.

Internal community hierarchies also shape CAGs' ability to sustain independent questioning. Local elites or politically connected individuals may dominate discussions,

overshadowing poorer or less educated participants, particularly women. As one female CAG member noted:

> *Since we joined CAG, we have learnt a lot. Many of our attitudes towards involvement in discussions and participation have changed. But that doesn't mean the whole society has changed. I can sense that they show me some respect, but not necessarily listen to everything we say. They have limitations* (CAG 5, 2nd interview).

This pattern mirrors what Donetto et al. (2015) and Røhnebæk and Bjerck (2021) describe as the persistence of "hidden hierarchies" within co-productive settings. Additionally, CAGs' reliance on BRAC for training, logistical support, and coordination makes it difficult to critique the organisation that sustains their operations—an issue widely recognised in social accountability research (Hopper and Tanima, 2018; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008). As one youth member succinctly expressed: *"We are working with BRAC, so we cannot go against them."* This demonstrates the paradox of co-production in marginal economies: it facilitates voice, yet embeds communities within relationships that simultaneously constrain critique.

Beyond organisational dynamics, the broader institutional environment offers limited avenues for translating community questioning into systemic change. Local government authorities may welcome CAG engagement at the project level but rarely integrate their feedback into formal decision-making structures (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2023). One CAG member described this dilemma:

> *We submitted our memorandum to the local MPs contesting the Parliamentary Election 2024, demanding specific actions and commitments to address the effects of climate change in their election manifestos. However, how they will respond to this remains unknown. If they ignore our demands, can we truly*

> *challenge them? No, they are too powerful. Nonetheless, we are still proud to have reached this stage to voice our demands* (CAG 5, 2nd interview).

This emphasises the partial and fragile nature of questioning power in developing contexts: community voice is emerging, yet institutional responsiveness remains uncertain. As Hopper and Tanima (2018) and O'Leary (2017) argue, voice alone does not guarantee accountability; meaningful change depends on mechanisms that ensure institutions listen and respond.

Nevertheless, the act of publicly submitting demands signals a substantial discursive shift—from silent dependency toward collective advocacy—reflecting an increasing awareness of rights, responsibilities, and capabilities among community members. Even if influence remains limited, these practices mark early yet significant steps toward a culture of participatory governance.

Although these participatory gains remain fragile, they signal the emergence of a gradual movement towards social accountability. As Alawattage and Azure (2021) argue, accountability is not achieved solely through formal reporting but through the slow socialisation of dialogue, trust, and mutual recognition between citizens and institutions. In this sense, co-production becomes a training ground for democratic engagement, where communities learn to speak, organise, and negotiate even within constrained spaces. While CAGs cannot yet fully influence political actors, their collective actions are beginning to normalise civic dialogue and establish precedents for future institutional engagement.

To illustrate how these processes connect, the following 7.1 diagram maps the chain of representative co-production within CCP and shows how intermediary groups help embed social accountability at different points of the NGO–community relationship.

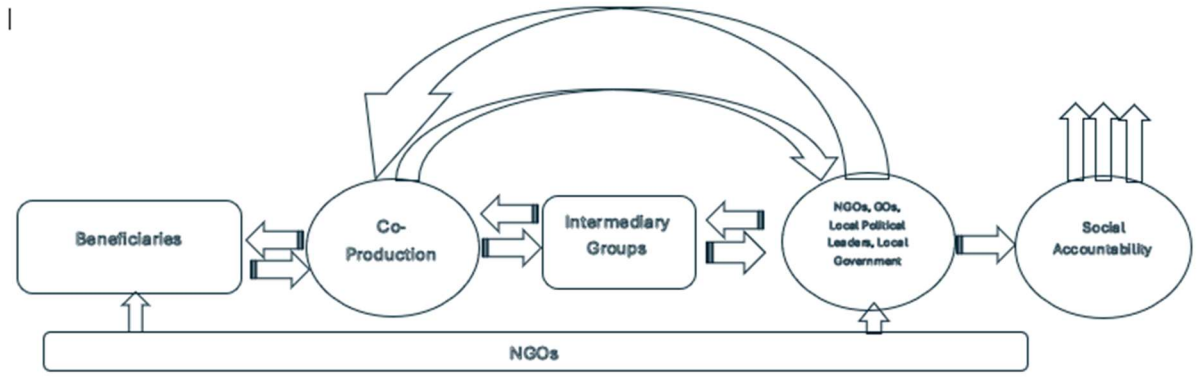


Figure 7.1: The chain of Intermediary groups as representative co-producers

Figure 7.1 illustrates how intermediary groups function as representative co-producers within the CCP, forming a relational chain that links beneficiaries, NGOs, government offices, and local authorities. Positioned as the legitimate voice of the community, these intermediaries translate local concerns, tacit knowledge, and collective priorities into institutionally recognisable dialogue. At the same time, they support NGOs by facilitating co-production processes—mobilising participation, maintaining communication channels, and nurturing spaces for discussion and joint problem-solving. Through this dual role, intermediary groups strengthen the interconnections among actors, enabling community demands to be articulated, negotiated, and addressed. The upward arrows in the diagram signal the expanding possibilities for social accountability that emerge as these representative interactions accumulate—showing how co-production can gradually embed more transparent, responsive, and reciprocal accountability practices within NGO–community relations.

The relevance of this model becomes clearer through practical application. The representative co-production model is carried out via intermediary entities such as

CAGs, whose locally grounded engagement illustrates how theory translates into social accountability within BRAC's Climate Change Programme. In co-production, intermediaries are formal bodies chiefly responsible for helping service providers deliver and coordinate services (Haug, 2023). Within the CCP, the creation of Climate Action Groups in each ward established such intermediary structures representing local communities. By aligning service delivery with grassroots priorities, CAGs enable a more inclusive and responsive approach to climate resilience, fostering both behavioural and institutional change.

In Bangladesh, where beneficiaries often face chronic resource scarcity and have historically remained passive recipients of NGO assistance, this approach repositions them as active partners in development. Empowering CAG members to act as mediators between NGOs and communities helps transform dependency into participation and voice. Over time, this participatory dynamic establishes the groundwork for social accountability by embedding transparency, responsiveness, and shared responsibility within service delivery. Thus, the co-production model—supported by intermediary groups—demonstrates how collective engagement at the grassroots level can develop into a sustainable framework for NGO social accountability in emerging economies (Tuurnas et al., 2016).

7.3 Climate Youth Group (CYG): Youth Representatives from the Community

Climate change in Mongla has not only harmed the environment but also disrupted the community's social fabric, deepening social divisions and eroding trust. Understanding these social impacts offers important context for the development of the Climate Youth Groups (CYGs), which aim to co-create initiatives that restore collective purpose and solidarity. The CYG acts as a mediating structure in the co-production process,

involving local youth in the joint creation, implementation, and monitoring of community projects focused on climate resilience and safe drinking water within the Climate Change Programme.

The project identifies enthusiastic young community members who are familiar with contemporary lifestyles, technologically adept, active on social media, and willing to volunteer. The formation of CYGs aims to engage youth—both boys and girls—in constructive community development activities. Members are young residents of Mongla Upazila who are directly affected by climate change and who act as local representatives in their respective areas. Each CYG member is a *Climate Ambassador* and is responsible for reporting on the climate vulnerability in their ward.

Through co-production, these Climate Ambassadors collaborate with CCP staff to identify environmental challenges, co-create awareness campaigns, and jointly carry out local adaptation measures—such as maintaining rainwater harvesting systems and promoting sustainable water use. In this way, CYGs co-produce both service results (e.g., more reliable access to safe drinking water) and social processes (e.g., civic participation, awareness, and behavioural change) that support long-term climate adaptation and accountability. There are six Climate Youth Groups across six unions in Mongla, each comprising approximately 25–30 Climate Ambassadors, for a total of 180 members. CCP harness the energy and potential of these youth groups to deliver community services that contribute to the project's sustainable impact. Comments from CAG members demonstrate how this strategy is perceived at the community level.

> *One of the strategies of BRAC that I appreciate is their engagement with the young generation. Youth groups are at risk of engaging in many harmful activities in society. Drugs, hijacking, and various social crimes are common. They often feel frustrated*

due to poverty, unemployment, and uncertainty in their lives. BRAC involves these young people in positive community actions. As a mother of a young son, I think this is a very good practice. Their training will equip them with lifelong skills and enhance their CVs (CAG 3).

CCP selected many young, enthusiastic boys and girls who were willing to participate in social work. Our youth groups are quite vulnerable due to a lack of opportunities to channel their time into positive activities. As a teacher, I am pleased that BRAC has taken the initiative to organise youth and help them develop their skills (J4).

CYGs were established to foster social connections and promote youth representation in responding to the climate crisis. Initially, the project organised foundational training for CYG members at unique venues to attract and inspire them, and to support leadership and motivational development. Once motivated, skilled, and clear about the objectives and role of CYGs, these ambassadors were prepared to serve their communities. The following reflections from the Specialist of the Knowledge Development Department and a Project Officer highlight the motivations for engaging youth as co-producers.

We also identified the most promising and capable young boys and girls from the community to form some CYG. We aim to engage the youth in constructive activities that benefit society. We are nurturing their energy to foster a positive vibe within the community. We are raising awareness of the potential of youth, providing leadership skills and advocacy training, and developing communication skills to motivate grassroots populations (SAKD).

The CYG group mainly selects young people who can make meaningful contributions to the community. Some are already recognised leaders within their community. I know someone who received the 'Joyeeta Award' from the Prime Minister for social work. People like her, who are active in social work and participate in various community events and government meetings, tend to be more confident

when speaking on behalf of the community. BRAC is utilising their potential to establish communication with governments and NGOs (PO5).

To sustain and support these Climate Ambassadors, the Project Officer of each ward organises quarterly awareness meetings with each CYG. These meetings typically cover:

i) What climate change is and how to adapt in this community

ii) Why is safe drinking water a right?

iii) Water Safety Plan (WSP)

iv) Water tank maintenance and operations

The Advocacy and Knowledge Department develop user-friendly materials and training modules, educates individuals about their rights, and assists in disseminating this knowledge throughout the community. CCP assigns each Climate Ambassador the task of sharing their knowledge and raising awareness among approximately 40 households in their neighbourhood. This strategy not only involves youth in community activities but also energises them to address pressing issues and contribute to building a society that reflects their needs and aspirations.

In Bangladesh, youth frequently belong to underserved or underrepresented groups. By engaging them in co-production, their perspectives and needs are explicitly recognised, increasing the likelihood that policies and services will reflect the concerns of all stakeholders. Through these collaborative activities, CYGs co-produce climate adaptation services, such as awareness campaigns, safe water maintenance, and behavioural change initiatives, while simultaneously co-creating accountability itself. By monitoring water systems, reporting local problems, and communicating

community feedback to CCP staff and local government officials, CYG members help institutionalise feedback mechanisms within service delivery.

This process converts youth engagement into a localised form of social oversight, where NGOs become accountable to community representatives. As Tisdall (2017) argues, co-production improves accountability when citizens actively take part in planning, monitoring, and assessing public services. In the CCP, the CYGs' daily practices of observation, reporting, and advocacy serve this purpose, embedding transparency and responsiveness into the project's operational cycle. The Climate Youth Groups, therefore, demonstrate how co-production extends beyond service delivery to encompass the joint development of climate adaptation solutions and participatory accountability mechanisms, positioning youth as active partners in promoting both community resilience and social oversight within BRAC's Climate Change Programme.

7.4 Theatre Groups: Representatives for Mass Awareness

The Theatre Groups (TGs) serve as another form of intermediary co-production within BRAC's Climate Change Programme, in which local cultural actors collaborate with the NGO to develop communication platforms that raise climate awareness, challenge power structures, and foster collective reflection. This process transforms cultural expression into a means of social accountability.

Bangladeshi society is culturally rich, shaped by centuries of history, art, literature, and tradition. The country has a strong heritage of music and theatre, including folk and classical forms. *Baul* songs and mystical folk music performed by wandering minstrels are recognised by UNESCO as intangible cultural heritage. The use of theatrical media

for social transformation and awareness-raising is common in several Asian and African contexts. In rural Bangladesh, street theatre remains an important form of cultural expression and entertainment, particularly after the harvest season (Khan, 2017). Civil society organisations and development agencies have increasingly used these forms to address pressing social challenges and promote public awareness (Rashid, 2015). Many NGOs in Bangladesh employ street theatre to facilitate interactive communication and engagement with their target audiences (Ahmed, 2016). Among their aims is to revive and promote folk cultural practices to sensitise grassroots populations and strengthen communities' capacity to cope with severe climate change and natural disasters (Ahmed, 2016; Khan, 2017).

Building on this tradition, the CCP established Theatre Groups (TGs) to raise mass awareness of water salinity, climate change, and citizens' roles in mitigation and adaptation through interactive street drama (popular theatre)[3]. To enhance community engagement, 13 local members from CAGs and CYGs were trained to create and perform dramas that convey key messages on water conservation and climate resilience to diverse audiences. The aim was to extend awareness activities beyond direct project beneficiaries and reach the wider community. As the Specialist of the Advocacy and Knowledge Department explained:

> *Our primary focus for the project is to build climate resilience within the community to confront the climate crisis. Merely providing water tanks will not be sufficient to achieve this goal. For a sustainable solution, the most essential step is to ensure that every individual in the community understands why climate change is happening*

[3] Traditional theatre form that combines storytelling, drama, and music, typically performed in an open-air setting.

> *and what role they can play in preventing it and adapting to the changes. We convey these vital messages through performance art and popular theatre so that everyone in the community can learn about their roles (SAKD).*

Storytelling, jatra (folk theatre), and rural fairs are central to cultural life in Mongla. Recognising the severity of climate impacts in the area, CCP aimed to use these cultural forms to raise mass awareness. A theatre specialist trains the TG members to improve the effectiveness of their performances. The trainer develops scripts rooted in local realities that depict the devastating effects of climate change on communities and showcase CCP's activities to educate large audiences and encourage action to reduce climate-related risks. The group performs at well-known public venues such as markets, open fields, and school grounds in Mongla, aiming to engage both broad and targeted audiences (BRAC, 2024). One Project Officer explained the topics addressed in these performances:

> *In the theatre, we first present the current issues related to climate change and its impact, including the crisis of safe drinking water in the community, agricultural problems caused by water salinity, the suffering of school-aged children due to lack of safe drinking water, women suffering from collecting water over long distances, waterborne diseases, the adversity of drinking saline water, and the devastating impact on the fishery industry in Mongla due to saline intrusion in ponds and rivers (PO5).*

These performances aim to strengthen communities' capacity to think critically about and adapt to the adverse effects of climate change. The project pursued its objectives through a three-pronged approach—awareness, action, and advocacy. The street theatre performances were part of the awareness-raising campaign on Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviour (KAB) related to climate change, providing a foundation for

resilience-building initiatives. The Project Manager described the expected outcomes of the theatre group's activities:

> *We harness the potential of youth as a communication channel for our project information and deliver social messages through folk forms. We informed the community about the existence of our Climate Action Groups (CAG) and Climate Youth Groups (CYG), explaining how they act as catalysts. This helps the wider community see them as representatives to assert their rights and needs. From the same platform, we also conveyed messages about how each individual should play their part in tackling the climate crisis in Mongla (PM).*

The Area Manager added a further dimension to the role of the theatre group:

> *We used the performing theatre to inform the entire community about our water tank distribution, courtyard awareness meetings, how to harvest rainwater, water rationing during the dry season, home gardening, women's rights, the importance of children's education, involving women in Income Generating Activities (IGAs), and maintaining a harmonious family. We also aimed to promote unity within the community to tackle the climate crisis. This served as a comprehensive means of communication for the maximum population (AM).*

The use of theatrical media within the CCP demonstrates how co-production can serve as a tool for social transformation and knowledge co-creation. Co-production, at its core, aims to develop normative practices through the deliberate collaboration of diverse actors working towards shared goals (Bremer and Meisch, 2017). To reach broad and diverse audiences, the CCP employed community-based theatre as a participatory medium to encourage dialogue and build collective understanding of climate issues.

To reach broad and diverse audiences, the CCP used community-based theatre as a participatory medium to promote dialogue and foster collective understanding of climate issues. In this approach, the TGs act as a representative co-production mechanism: local performers collaborate with BRAC to co-design scripts, co-produce climate messages, and co-deliver awareness activities that mirror community realities. By integrating local knowledge and cultural expression into communication efforts, the TGs bridge the gap between NGO intentions and community interpretations. Their performances encourage open discussion among diverse audiences, creating informal and inclusive spaces for shared reflection on rights, responsibilities, and unmet needs. In this way, TGs indirectly enhance social accountability by raising awareness, increasing the visibility of NGO actions, and empowering community members to articulate concerns and expectations more confidently. Although they do not directly challenge institutional actors, they broaden the social and discursive conditions under which collective questioning and social accountability can develop.

As Baztan et al. (2020) observe, effective tailoring of climate knowledge relies on fostering iterative exchanges and sustained dialogue between service providers and beneficiaries during both the creation and application of knowledge. This knowledge co-production—the deliberate collaboration among individuals with diverse experiences and expertise working towards a shared goal—is vital for integrating reflection, iteration, and responsiveness within participatory initiatives (Bremer and Meisch, 2017).

In this context, street theatre functions as a form of civic engagement that raises awareness and amplifies public concerns—both central to social accountability. By merging entertainment with education, theatrical performances enable grassroots

communities to engage with and discuss complex social and environmental issues in a straightforward, relatable manner. Their open, informal format encourages participation from diverse audiences, including those who might otherwise be excluded by literacy barriers or formal institutional settings. Through these interactive performances, CCP employs theatre not only as a communication tool but also as a collaborative practice of knowledge creation. In doing so, it fosters reflection, participation, and collective learning, laying the foundations for a culture of social accountability.

7.5 Local Advisory Committee (LAC): Representatives of the Government Authorities

Joint initiatives between NGOs and governments can significantly enhance the effectiveness of development efforts by leveraging shared strengths, resources, and expertise (Mojumder and Panday, 2022). Such cross-sector partnerships enable NGOs to operate more efficiently, broaden their impact, and address systemic issues more thoroughly (Mojumder, 2018; Najam, 2000). To maintain a strong relationship with the government and secure appropriate support from local administrative authorities, the CCP established a Local Advisory Committee (LAC). This committee comprises 12 members: the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO), the Upazila Chairman, six Union Parishad Chairmen, relevant officers from the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE), the Departments of Health and Education, and CCP's representatives.

The LAC meets twice a year to ensure meaningful engagement with the project, providing oversight and advice on the quality of operations and the maintenance of CCP interventions. Such institutionalised multi-stakeholder committees are known to

enhance participatory governance, particularly by improving coordination, transparency, and responsiveness within service delivery systems (Mojumder and Panday, 2022). As chair of the committee, the UNO offers suggestions on collaborating with other stakeholders to increase investment in safe water access in the project area.

His comments reflect a positive, collaborative GO–NGO relationship that strengthens the project's acceptance and credibility.

> *They included me in their Local Advisory Committee, which involves our UP Chairman, Ward Members, and DPHE members. This approach helps keep us informed. The committee presents reports and updates us on its activities (UNO).*

Engaging government authorities in NGO activities enhances credibility and legitimacy, thereby fostering public trust and confidence. NGO–government collaboration increases the perceived trustworthiness of NGO interventions and encourages community participation (Lewis, 2010). It also ensures that NGO activities align with national priorities and policy frameworks—an essential condition for long-term effectiveness and integration into public systems (Mojumder, 2018; Najam, 2000). Government involvement provides stability by embedding programmes within formal governance structures, helping to ensure continuity beyond donor cycles (Ostrom, 1996; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012).

Within the CCP, collaboration with government authorities has also created opportunities for intermediary groups to engage with state actors, advocate, lobby, maintain liaisons, and support the community in asserting its rights. As the UNO acknowledged:

> *Yes, I recognise that engaging the local community is a good strategy, especially those who can advocate for the vulnerable group. BRAC introduced this group to our*

> *various departments and supported them in developing their leadership skills to speak out on behalf of the community (UNO).*

By institutionalising NGO–government collaboration, the LAC transforms co-production into a mechanism of embedded accountability, where government actors, NGOs, and communities share responsibility for both outcomes and oversight. This aligns with the concept of *institutionalised co-production* through which public agencies and civil society actors co-create and co-govern services (Joshi and Moore, 2004; Brandsen and Honingh, 2016). Involving local government leaders in project monitoring strengthens transparency and ensures that project objectives remain aligned with public policy frameworks (Pierre and Peters, 2020). Moreover, the LAC helps bridge vertical accountability (between government and NGOs) and horizontal accountability (between NGOs and communities), creating multi-directional systems of answerability (Jenkins, 2005; O'Donnell, 1998; Schedler, 1999). Through such institutional co-production, the CCP enhances both the legitimacy and responsiveness of its interventions, contributing to a governance model in which accountability is not externally imposed by donors but co-produced through continuous interaction among NGOs, government institutions, and communities (Fox, 2015).

7.6 Fostering Local Advocates: Culturing Social Accountability

Building a culture of social accountability requires much more than establishing formal mechanisms or participatory procedures; it depends on cultivating local advocates who can maintain accountability practices long after individual projects end. Scholars emphasise that accountability only becomes meaningful when communities have the capacity and confidence to engage with institutions, express their rights, and monitor service delivery (Fox, 2015; O'Leary, 2017; Joshi, 2017). In marginal economies,

where structural hierarchies, dependency relations, and information asymmetries limit citizens' ability to question authority, developing capable and confident community representatives becomes crucial (Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021). Without such grassroots advocates, participatory structures risk staying symbolic rather than becoming transformative (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, and Oswald, 2019).

This section explores how BRAC's Climate Change Programme (CCP) intentionally nurtures advocates through continuous engagement, leadership development, and participatory learning processes. Co-production research shows that intermediary actors—who interpret, mediate, and mobilise between institutions and communities—are vital in redistributing voice and improving accountability within public service ecosystems (Haug, 2023; Eriksson, 2019; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2021). By investing in intermediary groups that act as informed, motivated, and socially embedded local agents, the CCP seeks to shift communities from passive participation to active citizenship. These intermediaries—situated between NGOs, government authorities, and grassroots populations—serve a key role in interpreting information, mobilising collective voice, and supporting community oversight (Tuurnas et al., 2016; Brandsen and Honingh, 2016).

In doing so, CCP embeds social accountability as an ongoing, community-driven practice rather than a project-specific or donor-led obligation. This aligns with broader arguments that long-term accountability cultures develop through relational, dialogic, and iterative processes that foster trust, confidence, and shared responsibility between citizens and service providers (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Brown and Dillard, 2020). By cultivating local advocates who can navigate administrative systems, express

community needs, and facilitate collective action, CCP aids in the development of a sustainable, locally rooted culture of social accountability.

7.6.1 Competent Community

The primary aim of social accountability is to establish responsibility through civic participation, where ordinary people and/or civil society organisations are actively or indirectly involved in holding institutions accountable. Social accountability offers a strong framework for engaging grassroots communities (O'Leary, 2017). It acknowledges that not all 'voices' are equally represented in civil society and that particular attention and support are needed for those at risk of exclusion (Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2010). In many societies, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds face exclusion due to social hierarchies, power dynamics, and cultural norms (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; Tanima et al., 2023). In patriarchal contexts, women and girls are especially vulnerable to marginalisation. Consequently, social accountability emphasises capacity building, helping vulnerable people acquire the skills necessary for meaningful participation (O'Leary, 2017).

Scholars of development and NGO accountability often examine how NGOs fulfil their commitments to empower marginalised and vulnerable groups. There is widespread agreement that social accountability—where beneficiaries influence NGO operations and actions—is both morally and practically desirable (Day and Klein, 1987; Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Kilby, 2011). However, due to power dynamics inherent in aid funding, this opportunity has often been considered "effectively irrelevant" in practice (Najam, 1996). To make it meaningful, NGOs must effectively manage relationships

with diverse stakeholders, including governments, donors, beneficiaries, staff, and partners.

In line with this perspective, BRAC's CCP aims to provide need-based services, build relationships, share responsibilities, and foster resilience within communities to promote social accountability. One of the project's main objectives is to collaborate with target groups and communities in designing and implementing interventions, while also raising awareness to mobilise poor and marginalised groups around their rights and social responsibilities (BRAC, 2022). This includes establishing various intermediary groups to represent community interests and help people understand and assert their rights. The following comment from the Deputy Manager reflects CCP's long-term goal of cultivating a culture of social accountability.

> *CCP intends to hand over the responsibilities of the CAGs and WMC. These committees will assess our activities and share their findings with the local elected members and the chairman to ensure we are providing the right services to the right people in need of our support. If they find that we are not providing our support, they have the right to talk to us or even share it with other authorities, e.g., the UNO (DM).*

Building partnerships with communities and engaging capable representatives strengthens social accountability processes by fostering connections between citizens and decision-makers (Eriksson, 2019). Co-producing with intermediary groups, enhancing their capacity, and assigning them responsibilities as community representatives promotes a sense of ownership and encourages cooperation. As a CAG member observed:

> *After joining CAG, one notable change among our members is their increased confidence. Previously, during meetings, only a few participants spoke, while the rest remained silent. In front of the chairman, male members, and others, most female*

> *members felt shy and never voiced their concerns. However, through awareness-building training and meetings, APA consistently encourages us to engage and discuss our needs with the authorities. Now, people's attitudes are shifting. They are now more willing to participate (CAG 2).*

Co-production improves transparency, participation, and accountability by creating structured spaces where community representatives, NGOs, and government actors collaboratively engage in decision-making, implementation, and monitoring (McMullin, 2022). This participatory approach redistributes informational and decision-making power, allowing citizens to shift from passive recipients to active contributors (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2021). By involving intermediary groups such as CAGs, CYGs, and TGs, NGOs facilitate the exchange of local and technical knowledge, increasing the visibility of actions and decisions at all stages of project delivery (Eriksson, 2019; Haug, 2023). Such collaboration nurtures mutual understanding and trust—core elements of social accountability—as communities gain access to information and a platform to question and influence decisions (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; O'Leary, 2017). Additionally, involving institutional actors through the Local Advisory Committee (LAC) incorporates accountability into formal governance structures, ensuring NGO activities are monitored, justified, and aligned with public priorities (Ahmed et al., 2023; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011). Through these multi-level interactions, co-production shifts accountability from a narrow, hierarchical reporting mechanism towards a dynamic, dialogue-driven process rooted in transparency, shared learning, and reciprocal responsibility between NGOs and communities.

Haug (2023) argues that interaction is central to co-production, with power dynamics among public service providers, service users, and intermediaries being particularly significant. Co-production practices create interactional opportunities that help break

down established patterns of unequal power and authority. The way power is allocated influences the roles different actors can undertake in relation to community needs. Bovaird (2007) notes that collaborations in public service delivery often aim for mutuality, but this requires citizens or their representatives to actively engage with service providers to ensure community needs are met (Loeffler and Hine-Hughes, 2013; van Eijk et al., 2019). Co-production involving community representatives can thus play a transformative role in fostering a culture of social accountability within NGOs (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; O'Leary, 2017). As one CAG member emphasised:

> *If I observe BRAC failing to keep its promises, then we may raise this issue with our Ward members and the UP Chairman. We hope they will listen to us (CAG 1).*

CCP's strategy of engaging local powerholders has strengthened its ability to face challenges. Community confidence has increased through connections with local government authorities, participation in government meetings, and extensive awareness activities. Almost every CAG member mentioned new opportunities to interact with Union Parishads and other government bodies. As one member described:

> *Working with the chairman and members, and attending meetings with government officials, has given us the opportunity to discuss our issues—something that was not feasible before. I believe this is a stepping stone for the future. We seek assistance from them, but they often do not listen to our demands or act promptly. Nonetheless, they do give us hope and sometimes offer support. I think this is a good strategy for the future. We are learning who we need to approach regarding our needs (CAG 3).*

Banerjee and Jackson (2017) argue that excluding communities from development processes heightens the vulnerability of marginalised populations. When marginalised

communities become active partners in development efforts, the value propositions of such programmes change considerably, as they are then rooted in the community's actual needs. As one CAG member reflected:

> *Since we began our CAGs, I feel our community is united by a common mission. We face many issues—poverty, health problems, domestic violence, electricity, water, gas, and more. However, because of climate change, each difficulty becomes even more challenging. Life feels very uncertain. At any moment, a cyclone could strike and destroy everything I own. The CAG group is dedicated to tackling the challenges caused by climate change. Now, we are working together to improve our lives." (CAG 3).*

Collectivity and solidarity are vital for the sustainable development of impoverished communities, which cannot be achieved through systems that exclude or silence those targeted for "development" assistance (Wellens and Jegers, 2014). Subsequent research on social accountability has emphasised the potential of capacity building to empower individuals and enable their participation in NGOs' accountability mechanisms (Frey-Heger and Barrett, 2021; O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2008; O'Leary, 2017).

7.6.2 Adequate Skills to Practise Social Accountability

To practise social accountability effectively, grassroots communities need more than just opportunities for participation; they require the skills, confidence, and capacity to hold institutions, governments, and service providers to account (Qin, 2023). Social accountability relies on citizens' ability to critically engage with governance processes, promoting transparency, responsiveness, and equitable service delivery (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). Therefore, developing awareness, knowledge, and practical skills is essential. Beneficiaries must understand their rights, entitlements, and decision-

making mechanisms to recognise where and how to voice concerns (O'Leary, 2017; Kilby, 2011).

Within co-production frameworks, the skills needed for accountability go beyond technical training. They include the ability to mobilise tacit knowledge—the experiential, local understanding that community members hold about their environment, institutions, and survival strategies (Eriksson, 2019; Haug, 2023). This knowledge allows community members to assess the quality and relevance of NGO services based on lived experience, forming the foundation for co-assessment, the joint evaluation of service outcomes by NGOs and citizens. Through participatory monitoring, reflective meetings, and feedback sessions, groups such as CAGs and CYGs turn everyday insights into structured feedback that guides project adjustments. This process turns implicit, experience-based knowledge into collective learning and action, strengthening the dialogic relationship between NGOs and communities (Brown and Dillard, 2020; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021).

In CCP, combining advocacy training with recognising local tacit expertise has enabled community representatives to articulate their needs and assess the fairness and adequacy of service provision. Co-assessment operationalises social accountability within co-production: it goes beyond compliance or reporting to promote ongoing, mutual evaluation in which both NGOs and communities learn, adapt, and share responsibility for outcomes (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017). As one elected CAG leader explained:

> *I am an elected CAG leader. We received training in leadership and motivation, which provides a valuable opportunity to enhance my leadership skills. These skills assist us in negotiating for our rights and demands. We are more confident than before. For*

> *example, our agricultural land has been damaged due to increased soil salinity, caused by the actions of wealthy and politically protected individuals rather than the poor. They built Gher (freshwater shrimp culture) facilities in any manner they pleased; as a result, salty water entered all lands and water sources. We are suffering because of these unplanned polders. Currently, we are advocating and lobbying with the government's agriculture and fishery offices to help us reduce our hardship. We are demanding salt-tolerant seeds and plants to continue our farming activities (CAG 4).*

The lack of NGO accountability to beneficiaries is often linked to viewing beneficiaries as dependent stakeholders who are less able to challenge NGOs and other powerholders (Chu and Luke, 2022). This dependency dynamic reinforces upward accountability to donors rather than downward accountability to communities. To address this, Chu and Luke (2022) introduce the concept of felt responsibility, a moral and relational commitment to beneficiaries' well-being, as a key dimension of accountability practice. Instead of operating as a purely procedural or externally imposed mechanism, felt responsibility encourages NGO staff and community intermediaries to internalise accountability as an ethical stance grounded in empathy, reciprocity, and shared purpose. When incorporated into co-production processes, this attitude shifts accountability from a compliance obligation to a participatory, dialogic practice that fosters trust and collective agency between NGOs and communities. As one CAG member observed:

> *BRAC introduced us as volunteers working with government organisations and other NGOs. People recognise us as an advocacy and lobbying group for the community. We visit various offices to address our community's requests. For instance, if a rural woman wants to obtain a loan for a small business, I assist her with the application,*

accompany her to the relevant authority, and support her throughout the process (CAG 5).

CCP's motivational initiatives inspired community members to actively participate in fostering positive social change. The project involved them not only in awareness campaigns but also in practical training to develop relevant skills, enabling them to contribute more effectively. As one CAG member explained:

As a member of the CAG, the most important matter for me is awareness-building training. Our goal is to become informed and knowledgeable about various adaptation strategies for surviving in this disaster-prone area. BRAC provides us with this awareness through meetings, training sessions, seminars, discussion meetings, and by informing us where we can seek assistance. They informing us about our rights and guide us on how to claim them and address our local needs. For example, the UP has a substantial budget for water and sanitation development projects, but they do very little for us. We were unaware of much of this information before joining the CAGs. Now, we can raise these issues with the UP chairman. If BRAC had not involved us in their project, we would never have been able to discuss these matters (CAG 6).

The same CAG member highlighted an additional, longer-term dimension of the CCP's work:

We receive comprehensive training from BRAC and participate in regular meetings every three months. Their leadership development Programme is highly effective. Among all the CAG members across different wards, BRAC selected 18 members who are more capable of leading the community. These are special leaders who are more approachable and can contribute more effectively. Some of them are already involved in community initiatives. BRAC aims to utilise their experience and support them further to develop strong leadership skills. Alhamdulillah, I am a member of this distinguished group of leaders because I have previously been involved in social work

> *within my community. We attended a two-day residential training, which was very valuable for learning many leadership skills (CAG 6).*

The branch Project Manager detailed CCP's strategic approach to encouraging the community to engage in co-production for sustainable outcomes.

> *Once we selected our 18 best leaders from the CAG, we organised an intensive training for them. To make them feel valued and honour their dedication and contributions, we arranged the training at a special resort, providing them with an honorarium and some presents. Even though they are very willing to volunteer, CCP wanted to express its appreciation for their dedication to the community (PM, 2nd interview).*

The CCP aims to provide access to safe water, which is essential for life, and to enhance adaptation and resilience in water supply systems in some of Bangladesh's poorest and most climate-vulnerable regions, such as Mongla. It promotes sustainable development, especially in line with Sustainable Development Goals 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 5 (Gender Equality), 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and 13 (Climate Action). Effective communication skills, such as articulating concerns to policymakers, presenting issues at public meetings, and sharing personal stories, are vital within social accountability mechanisms. CCP's awareness-building meetings help develop these skills, enabling community representatives to communicate effectively with relevant departments. As one CAG member noted:

> *In CAG, we discuss who to contact for different types of help. For example, if there is a domestic violence issue, as a community leader, I know which NGOs support women's rights and which government department I need to contact. We can reach out to these organisations to seek assistance. We support vulnerable groups in our community (CAG 4).*

My field observations during data collection revealed that volunteers are strongly determined to serve their community. CCP's co-production approach enhanced their self-efficacy as local mediators between citizens, NGOs, and government actors. By facilitating dialogue, encouraging participation, and fostering shared understanding, these intermediaries promote social accountability within NGO–community interactions (Tuurnas et al., 2016). Over time, these mediatory roles not only contribute to the immediate success of NGO interventions but also help establish a foundation for lasting social accountability by embedding negotiation, reflexivity, and mutual trust into everyday governance practices (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Brown and Dillard, 2020).

Overall, the CCP's co-production approach demonstrates that fostering social accountability in grassroots areas requires more than just procedural participation. It depends on developing skills, confidence, and collective awareness. By recognising and mobilising communities' tacit knowledge (Eriksson, 2019; Haug, 2023), providing leadership and advocacy training (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; O'Leary, 2017), and institutionalising co-assessment practices (Brown and Dillard, 2020; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021), CCP supports local representatives in transforming lived experience into practical oversight. These processes promote a culture of shared responsibility and collective ownership between NGOs and communities (Chu and Luke, 2022), shifting accountability from hierarchical reporting to relational, dialogue-based engagement. Ultimately, this capacity-building embeds transparency and responsiveness into everyday community practices, laying the foundation for sustainable, locally rooted social accountability.

7.7 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how, and in what context, community co-production can ensure NGOs' social accountability, thereby addressing the third research question of this study. The analysis demonstrates that in emerging economies such as Bangladesh, the practice of co-production—and the development of meaningful social accountability mechanisms—is constrained by deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities, dependency relationships, and cultural hierarchies that restrict grassroots participation (Ahmed et al., 2023; Taufiq, 2021). Within such contexts, direct beneficiary engagement is often difficult to achieve, making *representative co-production* a practical and contextually appropriate alternative.

By engaging intermediary community representatives—such as Climate Action Groups (CAGs), Climate Youth Groups (CYGs), Theatre Groups (TGs), and the Local Advisory Committee (LAC)—BRAC's Climate Change Programme (CCP) fostered a participatory infrastructure that transforms co-production from an abstract ideal into a practical reality. These intermediary organisations act as relational links between NGOs, local government institutions, and citizens, facilitating a two-way exchange of communication and ensuring that community perspectives influence planning, implementation, and evaluation. Through this approach, co-production becomes a relational and interactive process that encourages shared understanding, participatory monitoring, and collective problem-solving, thereby integrating accountability into everyday community practices (Eriksson, 2019; Haug, 2023).

However, the process of co-producing accountability remains a complex endeavour. As the findings illustrate, persistent tensions emerge from unequal power dynamics, the risk of elite capture, institutional inertia, and the limited scope for citizen questioning

within hierarchical governance systems (Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2010). Intermediary groups such as CAGs and CYGs often operate within a delicate space—balancing collaboration with NGOs and local authorities while navigating the political sensitivities needed to maintain access and influence. These constraints emphasise that although co-production holds transformative potential, it is inevitably shaped by structural inequalities and political realities that can hinder transparency and responsiveness.

Nevertheless, by mobilising tacit knowledge, fostering advocacy and leadership capabilities, and institutionalising co-assessment practices, the CCP shows that co-production can still create meaningful pathways to more participatory and accountable governance. These practices shift accountability from a narrow, compliance-focused requirement to a dialogic and reflexive process rooted in trust, negotiation, and mutual learning (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Brown and Dillard, 2020; O'Leary, 2017).

In Bangladesh, where institutional fragility and socio-cultural barriers often restrict the agency of marginalised groups, co-producing with community intermediaries presents a practical and context-sensitive approach to enhancing transparency, inclusiveness, and legitimacy in NGO operations. Despite ongoing challenges, the participatory co-production model transforms NGO–community relations and establishes a sustainable, locally grounded culture of social accountability—one that develops through ongoing dialogue, shared responsibility, and collective participation.

Theoretically, this chapter advances the literature on co-production and NGO accountability by expanding the concept of representative co-production into marginal economies, where direct citizen participation faces structural barriers. It demonstrates how intermediary groups function as an accountability ecosystem linking community

tacit knowledge with institutional decision-making platforms, thereby transforming co-production into a deeply embedded practice of social oversight. The findings contribute to existing scholarship by reframing accountability as a dialogic, relational, and iterative process—co-produced through everyday interactions among NGOs, communities, and government actors, rather than enforced through formal reporting mechanisms. In doing so, the chapter improves understanding of how co-production can promote partial yet meaningful forms of social accountability in contexts characterised by dependence, inequality, and limited political space.

Chapter 8

Discussion– Co-production as a Pathway to Social Accountability

8.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the discussion of the study's key findings, interpreting them through the theoretical lens of *social-symbolic work* (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) and the literature on co-production and NGO accountability. Rather than restating the empirical results, it offers a reflective synthesis that explains how the study advances understanding of co-production through participatory development and social accountability in emerging economies. The discussion explores how NGOs embed co-production within organisational routines, how individual actors reimagine their roles and agency, and how these collaborative practices evolve into mechanisms of social accountability. In doing so, it demonstrates that co-production operates not merely as a participatory technique but as a dynamic institutional process shaped by meaning-making, trust-building, and legitimacy work. The chapter is organised around the three research questions, addressing each in turn before drawing together the overarching insights that link co-production to social accountability.

This research drew on Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) framework of social-symbolic work, which describes the intentional efforts of actors to shape the social and symbolic structures that form organisations and institutions. Using this theoretical perspective, the study investigated how NGOs can promote co-production practices that enhance social accountability through shared meanings, trust, and the legitimisation of participatory development. It also explored how social-symbolic work aids in managing power dynamics by valuing local knowledge and fostering dialogue, thereby

establishing a more equitable basis for institutionalising co-production practices that support rights-based and inclusive development to foster social accountability.

Guided by these objectives, the study addressed three key research questions:

1. How do NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to embed co-production within their organisational routines and establish citizens' active engagement in their development activities?
2. How do individual actors reimagine their role in co-production to ensure beneficiaries' participation in development activities that meet social needs?
3. How, and to what extent, can community co-production facilitate the social accountability of NGOs?

To provide a structured overview of how the empirical chapters address the research questions, Table 8.1 summarises the key findings from Chapters 5, 6, and 7. The table highlights how the study progresses from the organisational embedding of co-production, to the transformation of individual roles, and finally to the emergence of social accountability through representative and relational co-production practices.

Table 8.1: Summary of Research Questions and Key Findings from Chapters 5–7

Research Question	Empirical Focus (Chapter)	Key Findings
RQ1: *How do NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to embed co-production within their organisational routines and establish citizens' active engagement in their development activities**?***	**Chapter 5**	BRAC embeds co-production through interconnected **discursive, relational, and material forms of social-symbolic work**. Discursively, it constructs narratives of empowerment, rights, and participation that legitimise citizen engagement. Relationally, it builds trust, inclusion, and long-term community partnerships through local presence, recruitment strategies, and continuous interaction. Materially, it institutionalises participation through infrastructures such as branch offices, training centres, participatory

Research Question	Empirical Focus (Chapter)	Key Findings
		tools, and community media. Together, these practices normalise co-production as an organisational logic and a source of legitimacy rather than a project-based activity.
RQ2: *How do individual actors (staff and citizens) reimagine their roles towards co-production to ensure beneficiaries' participation in development activities to meet social needs?*	**Chapter 6**	Co-production is sustained through the **transformation of identities, relationships, and capabilities** among staff and citizens. Staff shift from expert service providers to facilitators and partners, while community members move from passive recipients to active co-producers. This transformation is enabled through identity work, boundary work, and capability-building practices, including training, awareness programmes, and participatory engagement. These processes foster **self-efficacy, collective agency, and ownership**, embedding co-production as a lived and ongoing social process.
RQ3: *How, and in what contexts, can community co-production ensure NGOs' social accountability?*	**Chapter 7**	Social accountability emerges through **representative and collective co-production**, particularly via intermediary groups such as CAGs, CYGs, TGs, and LACs. These actors function as mediators, advocates, and accountability agents, enabling dialogue, monitoring, and feedback between communities, NGOs, and local authorities. Co-production transforms accountability from a top-down, donor-driven process into a **relational, dialogic, and context-dependent practice**. However, accountability remains partial and negotiated, shaped by structural inequalities, power hierarchies, and institutional constraints.

To gather empirical insights into these questions, the research selected BRAC International from Bangladesh as a qualitative case study. BRAC provides an ideal setting for analysing how NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to institutionalise co-production and enhance accountability. As one of the world's largest development organisations, BRAC operates across multiple sectors and maintains widespread community-level partnerships, making it particularly suitable for analysing how

organisational culture, field practices, and local interactions influence participatory development and the establishment of social accountability mechanisms.

Situated within an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed semi-structured interviews, journal entries, document analysis, and participant observation to explore the symbolic and relational aspects of co-production. These methods provided a detailed understanding of how organisational actors and community members create shared meanings, negotiate legitimacy, and manage power relationships in everyday practice. Data analysis was conducted thematically, following Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) framework of social-symbolic work, which emphasises three interconnected dimensions: discursive, relational, and material, to demonstrate how these forms of work facilitate the integration of co-production within organisational settings, thus helping to open the pathway of social accountability in emerging economies like Bangladesh.

Empirical insights from BRAC's Climate Change Programme (CCP) in Mongla, Bangladesh, demonstrate how co-production, especially in its representative form, enables NGOs to shift from donor-driven, upward accountability to more dialogue-based, socially embedded forms of accountability. This shift is particularly important in settings characterised by socio-economic inequality, cultural hierarchy, and institutional fragility, where the pressure to meet donor expectations and deliver measurable outcomes can overshadow commitments to social justice and community responsiveness.

The findings reveal that co-production extends beyond mere procedural participation or project-based collaboration; it entails an ongoing negotiation of trust, legitimacy, and mutual accountability between NGOs and the communities they serve. When

embedded within organisational culture, co-production enables NGOs to move beyond technocratic accountability models and cultivate dialogue-centred, contextually grounded, and reciprocal systems of social accountability. In such environments where structural inequalities and power imbalances often impede direct participation, representative co-production, mediated through intermediary groups, provides a flexible and contextually appropriate mechanism for fostering meaningful engagement.

By mobilising local intermediaries who act as catalysts, connectors, interpreters, and advocates, NGOs engage in nuanced forms of boundary and identity work that bridge institutional and community domains. These actors translate organisational objectives into culturally resonant meanings, mediate power imbalances, legitimise local knowledge, and sustain spaces for ongoing dialogue. Through these relational and symbolic practices, NGOs transform accountability from a procedural duty into a continuous, negotiated, and socially embedded process, fostering inclusion, transparency, and legitimacy within complex development environments.

In emerging economies, where entrenched hierarchies, socio-economic marginalisation, and institutional fragility often limit grassroots participation, representative co-production offers a practical, contextually appropriate approach to enhancing social accountability. By collaborating with intermediary groups such as Climate Action Groups (CAGs), NGOs create structured environments that enable citizens to voice their concerns, have them documented, and be represented in decision-making processes. These intermediaries act as trusted social catalysts, translating between community languages and organisational logics to ensure local issues are not only voiced but also integrated into Programme and policy frameworks.

Representative co-production thus broadens accountability beyond formal mechanisms like audits or donor reports to include relational and dialogic forms of responsiveness. Intermediary groups depend on communities' lived experiences, fostering deliberation, feedback, and co-interpretation of results. In this way, accountability is no longer solely about conforming to upward structures of donor governance but becomes an ongoing exchange grounded in shared meanings, trust, and legitimacy. As Banks et al. (2024) and Nazneen et al. (2024) argue, such relational engagement is essential for transforming accountability from a technical task into a social practice embedded in local moral economies.

Furthermore, in situations where direct citizen participation is often limited by gender norms, literacy barriers, or fear of authority, intermediaries play a crucial symbolic role by demonstrating participatory behaviour and endorsing marginalised voices. Their involvement in deliberative forums not only broadens representation but also redistributes symbolic power—affirming the legitimacy of community knowledge as a basis for decision-making. Over time, these practices can foster a culture of accountability that is both outward-facing (towards citizens) and reciprocal (between NGOs and communities), reducing the gap between global accountability standards and local realities.

Therefore, representative co-production, sustained through intermediary groups, becomes an essential mechanism for fostering social accountability in emerging economies. It enables NGOs to establish participatory structures where dialogue, trust, and transparency replace dependence and hierarchy. Consequently, this elevates co-production from merely a procedural step to a socially embedded and symbolically legitimised pathway for inclusive, rights-based development.

This chapter introduces co-production as both a symbolic and structural pathway through which NGOs negotiate and institutionalise new forms of social accountability. From a social-symbolic perspective, it examines how meaning-making, trust-building, and legitimacy are cultivated through everyday organisational and community practices. The subsequent sections interpret the findings across the three interconnected dimensions of discursive, relational, and material work, demonstrating how co-production is enacted and sustained within BRAC's institutional framework. The next section begins by addressing Research Question 1, which concerns: *How do NGOs engage in social-symbolic work to embed co-production within their organisational routines and establish citizens' active engagement in their development activities?*

8.2 Embedding Co-production through Social-symbolic Work (Discussion of Research Question 1)

Building on the empirical insights presented in Chapter 5, this section examines how BRAC utilises social-symbolic work to embed co-production within its organisational systems and encourage citizens' active participation in development activities. Drawing on Lawrence and Phillips (2019), social-symbolic work refers to actors' deliberate efforts to shape meanings, relationships, and material arrangements that form institutional realities. In BRAC's case, this process involves the intentional creation and maintenance of participatory norms, trust-based relationships, and material infrastructures that legitimise co-production as both practice and ideology.

The discussion interprets BRAC's co-production practices as part of a broader *institutional effort* where discursive, relational, and material forms of social-symbolic work come together to transform participatory ethics into lasting organisational

routines. Through these interconnected practices, BRAC addresses complex social-symbolic issues such as poverty, gender inequality, unequal power relations, and deeply rooted socio-cultural hierarchies that shape daily life in Bangladesh (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). In this way, co-production is not just a methodological tool or participatory technique but an ongoing institutional effort through which NGOs seek to reshape the symbolic and structural foundations of development (McMullin, 2022). By embedding participatory values into its operational systems and organisational identity, BRAC makes co-production a form of institutional work that both sustains and questions the social systems in which it operates, creating spaces where local meanings, power, and legitimacy are constantly negotiated. Instead of viewing participation merely as a procedural requirement or a donor-driven output, BRAC develops co-production as a normative organisational principle—a guiding framework that reflects its commitment to empowerment, inclusivity, and social justice.

8.2.1 Co-production as Organisational Logic and Source of Legitimacy

As shown in Chapter 5, BRAC's long-standing commitment to participatory approaches—from the creation of Village Organisations (VOs) and Polli Shomaj (PS) to the Community Empowerment Programme (CEP) and the Climate Action Groups (CAGs)—illustrates that co-production has become an enduring organisational ethos. These Programmes demonstrate BRAC's ongoing investment in building community partnerships that blur the boundaries between "service providers" and "beneficiaries," positioning citizens as co-producers of social change (Bovaird, 2007; Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006).

This evolution reflects what Lawrence and Phillips (2019) describe as symbolic infrastructure building—the creation of enduring meanings, values, and practices that

strengthen organisational legitimacy. In this context, the findings highlight that BRAC's narrative of empowerment through participation functions both as a moral discourse and a strategy to establish legitimacy. It presents co-production not only as an efficient delivery method but also as an ethical commitment to justice and inclusion (Cornwall, 2008; Banks et al., 2024). By reimagining beneficiaries as active agents rather than passive recipients, BRAC bolsters its legitimacy among donors, government bodies, and the communities it serves (Lewis and Kanji, 2009; Nazneen et al., 2024). As Roborgh et al. (2024) describe, BRAC has combined emergency assistance with long-term development initiatives, anchoring its approach in empowering local communities through active involvement of service users in their daily practices. This approach reflects the idea of co-production, as McMullin (2022) argued that third sector organisations are increasingly regarded as 'hybrids' of various domains, integrating and adapting to diverse tasks, legitimacy, or resource contexts.

In BRAC's case, co-production functions as the unifying logic that links these hybrid elements, simultaneously aligning the organisation's practical objectives with its normative commitments. Here, co-production acts both as a source of organisational identity and as a legitimising narrative. It distinguishes BRAC within Bangladesh's competitive development landscape — not just as a service-delivering NGO but as an institution committed to promoting participatory citizenship and fostering moral accountability (Banks et al., 2015; Qayum, 2020). By embedding co-production as a cultural and ethical norm, BRAC engages in what Lawrence and Phillips (2019) describe as social-symbolic work: actively shaping the meanings and values through which legitimacy is continually created, sustained, and renewed.

8.2.2 Discursive Work: Constructing Empowerment and Shared Meaning

Discursive work—how organisations construct and circulate narratives, vocabularies, and frames of meaning—is essential to BRAC's embedding of co-production. As Zilber (2008) and Lawrence and Phillips (2019) argue, discourse is a vital medium through which institutions are created and sustained. BRAC's discourse of "empowerment," "citizenship," "entitlements," and "equal rights" has been intentionally developed over decades to legitimise participation, foster shared understandings of social responsibility, and harness the community's potential.

Findings revealed that Programmes such as Polli Shomaj and Village Organisations (VOs) support BRAC in carrying out various awareness activities, workshops, and training using slogans, posters, flipcharts, placards, and other visual tools to introduce rights-based language at the grassroots level. This approach enables women to voice claims related to justice, livelihoods, and entitlements (Qayum et al., 2024; Rashid and Alim, 2005). These new vocabularies of participation transformed the cultural landscape of rural Bangladesh, creating discursive spaces where marginalised groups could consider demanding justice, accountability, and recognition (Banks et al., 2024). In this way, BRAC's communicative work aligns with Cornwall's (2008) description of transformative participation, a process that reshapes how people perceive their agency and their relationships with institutions. This process aligns with the concept of social-symbolic work, which examines individuals' intentional and reflexive efforts to shape social-symbolic objects—such as power relations, socio-cultural norms, and practices—not as isolated acts but as patterned activities recognised as legitimate within their communities (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Whittington, 2006).

Findings also suggest that BRAC systematically developed policies to establish a community-driven development approach centred on the organisation's mission:

“empower people and communities in situations of poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice.” By utilising the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), a community-based research and planning method that BRAC employs to involve local people in assessing their needs, resources, and identifying potential solutions (Chowdhury et al., 2014; Kaikobad, 2024). These active participation opportunities increase the likelihood of sustained engagement until project completion. It also promotes community empowerment by actively involving local individuals in recognising their needs, challenges, and possible solutions (Taher and Rahman, 2018). This method ensures that community members actively participate as agents in their own development, rather than having external solutions imposed on them. Such practice reflects four modes of public engagement — information, consultation, participation, and co-production — that enhance citizens' influence on public service decisions, as delineated by Loeffler and Martin (2015). The practice of Participatory Rural Appraisal is also associated with the 4Cos principle of the co-production. This involves beneficiaries and community members collaboratively identifying community needs, co-designing activities to address those needs, co-delivering project activities, and ultimately co-assessing the outcomes of these activities (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2020).

Likewise, at the organisational level, BRAC strengthens this discourse internally through training, communication, capacity building, and performance evaluation. The organisation has been recognised as a "pioneering" and "pace-setting" NGO, with its success rooted in its philosophy and identity as a learning organisation (Lovell 1992; Ahmed et al., 2023; Banks et al., 2024). It has received international acclaim for its influence, innovation, impact, governance, and sustainability efforts, including being repeatedly named “the best” NGO worldwide in 2023 by TheDot Good (formerly NGO Advisor). Findings in this study show that the organisation has established various

institutional platforms, including the Research and Evaluation Division (RED), the Centre for Development Management (CDM), and the Management Development Programme (MDP). All these departments, training, and learning facilities play a key role in shaping and reproducing the organisation's discursive foundations.

BRAC's RED functions not only as a producer of empirical knowledge but also as a discursive space where development narratives are continuously created, contested, and legitimised. Through research publications, evaluation reports, and impact assessments, RED develops meaningful vocabularies of empowerment, resilience, and participation that guide Programme design and bolster BRAC's legitimacy as a knowledge-led organisation (Chowdhury et al., 2014). Similarly, the Centre for Development Management (CDM) and the Management Development Programme (MDP) reflect the institutionalisation of learning as both a moral and developmental discourse. The MDP for staff, initiated in 1990, has grown beyond BRAC to include various international organisations. This initiative seeks to enhance leadership and managerial competencies within the organisation (Mair et al., 2012). By integrating concepts such as leadership, innovation, and ethical governance into their curricula, these Programmes cultivate a shared language that links personal growth with social responsibility (Mair et al., 2012; Banks et al., 2024). In this way, these institutional platforms function as discursive infrastructures—spaces where organisational values are codified, shared, and internalised—ensuring that co-production is not merely operationalised in field practices but embedded within BRAC's intellectual and moral identity.

Discursive work also plays a key role within BRAC's organisational cultures. The language of empowerment and co-production permeates its internal communications,

staff training materials, and leadership stories. Staff are not viewed merely as implementers but as agents of social change who embody the organisation's values in their daily practices. BRAC's leadership consistently reinforces this message through institutional rituals, value statements, and recognition Programmes. For example, the Fazle Hasan Abed Values Award publicly honours staff who exemplify inclusiveness, integrity, and innovation—transforming moral values into visible symbols of legitimacy and belonging (Cho and Sultana, 2015; Ahmed et al., 2023). In this way, discourse functions as a form of identity work, shaping how individuals perceive their roles within co-production and aligning personal motivation with collective purpose.

At the same time, BRAC's training and learning Programmes demonstrate that social-symbolic work involves both discursive and material dimensions that are interconnected. Training sessions, workshops, and seminars are not merely about transmitting knowledge; they reinforce the organisation's symbolic order by embedding narratives of empowerment, accountability, and justice into everyday practices. During training for the Climate Change Project (CCP), for example, participants were encouraged to internalise the project's mission and consider their role in leading community responses to climate challenges. As one Project Officer mentioned, *"The training helped us develop the skills to communicate the complex impacts of climate change to the grassroots population, who are often unaware of one of the biggest crises they face."* This emphasis on communication and empathy illustrates how BRAC's discourse serves as a teaching tool, transforming abstract development goals into emotionally resonant, actionable messages that link institutional priorities with community realities.

8.2.3 Relational Work: Building Trust, Inclusion, and Shared Responsibility

Relational work—the theoretical foundations, as discussed by Lawrence and Phillips (2019)—further clarifies how these dynamics function within BRAC's organisational and community practices. They argue that relational work involves actors' intentional efforts to establish, maintain, negotiate, transform, or even end relationships, reflecting the ways individuals and organisations shape social links that support collective action. This perspective shows that the relational dimension of social-symbolic work is not confined to any single institutional domain; instead, it occurs across public, organisational, and even private spheres, where meanings, expectations, and emotional commitments are created and sustained. Furthermore, the concept of relational packages emphasises that such relationships are formed through multiple interconnected elements: defining the relationship itself, the value it provides to those involved, the media or practices used to negotiate it, and the broader social meanings it carries within a community or organisation. Within BRAC, these elements are reflected in everyday interactions between staff and community members, whether through field visits, shared meetings, or acts of mutual support—each contributing to defining and reinforcing the moral and practical importance of co-production. In this way, relational work is not merely a by-product of Programme delivery but a vital mechanism through which BRAC and the community continually renegotiate legitimacy, accountability, and collective purpose.

For instance, this study's findings show that BRAC's Climate Change Programme strategically set up two branch offices in Mongla to ensure a long-term presence in the area and stay close to communities. This strategic choice exemplifies the relational maintenance described by Lawrence and Dover (2015). Physical proximity shows solidarity and ongoing commitment, helping to reduce both symbolic and practical barriers between NGO professionals and community members (Ahmed et al., 2023;

Roborgh et al., 2024). This approach highlights the relational dimension of social-symbolic work, positioning the organisation as a collective entity working alongside communities to build and sustain relationships (Lawrence and Dover, 2015; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). A visible presence within the local community conveys continuous dedication, reliability, and legitimacy in the eyes of citizens, government officials, and other NGOs.

In terms of recruitment, findings also suggest that BRAC's strategy of promoting staff internally plays an important role in relational maintenance, reinforcing long-term organisational commitment and cohesion. In CCP, top-level management members are recruited internally; these individuals have been serving the organisation for decades. By retaining employees who have risen through the organisation's ranks, BRAC maintains enduring social bonds and shared values among its workforce. This continuity fosters stability, institutional memory, and mutual trust between management and field staff, which are essential for integrating co-production into daily practices. Employees with years of experience at BRAC carry forward its participatory ethos and moral culture, strengthening both interpersonal relationships and organisational legitimacy. From the perspective of social-symbolic work, this approach reflects what Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) describe as the maintenance of institutional logics, the preservation of shared meanings and relational norms that uphold institutional identity over time. Internal recruitment thus acts as a relational mechanism through which BRAC nurtures loyalty, reciprocity, and long-term accountability within its organisational community

Findings also indicated that for front-line staff, the CCP's emphasis on local recruitment is a key aspect of relational work, strengthening the organisation's presence within the

communities it serves. Hiring staff from the same localities where projects are implemented fosters cultural understanding, empathy, and trust, allowing them to act as relational mediators between institutional and community worlds. These locally based employees share language, customs, and experiences with beneficiaries, enabling them to clearly communicate organisational goals while also conveying community perspectives to Programme leaders. This proximity transforms development interactions from hierarchical exchanges into collaborative relationships built on mutual respect and understanding. In terms of social-symbolic work, such relational embeddedness helps build legitimacy through emotional bonds and moral reciprocity (Lawrence et al., 2010; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Zilber, 2008). By embedding its workforce within the social fabric of local life, BRAC turns recruitment into a relational strategy for co-production, institutionalising inclusion and shared purpose through everyday human connections.

This relational proximity enhances communication and fosters mutual support between the CCP's staff and community members, which is vital for sustaining co-production (Gheduzzi et al., 2024). Findings show that frequent field visits by local staff, mainly Area Managers and Project Officers, nurture strong relationships with beneficiaries and community members through home visits, community awareness meetings, and informal exchanges. These regular visits help build interpersonal trust and citizen engagement, aiding the community in developing solutions to climate challenges (Jaspers and Steen, 2020; Loeffler and Martin, 2015). Through this relational work, BRAC redistributes symbolic power, allowing local knowledge and lived experiences to influence development decisions traditionally led by experts. As trust grows, relationships extend beyond formal project boundaries, creating mutual obligations and shared commitments to collective well-being.

Community members often support staff by mobilising neighbours, sharing information, or giving feedback on Programme results. In return, staff respond with care, empathy, and practical assistance during times of need. This mutual exchange shifts accountability from a one-way expectation to a negotiated, relational process in which both parties acknowledge their interdependence in achieving social outcomes (NESTA, 2011). In this way, local recruitment enhances relational space—the process through which development work becomes co-owned, emotionally connected, and morally grounded in daily interactions. These reciprocal relationships exemplify the relational aspect of social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019), transforming participation into an ongoing, trust-based partnership that boosts both organisational legitimacy and community empowerment.

Findings also indicated that BRAC's emphasis on gender inclusion in both staff recruitment and community group formation exemplifies a deliberate enactment of the relational aspect of social-symbolic work. By striving for at least 50% female participation in staffing and community groups such as the Polli Shomaj and Climate Action Groups (CAGs), BRAC promotes gender equality to reshape the relational dynamics through which development collaboration occurs. Recruiting women from local communities enhances empathy, accessibility, and mutual respect between staff and beneficiaries, while their active participation in advisory and decision-making spaces symbolically challenges patriarchal norms and broadens the social legitimacy of women's voices (Qayum et al., 2024; Nazneen et al., 2024). These inclusive recruitment practices foster the creation of relational environments where trust and reciprocity can thrive, reinforcing Nabatchi et al.'s (2017) concept of co-productive social capital. In this way, gender inclusion becomes more than a numerical target – it acts as a form of relational and symbolic work that deepens co-production by

embedding equality, care, and respect for women's rights into BRAC's daily engagements with communities.

BRAC's internal organisational culture, particularly the "Bhai Culture" (Brotherhood relationship), represents a distinctive form of relational work that reinforces loyalty, solidarity, and mutual respect and support among staff. Although the organisation retains a hierarchical structure, its leadership, rooted in the values instilled by Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, has cultivated a culture of interpersonal trust and moral commitment that bridges formal authority and emotional connection (Ahmed et al., 2023; Cho and Sultana, 2015). Referring to colleagues as bhai (brother) symbolically dissolves social distance, embedding respect, empathy, and collective responsibility within daily interactions. This informal relational code performs what Lawrence and Phillips (2019) describe as social-symbolic work, constructing shared meanings and emotional bonds that sustain organisational cohesion. The CCP's "family-like" environment, where staff consistently describe mutual help and teamwork, illustrates how relational work fosters organisational commitment and purpose. Such affective ties generate a sense of belonging that translates into stronger motivation, retention, and accountability, enabling BRAC to sustain long-term co-production relationships with communities. In this way, BRAC's loyalty culture exemplifies how relational work operates internally, creating the trust and moral infrastructure necessary for maintaining participatory development externally.

8.2.4 Material Work: Institutionalising Co-production through Structures and Practices

Material work—how organisations design tangible structures, resources, and artefacts—transforms symbolic commitments into lasting practices. The material

aspect of social-symbolic work emphasises how physical infrastructures, technologies, and embodied practices shape and reinforce the meanings and relationships that underpin organisational life (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Monteiro and Nicolini, 2015). In BRAC's co-production framework, material work involves more than simply providing logistical or technical resources; it includes embedding the organisation's participatory values and accountability structures into tangible systems and spaces. Artefacts such as branch offices, learning centres, training manuals, uniforms, and community radio broadcasts serve as physical representations of BRAC's ethos of empowerment and inclusion. These infrastructures and tools institutionalise co-production by transforming its core principles—such as participation, trust, and mutual responsibility—into embodied, routinised practices. In this way, material work functions as a key mechanism through which BRAC embeds co-production, linking the symbolic with the structural and ensuring that development principles are translated into lived, observable realities across its Programmes and community interactions.

Findings from various sources indicate that one of the most visible aspects of BRAC's material work is its extensive branch network, which creates a dense organisational infrastructure that materially supports its co-production practices. With over 2,000 field offices nationwide, usually situated within a 3- to 5-mile radius of rural communities, BRAC guarantees physical accessibility across all 64 districts in Bangladesh, facilitating easy, regular interactions among staff, beneficiaries, and communities (BRAC, 2023; Banks et al., 2024). This proximity enables staff to offer "doorstep services," build trust-based relationships, and symbolically demonstrate the organisation's enduring presence in people's daily lives. These practices align with Bovaird's (2007) concept of co-production as the "provision of services through regular, long-term relationships between professionalised service providers and service

users… where all parties make substantial resource contributions," which strongly echoes the material dimension of social-symbolic work.

Findings also suggest that another element of material work is the establishment of BRAC's 18 Training and Learning Centres (TLCs). This exemplifies the material dimension of social-symbolic work by providing tangible spaces where the organisation's participatory values and development principles are enacted and reinforced. These centres serve as more than sites of technical instruction; rather, they are physical environments that embody BRAC's ethos of learning and growing, self-development and empowerment, inclusion, and collective learning. Within these spaces, staff, community representatives, and partners engage in dialogue, skill development, and reflective practice, transforming conceptual issues such as participation, community empowerment and sustainable development into visible, shared experiences (Chowdhury et al., 2014; Banks et al., 2024). The TLCs function as material anchors that institutionalise knowledge co-production by fostering continuous interaction between organisational actors and communities, supporting a cycle of mutual learning and adaptation (Singh et al., 2022). In this way, BRAC's investment in these purpose-built infrastructures bridges symbolic intention and operational reality, demonstrating how material arrangements can stabilise institutional values and sustain long-term collaboration in participatory development (Lawrence and Dover, 2015).

The use of media and technologies, along with the establishment of *Radio Pollikontho* 99.2 FM—the community radio—represents another aspect of BRAC's material work. This work, which relates to Lawrence and Phillips (2019), draws on the example of Leonardi and Barley (2008). These authors demonstrate, through ergonomics, that

technologies are not merely tools that influence human behaviour but are also subject to human intention and redesign. This interaction between material and social agency shows how changing the material properties or uses of a technology can reshape organisational routines and meanings—a process they describe as the material dimension of social-symbolic work. Within BRAC, Radio Pollikontho, the community radio initiative, exemplifies this dynamic. As a locally operated communication technology, it functions as a material platform both shaping and being shaped by participatory practices. Through co-creating content, local storytelling, and interactive broadcasting, community members and BRAC staff continually reinterpret and redesign how the radio works as a medium for participation, empowerment, learning, and social progress. In doing so, Radio Pollikontho becomes more than a technological tool; it functions as a site where co-production is materially embedded and sustained.

This research found that the *Radio Pollikontho* produces community-driven, participatory Programmes on issues such as health, education, women's rights, domestic violence, childcare, agriculture, climate change, and social justice, among

other typical crises that hinder the sociocultural development of the country. In doing so, it becomes a material and symbolic platform through which marginalised voices, particularly those of the most vulnerable communities such as women, youth, the poor, and minority groups, can be amplified and legitimised within the public sphere (Islam, 2016). The channel thus functions as a space for generating new narratives that challenge fatalism ("nothing will change here"), address silence around taboo issues such as gender-based violence, and question disempowering cultural beliefs.

Through these dialogic practices, the radio's material infrastructure enables the co-production of knowledge and meaning between BRAC and the communities it serves.

By facilitating deliberation, storytelling, and shared problem-solving, Radio Pollikontho transforms communication from a top-down process into a participatory, co-created practice—embedding BRAC's development values within the everyday communicative routines of rural life. Its iterative use and adaptation ensure that participatory philosophies are not mere intangible ideals but become routine features of organisational and community life, demonstrating how material technologies can stabilise and sustain co-productive relationships over time.

In BRAC's case, infrastructures such as local branch offices, training centres, and community meeting spaces serve as tangible representations of these enduring partnerships, enabling staff and citizens to engage continuously in planning, reflection, and problem-solving. These physical environments promote continuity and shared presence, making cooperation a visible and routine part of organisational life. Through this physical embedding, co-production becomes sustained and recognisable, transforming participatory ideology into enduring organisational habits and social relationships. In this way, BRAC's physical environment functions as a connective tissue, linking professional and community worlds, and ensuring that inclusion and responsiveness are not merely rhetorical goals but are woven into the everyday material realities of development practice. As Lawrence and Phillips (2019) emphasise, material arrangements—such as spaces, artefacts, and technologies—do more than facilitate functions; they embody and stabilise the institutional meanings that underpin collaboration.

In summary, BRAC's physical infrastructure, such as its branch offices, training and learning centres, and community-based technologies, including Radio Pollikontho, shows how the organisation turns participatory ideals into lasting institutional realities.

These tangible arrangements link symbolic commitments with everyday practices, allowing co-production to be continuously performed, observed, and refined within organisational and community contexts. By embedding participatory principles into its physical spaces and technological systems, BRAC aims to make collaboration, trust, and responsiveness standard features of development work rather than just abstract ideals. In doing so, the organisation exemplifies the material aspect of social-symbolic work, where artefacts, spaces, and technologies actively reinforce the institutional meanings that underpin co-production. This material foundation helps explain how discursive, relational, and material forms of work interact dynamically to sustain BRAC's participatory ethos—a theme explored in the next section.

8.2.5 Integrating the Dimensions: Co-production as Dynamic Alignment

Building on the earlier discussion, which analysed the discursive, relational, and material dimensions of BRAC's co-production practices, this section combines these elements to examine how they collectively uphold co-production as an evolving organisational process. While each form of social-symbolic work serves specific functions—discourse shapes shared meanings, relationships build trust and reciprocity, and material infrastructures support practices—their interaction creates what Lawrence and Phillips (2019) identify as symbolic alignment: 'a dynamic equilibrium among meaning, relationships, and structure'. At BRAC, this alignment ensures that participatory values are not merely rhetoric or isolated projects but are embedded in organisational systems and community engagement. The following discussion demonstrates how this integration transforms co-production from a series of separate activities into a coherent organisational logic that continually fosters accountability, legitimacy, and inclusion.

The interaction of discursive, relational, and material work shows that co-production at BRAC is maintained through symbolic alignment—a continual adjustment between meaning, relationships, and structure (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). The discursive and relational dimensions of social-symbolic work are inherently material: discourse relies on the materiality of texts and the systems through which they are created and shared, while relationships depend on the media and infrastructures that facilitate interaction, whether face-to-face or virtual (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). In BRAC's case, discursive narratives justify participatory values; relational practices embed these values within networks of trust; and material structures formalise them into lasting organisational forms. This integration shifts co-production from merely a technical or procedural process into an organisational habitus—a patterned way of thinking and acting that continually reinforces participation, inclusion, and mutual accountability across Programmes and contexts.

As a learning organisation (Lovell, 1992; Ahmed et al., 2023), BRAC continually recalibrates its participatory discourse to respond to shifting development challenges—from post-war rehabilitation to women's empowerment and climate resilience—without losing its core ethos of citizen agency. This process aligns with Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) idea of institutional maintenance through symbolic recalibration, whereby organisations maintain legitimacy by adapting their symbolic structures to changing social realities. Through this ongoing negotiation, BRAC transforms co-production into a structural capability and a symbolic resource. Structurally, it integrates participation into systems of recruitment, training, and Programme design; symbolically, it reinforces BRAC's legitimacy as a trusted and community-rooted institution.

In summary, the analysis of the first research question indicates that BRAC's involvement in social-symbolic work demonstrates that embedding co-production is a complex, multi-layered institutional process. By framing empowerment discursively, fostering trust and inclusion through relational practices, and establishing material systems that routinise participation, BRAC promotes a participatory culture that sustains both community engagement and organisational legitimacy. Co-production thus functions both as a practical governance tool and as a symbolic framework through which BRAC navigates the challenges of community participation in grassroots settings.

The previous analysis of BRAC's discursive, relational, and material practices shows that co-production is not a fixed organisational method but a dynamic and institutionally embedded process maintained through continuous social-symbolic efforts. By aligning meaning, relationships, and structure, BRAC institutionalises participatory values throughout its systems, embedding accountability and inclusion into its organisational framework. However, while these institutional mechanisms create the conditions for co-production, they fundamentally depend on the agency of individual actors who interpret, adapt, and implement these values in practice. Co-production, therefore, is not only embedded organisationally but also personally enacted—it relies on how frontline staff, intermediaries, and community representatives understand their roles and responsibilities within participatory development processes. The following section (8.3) explores the second research question by examining how these actors reimagine their identities and practices to enable beneficiaries' meaningful participation in development activities that address collective social needs.

8.3 Reimagining Roles for Co-production (Discussion of Research Question 2)

Building on the institutional perspective discussed in Section 8.2, this section shifts focus to the individual and interpersonal aspects of co-production by addressing the second research question: How do individual actors reimagine their roles in co-production to ensure beneficiaries' participation in development activities that meet social needs? While the previous analysis demonstrated how BRAC integrates co-production through organisational systems, structures, and material arrangements, this discussion emphasises how people — staff, beneficiaries, intermediaries, and citizens — interpret, negotiate, and enact these organisational frameworks in daily practice. Drawing on insights from Chapter 6, the analysis reveals that co-production is sustained through social-symbolic work performed by individuals who redefine their identities, relationships, and capacities within the participatory development process. Through identity work, they reframe themselves as facilitators, partners, and contributors; through boundary work, they bridge organisational and community worlds; and through capability work, they develop the confidence and skills needed for meaningful participation. Together, these forms of agency transform co-production from an organisational ideal into a lived social process, where empowerment, inclusion, and accountability are realised through everyday interactions and relationships.

The analysis of BRAC's Climate Change Programme shows that co-production is maintained not only through organisational structures but also through symbolic and relational efforts made by individual actors to redefine their identities and interactions. Using social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019) as an interpretive framework, this section examines how identity work, boundary work, and capability development work combined to transform staff, intermediaries, and citizens from passive participants into active co-producers.

8.3.1 Transforming Identities and Building Agency in Co-production

The findings from Chapter 6 reveal that co-production within BRAC's Climate Change Programme involved a significant reconfiguration of individual identities among both staff and citizens. This transformation was not imposed by formal structures but emerged through ongoing interaction, reflection, and participation in shared practices. Regarding personnel transformation, it showed that, even though BRAC's staff have long been guided by the organisation's participatory ethos and commitment to community-centred development, this is a key feature of BRAC's organisational culture. However, within the Climate Change Programme, this orientation was expanded and intensified, as staff worked to foster deeper community involvement that extended beyond direct beneficiaries. Since the climate crisis affects entire ecosystems rather than isolated groups, the CCP's participatory strategies emphasised collective responsibility and inclusion across the entire community. This shift required them to move away from hierarchical models of aid delivery and instead recognise local knowledge as legitimate expertise. Likewise, community members, who were traditionally viewed as passive recipients of aid, began to perceive themselves as contributors, partners, and decision-makers in shaping local responses to climate challenges. Such shifts demonstrate how co-production becomes a process of becoming—a reimagining of who individuals are and what they can do within development systems (Filipe et al., 2017; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021; Osborne et al., 2016).

This transformation reflects what Lawrence and Phillips (2019) describe as the social-symbolic work of identity formation, in which individuals engage in meaning-making to align personal understanding with institutional purposes. Through regular interactions

such as community meetings, awareness training and workshops, and the creation of intermediary groups like Climate Action Groups, CCP established symbolic spaces where new identities could develop. For example, when beneficiaries contributed financially to the rainwater harvesting systems, they were encouraged to see themselves not as recipients of charity but as co-owners of local development initiatives. Similarly, staff narratives emphasised partnership, empowerment, and self-reliance—discourses that reinforced collective responsibility and mutual respect. These practices fostered a sense of self-efficacy and pride, motivating both staff and community members to act as capable agents of change rather than dependents on external aid (Thomsen, 2017; Voorberg et al., 2015; Nabatchi et al., 2017).

In this sense, co-production at the CCP was not just a technical approach to improve efficiency but also a symbolic act of empowerment, where identities were reshaped through practice and discourse. The sense of “being part of something larger” inspired individuals to contribute beyond mere instrumental benefits, fostering emotional commitment and moral ownership of collective goals (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016; Dudau et al., 2019). As participants internalised these new roles, co-production became embedded not only in organisational routines but also in the self-conceptions and everyday actions of those involved. Therefore, reimagining identities and developing personal agency were essential to maintaining co-production as a lived and evolving social process within the CCP’s development practice.

8.3.2 Building Capacity and Confidence: Self-efficacy as the Foundation of Agency

The reimagining of roles within BRAC’s Climate Change Programme was sustained through deliberate efforts to build capacity and foster self-efficacy—the belief in one’s

ability to make a meaningful difference. Results showed that one of the most significant ways the CCP encouraged co-production was through its focus on capacity building, confidence-building, and awareness-raising. These activities, delivered through participatory training, advocacy sessions, and culturally rooted learning methods, were not traditional technical interventions; instead, they are social-symbolic processes that shape how both staff and citizens see themselves and their capacity to act. For staff, facilitation and communication training increased their confidence to engage communities as equal partners. For citizens, leadership workshops, participatory meetings, and chances to lead discussions or present action plans developed competence, recognition, and civic pride. At first, many community members saw the project with feelings of dependency and fatalism, viewing external organisations as the main agents of change. However, through continuous dialogue, experiential learning, and shared reflection, they gradually developed a belief in their collective ability to influence outcomes—laying the psychological and social groundwork for co-production to thrive (Filipe et al., 2017; Røhnebæk and Bjerck, 2021; McMullin, 2022; Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015).

Within the CCP's participatory framework, building community capacity was viewed as a discursive, relational, and material process. Discursively, training and awareness activities redefined climate change from a distant or divine phenomenon into a tangible, human-shaped challenge that could be alleviated through collective actions. Using accessible language, local dialects, and relatable examples, the CCP's staff transformed scientific concepts into everyday realities that directly connected to participants' real-life experiences. This process exemplifies transformative co-production (Pestoff, 2020), as it redistributed agency and embedded participatory values into the social context of development practice. At the same time, collective

learning and joint problem-solving fostered collective co-production (Bovaird et al., 2015), strengthening solidarity, mutual responsibilities, and commitments within communities.

Such practices align with Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) view that discourse is a foundational element of social-symbolic work, through which new meanings and identities are created and stabilised. By employing participatory communication strategies, the CCP facilitated the dissemination of information to improve understanding of community co-production and enabled communities to see themselves as knowledgeable contributors rather than passive recipients.

Relationally, training and awareness sessions provided repeated opportunities for interaction and mutual recognition between staff and beneficiaries. These encounters fostered trust and solidarity, which, as identified in the co-production literature, are essential for meaningful collaboration (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Osborne and Strokosch, 2013). Participants often described how BRAC staff, especially women field officers (called Apa or Didi), created a safe and inclusive environment for dialogue, validating community perspectives and experiences. These interactions performed what Lawrence and Dover (2015) refer to as relational maintenance work, turning hierarchical development interactions into partnerships rooted in empathy and mutual learning. As a result, participants began to develop a sense of legitimacy and confidence in their ability to address climate-related challenges.

Materially, the tools and resources developed by CCP—such as posters, flipcharts, diagrams, and participatory visual aids—served as tangible artefacts of co-production. They helped translate complex information into accessible, community-owned knowledge, bridging literacy gaps and reinforcing collective understanding. These

artefacts, as Monteiro and Nicolini (2015) argue, can be viewed as material anchors that stabilise institutional meanings and practices. In CCP, such tools did more than convey messages; they embodied BRAC's participatory principles by making learning interactive, visible, and inclusive. The design of these materials, developed through field feedback and local examples, further reinforced the idea that knowledge was co-created rather than imposed, fostering a sense of ownership among participants.

Findings also demonstrated that these capacity-building initiatives had transformative psychological and social effects. Beneficiaries expressed feeling more confident, knowledgeable, and capable of engaging in problem-solving processes. They described a shift from “being taught” to “teaching others,” from recipients of development to contributors to it. This transformation reflects what McMullin (2022) identifies as the empowerment dimension of co-production, where participation becomes a process of identity reconstruction that enhances people’s self-worth and agency. In this way, BRAC’s approach aligns with Filipe et al.’s (2017) concept of empowerment through co-production, whereby individuals gain not only practical knowledge but also the emotional and symbolic resources needed to act collectively.

Furthermore, CCP’s awareness-raising activities created spaces for reflective learning, allowing participants to connect personal experiences with broader environmental and social issues. As Steele (2016) argues, co-production must begin “where people are,” anchoring learning in real-life experiences rather than theoretical concepts. CCP’s emphasis on dialogue, cultural activities such as street theatre, and locally relevant examples ensured that climate awareness was delivered not as external expertise but as shared learning rooted in the community’s own experiences. This approach helped normalise participatory involvement and sustain motivation

among community members—key elements of the 4Co model of co-production (co-design, co-delivery, co-assessment, and co-evaluation) outlined by Loeffler and Bovaird (2020).

Through these interconnected practices, the CCP created a positive cycle where knowledge creation, confidence-building, and participation supported and reinforced each other. As participants became more aware and gained practical skills, their confidence grew; this, in turn, motivated them to engage more actively in community meetings and advocacy efforts, further strengthening collective resilience. This approach aligns with the concept of resource mobilisation for value creation (Tuurnas et al., 2016), recognising intangible assets such as knowledge, confidence, and trust as essential resources in co-productive partnerships. In CCP, nurturing these intangible assets was as vital as establishing physical infrastructure for developing long-term adaptive capacity.

Ultimately, the CCP's capacity-building initiatives illustrate how co-production operates not only at organisational or programme levels but also on a deeply personal and psychological level. By embedding learning in culturally meaningful and participatory ways, CCP fostered a sense of 'collective efficacy'—the belief that communities can collaborate to influence their circumstances. This collective efficacy became the foundation for agency, enabling community members to see themselves as legitimate actors within development processes and motivating ongoing engagement beyond the project's duration.

In doing so, the CCP transformed its symbolic commitment to empowerment into everyday practices that practically strengthened community resilience and institutionalised co-production as a dynamic, self-sustaining process. These symbolic

and practical experiences confirm that self-efficacy functions as the psychological mechanism through which co-production becomes credible (Thomsen, 2017; Van Eijk and Steen, 2014). When community members saw their inputs reflected in project outcomes—such as selecting sites for water tanks or influencing local action plans—they internalised the belief that their actions matter.

Through training, awareness, and motivational initiatives, the CCP became a catalyst for both individual and collective transformation, turning abstract participation into lived co-production. These initiatives exemplified the social-symbolic work through which meanings, relationships, and capacities were continually reshaped (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). Discursively, they reframed staff and community perceptions of agency; relationally, they fostered trust and mutual recognition; and materially, they provided tools and spaces that enabled visible, shared action. In this process, both staff and citizens internalised participatory values as part of their identity, enacting what Pestoff (2020) terms transformative co-production, where service users and providers co-create not only outputs but also norms of collective responsibility and democratic engagement.

Simultaneously, the CCP's group-based learning, shared contributions, and collaborative problem-solving practices nurtured collective co-production (Bovaird et al., 2015), strengthening social capital and embedding cooperation as a community norm. Training and motivation thus worked as symbolic and practical bridges aligning organisational intentions with local realities, transforming staff and beneficiaries alike into empowered community co-producers capable of sustaining resilience, accountability, and inclusion beyond the life of the project (McMullin, 2022; Nabatchi et al., 2017).

8.3.3 Negotiating Power and Legitimacy in Co-production

Findings revealed that the Climate Change Programme recognised early on that co-production in Mongla could not succeed without addressing entrenched power hierarchies. By establishing Local Advisory Committees (LACs) and Climate Action Groups (CAGs) that included government officials, local elites, and grassroots participants, the CCP created formal spaces for citizens and powerholders to deliberate together. These encounters, while modest, symbolically challenged existing hierarchies by redefining who could participate in decision-making. What were once distant and inaccessible authorities became interlocutors, and marginalised citizens learned to speak confidently about community issues, signalling a gradual shift towards more equitable relationships.

Through this approach, CCP engaged in the relational dimension of social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019), fostering trust, recognition, and dialogue across social divides. Meetings between citizens, BRAC staff, and local government representatives served as acts of relational maintenance work (Lawrence and Dover, 2015), where new meanings of authority and legitimacy were formed through repeated interaction. Such practices exemplify transformative co-production (Pestoff, 2020), which aims to redistribute power and embed participatory norms within institutional structures.

However, the findings also emphasise the paradox of invited spaces (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Cornwall, 2002). Although the CCP created new opportunities for grassroots participation, these forums remained limited by bureaucratic norms and organisational agendas. As a result, empowerment was negotiated rather than absolute; citizens' voices gained recognition but within a framework largely shaped by

institutional constraints. The Programme Head acknowledged this tension, noting that effective dialogue required “careful balancing” between bureaucratic authority and community readiness.

Despite these limitations, the CCP’s strategy demonstrated that addressing unequal power relations requires ongoing negotiation rather than a single reform. By fostering respect, empathy, and mutual learning, the programme gradually redefined power as shared responsibility rather than top-down control. In doing so, CCP helped institutionalise co-production as a relational and symbolic process through which legitimacy, accountability, and trust are co-created among citizens, NGOs, and state actors.

In conclusion, the discussion of the second research question reveals that co-production within BRAC’s Climate Change Programme was sustained through the social-symbolic work of individual actors who redefined their roles, enhanced their capacities, and negotiated legitimacy within complex hierarchies of power. Through interconnected processes of identity reconstruction, development of self-efficacy, and relational negotiation, both staff and citizens shifted from passive participants to active co-producers of development outcomes. These dynamics show that co-production is not merely an organisational strategy but an ongoing process of empowerment and meaning making. The subsequent section (8.4) expands on this understanding by exploring how these collaborative practices and shared agency extend into social accountability, illustrating how co-production functions as a mechanism for embedding dialogue, trust, and reciprocity in BRAC’s development governance.

8.4 Co-production as a Mechanism for Social Accountability (Discussion of Research Question 3)

Building on the organisational and interpersonal aspects discussed earlier, this section addresses the third research question: *How and in what context can community co-production enhance NGOs' social accountability?* The analysis, drawing on evidence from BRAC's Climate Change Programme, demonstrates that co-production is more than just a participatory approach; it functions as a mechanism of embedded accountability, enabling citizens, intermediaries, and NGOs to collaboratively develop systems of responsiveness and legitimacy within fragile institutional settings. In marginal economies like Bangladesh, where traditional accountability tends to rise vertically and is bureaucratically driven, co-production shifts the focus downward by fostering dialogue, trust, and shared responsibility between NGOs and communities.

By employing intermediary groups such as Climate Action Groups, Climate Youth Groups, Theatre Groups, and Local Advisory Committees, the CCP transformed participation into structured practices of representation, monitoring, and advocacy, thereby enhancing transparency and accountability. These mechanisms show how co-production, when institutionalised through representative, relational, and reflexive practices, can reform NGO–community relationships away from hierarchical dependence and pave the way towards social accountability (Alawattage and Azure, 2021; Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; Haug, 2023; O'Leary, 2017).

8.4.1 Representative Co-production as Accountability Infrastructure

Findings indicate that the representative co-production functions as the structural basis of social accountability within the CCP. Community participation has developed into organised, legitimate, and lasting forms of engagement that connect NGOs, local authorities, and citizens in collaborative efforts. In fragile institutional contexts such as coastal Mongla in Bangladesh, direct involvement in accountability mechanisms is

often hindered by social hierarchies, low literacy levels, and heavy reliance on aid. To overcome these barriers, CCP formalised representative co-production (Eriksson, 2019), allowing various intermediary community actors to act as collective voices for the community.

In this context, findings emphasise that through this representative co-production approach, the CCP shifted the process from tokenistic participation to an ‘active engagement model of the community’ — a form of participation capable of promoting NGOs' development activities as a shared responsibility system, where citizens participate indirectly but meaningfully in the operational aspects of NGOs. The representative intermediary groups facilitated information exchange, collective problem-solving, and advocacy, allowing communities to question, deliberate, and influence project operations (Brown and Dillard, 2020; O’Leary, 2017). By embedding these roles within formal committees and participatory platforms, the CCP created a relational accountability network (Brown and Dillard, 2020) that maintained ongoing feedback among community actors, NGOs, and government representatives. This framework exemplifies what Haug (2023) describes as the “infrastructural turn” in co-production, where collaboration moves beyond episodic participation to become an integral part of service providers' structures.

At the relational and cultural levels, these intermediary mechanisms also helped legitimise community voices and reshape traditional power hierarchies. By inviting citizens and local authorities to deliberate in shared spaces such as Local Advisory Committee meetings and Climate Action Groups forums, the CCP transformed questioning from an adversarial challenge into a collective and legitimate form of governance. These participatory encounters also had a tangible dimension, as co-

production was materialised through reports, meeting minutes, posters, and feedback forms that made accountability visible and traceable. In doing so, the CCP embedded transparency and participation not as donor-driven requirements but as everyday relational norms rooted in local practice.

In Bangladesh's sociocultural context, where deep-rooted hierarchies, patron–client relationships, and bureaucratic norms often limit citizens' ability to engage directly with authorities, community participation in NGOs' accountability processes remains uncommon. As demonstrated in the CCP, representative co-production offers a practical means to foster a culture of social accountability in such environments. By involving local elites, respected community figures, and intermediary leaders instead of depending solely on direct participation by beneficiaries, the CCP model strategically leverages social legitimacy and communication skills to bridge the gap between NGOs and grassroots communities. These intermediaries can articulate local needs and advocate within institutional frameworks that are otherwise inaccessible to ordinary citizens. Although this approach does not immediately dismantle entrenched hierarchies, it gradually creates participatory spaces for dialogue, transparency, and responsiveness- conditions essential for nurturing social accountability. Over time, such representative structures may evolve into culturally embedded systems of participation, in which negotiation, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility become routine features of NGO–community relations in Bangladesh, thereby reinforcing NGOs' social accountability mechanisms.

8.4.2 Community Co-production and Empowerment as Social Accountability Practice

Findings in this study showed that while representative co-production provides the structural base for accountability, community co-production (Bovaird et al. 2015; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; Pestoff, 2012) turns these structures into lived practices of empowerment and rights claiming. The CCP's intermediary groups—especially the Climate Action Groups, Climate Youth Groups, and Theatre Groups—demonstrate how collective participation can develop into a dynamic process of social accountability. Through participatory learning, advocacy, and awareness-raising activities, these groups help citizens recognise their own agency, draw on their practical expertise, tacit knowledge, and experience, and voice local priorities within the NGO's operational activities. Co-production then becomes more than a service-delivery method; it is a participatory practice in which citizens collectively monitor, negotiate, and influence decisions that impact their lives.

The CAGs, in particular, acted as community representatives, bridging the gap between vulnerable citizens, NGOs, and local government institutions. By facilitating community meetings, leading advocacy campaigns, and engaging with Union Parishad representatives, they created a platform where citizens could voice concerns, demand transparency, and evaluate programme outcomes. These interactions transformed accountability from a one-way reporting obligation into an ongoing dialogue of mutual responsiveness. As Frey-Heger and Barrett (2021) argue, social accountability develops when citizens see themselves as rights-claimers rather than passive recipients of development aid. In Mongla, participation in CAGs fostered this sense of civic empowerment: members described themselves as "change-makers" capable of representing collective concerns and influencing local decision-making. This shift in self-perception marks the rise of what O'Leary (2017) terms citizen-led

accountability, in which empowerment and accountability mutually reinforce one another in a virtuous cycle of participation and legitimacy.

The findings also reveal that community co-production encompasses a collective and cultural dimension. The CYGs and TGs both employed youth mobilisation and cultural performances, such as street theatre and folk drama, to educate people about climate resilience, water safety, and environmental justice. These public activities help disseminate knowledge and symbolically reinforce citizens' rights to question and participate in public debates. As Pestoff (2020) and Bovaird et al. (2015) suggest, collective co-production can foster empowerment by creating shared spaces for reflection, expression, and action, thereby embedding accountability into community culture. Within CCP, theatre performances and youth-led initiatives served as public platforms where social learning and collective voices converged, making co-production visible and accessible to all community members.

Through these collective practices, the CCP fostered what Tuurnas et al. (2016) call value co-creation: the creation of social, cultural, and moral value through participation itself. This participatory engagement built both individual confidence and community solidarity, the essential elements of social accountability. Citizens who initially lacked the confidence to approach government officials began to participate in advocacy meetings and submit formal requests to local authorities, demonstrating a growing belief in their collective capacity to influence decisions. This gradual transformation from awareness to action illustrates how empowerment, once institutionalised through co-production, functions as a mechanism of social accountability.

In Bangladesh’s hierarchical and bureaucratically focused development landscape, such community-driven accountability remains an evolving process rather than a fixed

norm. However, the CCP's experience shows that when empowerment is integrated within participatory structures and supported by intermediary networks, communities begin to see accountability as a shared moral and civic responsibility. The act of speaking out, questioning, and suggesting solutions becomes part of the local development culture, shifting accountability from an external obligation to a relational and collective practice. In this way, community co-production within the CCP could enhance programme legitimacy and establish a more participatory and responsive model of NGO operations—one that recognises citizens as partners in maintaining social accountability.

8.4.3 From Voice to "Collective Questioning Power"

While co-production initiatives like the CCP succeeded in amplifying community voice, their deeper importance lies in how collective participation translated that voice into challenging power—the ability of citizens to question, negotiate, and influence institutional practices. In Bangladesh's hierarchical governance and aid-dependent development systems, "voice" alone seldom leads to accountability unless it is collectively organised, recognised by institutions, and sustained through dialogue. CCP's participatory structures, especially the Climate Action Groups, Local Advisory Committee, and other intermediary forums, provided such a foundation. By legitimising questioning as a constructive form of engagement, they transformed voice from a symbolic expression of opinion into a practical tool for negotiation and oversight.

This process, as Fox (2015) describes, is a shift from "voice" to "accountability," in which citizens move from merely speaking out to power to actively exercising collective influence. Through training, organised participation, and repeated interactions with NGO and government representatives, community members gained both the

confidence and procedural knowledge to ask informed questions, seek clarification, and monitor progress. Their involvement in policy dialogues, review meetings, and advocacy events—such as submitting six-point agendas to parliamentary candidates during national elections—illustrates how co-production can nurture political awareness and civic agency within marginalised groups. As O'Leary (2017) argues, when communities develop the capacity to articulate their concerns and engage institutions on equal terms, they begin to build their own mechanisms of accountability from below.

On a relational level, the act of collective questioning also redefined the nature of NGO–community interactions. Instead of viewing questioning as a threat to authority, BRAC staff within the CCP started to see it as evidence of learning, trust, and partnership. This shift echoes Brown and Dillard's (2020) concept of relational accountability, where dialogue and responsiveness replace hierarchical control as the basis of legitimacy. In CAG meetings and advisory sessions, questioning became a shared practice through which staff and citizens jointly examined project challenges, resource distribution, and future planning. Such iterative exchanges blurred the traditional boundaries between service providers and recipients, creating a form of horizontal accountability embedded within everyday co-productive relationships.

However, while this emerging "questioning culture" indicates progress towards participatory accountability, it remains fragile. Deeply ingrained bureaucratic norms, gender hierarchies, and political patronage still restrict the extent to which collective voices can influence institutional behaviour. The CCP's experience suggests that sustaining collective questioning power requires ongoing investment in capacity building, transparency, and safe environments for dialogue. Yet, even within these

constraints, the initiative shows that accountability does not depend solely on formal mechanisms — it can also develop through iterative, trust-based relationships in which questioning is both a right and a shared duty.

Ultimately, the shift from individual voices to *collective questioning power* marks a key turning point in NGO–community relations in Bangladesh. It exemplifies a gradual democratisation of development practice, where accountability arises not from compliance or oversight but from everyday interactions through which citizens, intermediaries, and NGOs co-create meaning, decisions, and solutions. In practice, representative groups legitimise critique, reduce personal risk, and normalise requests for explanations ("we ask for explanations… we are helping them to do better"), shifting relations from gratitude and deference toward shared responsibility. Popular theatre and youth ambassadorship extend the reach of participation and lower literacy barriers, transforming awareness into public deliberation and tacit knowledge into co-assessment inputs (Bremer and Meisch, 2017; Baztan et al., 2020; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021). The outcome is an emerging feedback loop—participation → transparency → monitoring—through which communities learn to claim rights and NGOs learn to justify decisions, embedding accountability as a relational and iterative process within local governance.

8.5 Synthesis: Co-production as an Evolving Framework for Social Accountability

Overall, the CCP findings show that co-production can be a strong, locally relevant way to promote social accountability when established through representative, collective, and relational practices. Representative co-production establishes the organisational framework that enables communities—especially those facing

marginalisation, gendered exclusion, and low literacy—to participate meaningfully through intermediary structures. Community co-production then turns this institutional base into daily practices of empowerment, dialogue, and rights-claiming, helping citizens link lived experiences with Programme decisions. Lastly, collective questioning of power transforms these participatory efforts into civic influence and oversight. Through these interconnected processes, accountability shifts from a mere procedural duty to a lived, negotiated, and ongoing relationship between NGOs and the communities they serve.

A key insight from the CCP is that social accountability develops gradually rather than through a single mechanism or event; it becomes stronger as communities gain confidence and recognition within organisational structures. In Bangladesh's hierarchical governance system, where accountability traditionally flows upwards to donors and bureaucratic authorities, the CCP demonstrates how downward, community-facing accountability can be built gradually by legitimising citizens' roles in monitoring, evaluating, and questioning NGO practices. This change aligns with broader debates in the accountability literature, which argue that meaningful participation requires not only "voice" but also institutional receptivity and channels to turn voice into influence (Fox, 2015; Brown and Dillard, 2020). Representative co-production provides these channels by incorporating community perspectives into decision-making forums, enabling intermediary groups to turn individual grievances into collective claims recognised by organisations.

The synthesis also emphasises that co-production functions as a relational accountability system, in which trust, reciprocity, and recognition replace hierarchical authority as the foundation for legitimacy. Through repeated interactions in CAG

meetings, advisory sessions, and community mobilisation activities, staff and citizens develop shared norms that support mutual expectation-setting, feedback, and problem-solving. These relational dynamics align with Lawrence and Phillips' (2019) conceptualisation of social-symbolic work: accountability is built not only through formal mechanisms but also through the interpersonal and symbolic practices that give meaning to participation. As trust deepens, questioning becomes normalised, and citizens gain the confidence to demand explanations, negotiate solutions, and monitor commitments. In this way, the CCP embeds accountability within the everyday routines of community life rather than relying solely on formal audits or external evaluations.

Furthermore, the CCP shows that co-production creates distributed forms of accountability. Instead of resting solely with NGO staff or community representatives, accountability is shared among networks of actors—including government officials, local elites, youth groups, and cultural intermediaries such as theatre troupes. These diverse actors take on complementary roles: some interpret community concerns, some legitimise claims within bureaucratic systems, and others highlight issues through public performances. This distributed structure mirrors what Haug (2023) calls the "infrastructural turn" in co-production, where accountability arises from interconnected sites of interaction rather than a single mechanism. In CCP, the mix of advisory committees, CAGs, CYGs, and TGs forms a multi-layered system where different actors continuously negotiate, monitor, and uphold expectations of transparency and responsiveness.

Importantly, this synthesis shows that social accountability in marginal contexts is inherently political. The act of questioning—whether about resource distribution, service quality, or unmet commitments—is not merely technical oversight but a

challenge to existing power relations. The CCP demonstrates that representative co-production lowers the personal risk of questioning authority by collectivising voice and legitimising critique within formal participatory processes. Over time, this develops what the study calls collective questioning power: the ability of communities to engage with institutions from a position of confidence, organisation, and legitimacy. This change echoes O'Leary's (2017) argument that accountability arises when citizens gain the capacity, opportunity, and recognition necessary to hold institutions to account. Within CCP, questioning became less an act of defiance and more an accepted element of collaborative governance.

Although constrained by Bangladesh's hierarchical governance culture and persistent structural inequalities, the CCP demonstrates how co-production can gradually shift accountability downward—toward citizens—and embed responsiveness within local development systems. This relational and iterative form of accountability signifies a move from compliance-driven models to collaborative, dialogue-based governance, laying the groundwork for more democratic and participatory NGO practice. Viewed through the lens of social-symbolic work, representative, collective, and relational co-production practices serve as discursive, relational, and material mechanisms that turn citizen voice into collective questioning power, establishing social accountability as a routine institutional practice rather than an externally imposed requirement.

In summary, the CCP case demonstrates that social accountability in marginal economies is not a prerequisite for co-production, but rather a gradual outcome of co-production when it is embedded through relational infrastructures, intermediary leadership, and culturally resonant practices. This synthesis reinforces the chapter's core argument: co-production, when institutionalised through social-symbolic work,

develops into an accountability framework that connects citizen agency, organisational responsiveness, and local governance legitimacy in meaningful and sustainable ways.

8.6 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how BRAC's Climate Change Programme operationalises co-production as both an organisational strategy and a lived social process, addressing all three research questions guiding this study. Rather than a single intervention, co-production within BRAC emerges as a dynamic, multi-layered practice shaped by organisational design, individual agency, and community engagement.

Section 8.2 demonstrated how BRAC embeds co-production through interconnected forms of social-symbolic work—discursive, relational, and material. Here, the chapter highlighted how co-production becomes part of organisational culture: discursive framings legitimise participatory principles, relational practices foster trust and inclusion, and material routines formalise participatory processes. This analysis clarified how organisational infrastructures enable co-production to operate beyond individual staff intentions or project cycles.

Section 8.3 shifts focus to individual and intermediary actors, showing that co-production depends as much on human agency and emotional engagement as on organisational design. Staff, volunteers, and community representatives reinterpret their roles and identities within the participatory framework, supported by training, leadership development, and confidence-building measures. These processes bolster self-efficacy and collective capability, enabling communities to transition from dependence to co-ownership of development outcomes. Therefore, co-production

functions not only as a method of service delivery but also as a process of identity work and empowerment.

Section 8.4 examined co-production as a way of promoting social accountability. By institutionalising representative forms of participation and enabling structured community engagement with local authorities, the CCP created channels for citizens to express concerns, provide feedback, and request responsiveness. These arrangements reshaped accountability relationships, shifting them from hierarchical, top-down oversight to shared, participatory oversight. In this way, co-production helped legitimate community voices and embedded accountability into everyday interactions among NGOs, citizens, and local government.

Overall, the chapter demonstrates that co-production within the Climate Change Programme operates on multiple levels—organisational, interpersonal, and communal—connecting structural frameworks with lived experience. The analysis shows that co-production can transform traditional development relationships by enhancing civic capacities, shifting expectations, and fostering more dialogic forms of engagement. Importantly, it highlights that the institutionalisation of co-production relies not only on formal systems but also on the cultivation of trust, motivation, and shared purpose.

By integrating these dimensions, the chapter enhances understanding of how co-production can foster more inclusive and accountable development, especially in contexts characterised by hierarchy, precarity, and limited civic voice. The next chapter synthesises these insights across the entire thesis, outlining the study's theoretical, empirical, and practical contributions, its limitations, and potential avenues for future research.

Chapter 9
Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This final chapter concludes the thesis by synthesising its main arguments and highlighting the research's contributions to theory, methodology, and practice. It revisits the study's central aim—to examine how co-production can serve as a pathway to social accountability in NGO-led development—by integrating the theoretical and empirical insights from the previous chapter. It first outlines the study's key contributions, then summarises its core arguments. The chapter then identifies practical implications for NGOs, policymakers, and development practitioners, discusses the study's limitations, and suggests avenues for future research. It closes by reflecting on the broader significance of co-production as a transformative model for inclusive and accountable development in emerging economies.

9.2 Research Contributions

This study advances theory, methodology, and practice by enhancing understanding of how co-production can be embedded, enacted, and sustained in NGO-led development contexts, particularly within emerging economies where social, cultural, and institutional barriers often impede meaningful participatory practice. By examining BRAC's Climate Change Programme through a social-symbolic lens, the research provides nuanced insights into how co-production functions not only as a participatory method but also as an evolving socio-institutional process that combines empowerment, accountability, and inclusion. It expands the co-production debate beyond Western welfare contexts to fragile governance environments, demonstrating how NGOs can institutionalise participatory practices even in settings characterised

by hierarchy, dependence, and limited civic infrastructure. The study thus contributes to redefining co-production as a dynamic interplay of meaning, relationships, and material practices through which development actors collectively generate new forms of legitimacy, agency, and social accountability.

9.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study's main theoretical contribution is to expand the concept of co-production beyond its Western welfare-state origins, demonstrating how it can be practically realised within the complex socio-political contexts of emerging economies worldwide. Historically, co-production theory has developed in environments where civic literacy, institutional trust, and participatory infrastructure are well established, enabling citizens to engage freely and equally in public governance (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021; Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; McMullin, 2022; Ostrom, 1972; Osborne, 2006; Osborne and Strokosch, 2013; Pestoff, 2012). However, in emerging economies such as Bangladesh, where social hierarchies, poverty, gender norms, and political patronage limit participation, co-production often remains an aspirational discourse rather than a tangible reality.

This research contributes by illustrating how meaningful participation can be constructed within constraints through the use of representative and intermediary groups that bridge social and institutional divides. Analysed through the lens of social-symbolic work theory (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019), the study demonstrates how NGOs like BRAC utilise discursive, relational, and material practices to legitimise alternative forms of participation and embed them within local governance systems. In doing so, it develops a context-sensitive model of co-production tailored to fragile institutional environments—one that recognises the symbolic and relational work

needed to transform marginalised citizens into credible co-producers and accountability partners.

Building on this, the study broadens the theoretical understanding of co-production as a multi-level institutional process rather than just a standalone participatory technique. While current scholarship often sees co-production as a form of collaborative service delivery (Brandsen and Honingh, 2016; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2021), this research shows that co-production operates simultaneously across organisational, interpersonal, and civic levels. Through BRAC's Climate Change Programme, co-production was integrated as a governance framework that aligned meaning, relationships, and material arrangements to reinforce participatory norms. From a social-symbolic standpoint, these processes demonstrate how institutional values such as empowerment and inclusion are not merely discussed but are materially and relationally enacted, transforming co-production from policy rhetoric into a practical organisational culture.

The study further develops theoretical understanding by illustrating how social-symbolic work functions as a mechanism for maintaining co-production over time. Social-symbolic work explains how institutions are reproduced through ongoing discursive, relational, and material practices that shape shared meanings and legitimacy (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). In the case of BRAC, discursive work framed participation as empowerment, relational work built trust and reciprocity between NGOs and communities, and material work reinforced these meanings through visible infrastructures and artefacts. By applying this framework to participatory development, the study provides a conceptual synthesis that links institutional theory with co-

production scholarship, demonstrating how the symbolic and material dimensions of everyday practices support long-term participatory efforts and operations.

The final theoretical contribution of this research integrates insights from transformative co-production (Pestoff, 2020), collective co-production (Bovaird et al., 2015), and community co-production (Loeffler and Martin, 2015) to demonstrate how co-production can evolve into a mechanism for social accountability. In contexts with weak governance, these interconnected forms of co-production enable communities not only to participate but also to hold institutions accountable through collective voice and shared learning. From a social-symbolic perspective, these interactions form the micro foundations of institutional legitimacy, in which meaning-making, recognition, and power-sharing are central to social accountability. Consequently, the study advances co-production theory by positioning it as both a participatory governance model and a symbolically mediated process of institutional change in development practice.

9.2.2 Empirical Contributions

Empirically, this study provides one of the first comprehensive analyses of how co-production is institutionalised and enacted within an NGO-led development context in emerging economies such as Bangladesh. By examining BRAC's Climate Change Programme (CCP) in coastal Bangladesh, the research demonstrates how participatory governance can be embedded through organisational structures, community networks, and intermediary mechanisms. Unlike much of the existing co-production literature, which is dominated by public-sector case studies in developed economies, this research illustrates how an NGO operating in a fragile socio-political environment can translate co-production from a normative ideal into a practical,

sustainable approach. Through detailed fieldwork involving interviews, journal entries, observations, and documentary analysis, the study shows how the CCP's participatory strategies were effectively and relationally designed to foster lasting opportunities for collective engagement and social accountability.

The study provides new empirical insights into the micro-processes of role transformation and agency-building that underpin co-production. It traces how BRAC staff, community representatives, and citizens engaged in identity and boundary work to reimagine themselves as facilitators, partners, and co-producers. These findings advance current understanding of the human dynamics of co-production, demonstrating how participatory systems rely on ongoing negotiation of meaning and authority between institutional and community actors. By capturing these transformations through the lens of social-symbolic work (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019), the research illustrates how empowerment and inclusion are developed through everyday communicative, relational, and material practices rather than being externally imposed via policy design. This provides a detailed empirical account of how co-production becomes embedded as a lived social reality within development organisations.

Furthermore, the research provides empirical evidence that representative co-production can serve as an accountability framework in settings where social hierarchies and cultural norms limit direct participation. By establishing Climate Action Groups (CAGs), Climate Youth Groups (CYGs), Theatre Groups (TGs), and Local Advisory Committees (LACs), BRAC's CCP formalised mechanisms that include community voices in organisational and governance processes. These intermediary structures shifted co-production from sporadic participation to a continuous

accountability relationship—what Brown and Dillard (2020) refer to as “relational accountability.” Empirically, this shows how intermediary representation can serve as a practical model for participatory governance in environments marked by inequality, low literacy, and bureaucratic control. The study thus enhances a grounded understanding of how NGOs can localise global participatory ideals by embedding accountability and inclusion in ways that are sensitive to local context.

In addition to advancing understanding of relational accountability, these findings also speak to broader debates on the transformative potential of accountability in development practice. Building on these insights, this study offers a focused empirical contribution to the literature on transformative accountability as conceptualised by O’Leary (2017). While the preceding discussion has shown how accountability is enacted through intermediary and participatory structures, this research demonstrates that such practices extend beyond relational engagement, enabling deeper processes of empowerment and power reconfiguration. The findings reveal that co-production fosters a gradual transformation in which community members move from passive recipients to active agents capable of questioning, influencing, and negotiating institutional decisions. Importantly, this transformation is neither linear nor absolute but unfolds incrementally within existing structural constraints, including hierarchy, gender norms, and dependency. By foregrounding processes of identity change, capability development, and collective action, the study extends O’Leary’s framework by illustrating how transformative accountability is socially and symbolically constructed in practice. In doing so, it provides new empirical insight into how accountability evolves from voice to what this study conceptualises as “collective questioning power” in marginalised development contexts.

Lastly, this research enhances the empirical understanding of the literature on co-production and climate resilience, a field still evolving within development studies. By examining BRAC's rainwater harvesting initiative and its associated awareness programmes, the study illustrates how environmental adaptation can act as a powerful entry point for collective action, social learning, and empowerment. In this context, co-production serves both as an approach and an outcome of resilience-building, demonstrating how shared responsibility for environmental adaptation fosters community ownership and self-efficacy. These findings deepen the understanding of how co-production can connect technical interventions with social transformation, generating value that goes beyond service provision to foster empowered, accountable, and resilient communities.

9.2.3 Practical Contributions

For practitioners, donors, policymakers, and development professionals, this study offers clear guidance on how NGOs can embed a context-specific co-production strategy as a sustainable and adaptable approach rather than merely a tokenistic participatory activity. The findings suggest that meaningful co-production depends less on the number of participatory events and more on the quality of relationships, capacity building, and trust in communication cultivated between NGOs and communities. Committing to ongoing training, dialogue, and locally rooted facilitation allows NGOs to turn participation from a procedural task into a consistent, practical process of collective agency and accountability.

The study also presents a *relational model of accountability,* in which feedback, reflection, and mutual learning among NGOs and citizens form a cyclical, adaptive process. Unlike traditional top-down reporting systems, this method promotes

responsiveness through dialogue and shared problem-solving. It redefines accountability as a social relationship—sustained through transparency, trust, and reciprocity—rather than a compliance-based mechanism. Practically, this model provides NGOs with a way to balance upward accountability to donors and social accountability to communities, ensuring that development initiatives remain contextually relevant, legitimate, and sustainable.

Finally, the research offers a practical framework for policymakers and development organisations seeking to incorporate participatory governance mechanisms into programmes focused on climate resilience, empowerment, and social development. By emphasising the principles of social-symbolic work—aligning meaning (discursive framing), relationships (trust-building), and material systems (participatory infrastructures)—the study shows how co-production can be institutionalised even in resource-limited and hierarchical settings. This framework assists practitioners in designing interventions that are not only effective but also empowering, embedding co-production as a lasting organisational and civic practice that enhances development outcomes while opening avenues for social accountability.

9.2.4 Methodological Contribution

Methodologically, first, this thesis advances by showing how social-symbolic work can serve as an analytical framework for examining co-production in NGO-led development. While existing co-production research mainly relies on service-evaluation methods or survey-based metrics, this study demonstrates how a qualitative, process-focused approach can reveal the micro-dynamics through which participation, legitimacy, and accountability are formed in practice.

A key methodological innovation in this research is its use of respondent journals as the main data source. Unlike interviews or focus groups, which take place within researcher-controlled settings and time frames, journals enabled respondents to reflect in their own environments, at their own pace, and without external pressure or interruptions. This method offered participants the freedom to express emotions, personal experiences, and daily practices that are often challenging to convey in formal interviews. Consequently, the journals provided rich, multi-dimensional accounts of how individuals navigated identity, agency, and participation during their daily interactions with BRAC's Climate Change Programme. The method was especially effective in revealing subtle forms of symbolic, relational, and emotional work that support co-production—insights often hidden within more structured qualitative techniques.

Second, the research shows how the social-symbolic work lens can serve as a coding and organising framework for qualitative data. By mapping discursive, relational, and material practices across chapters, the study provides a systematic method for connecting everyday actions with broader institutional processes. This approach offers a reproducible analytical strategy for future research aimed at understanding how participatory practices are integrated and maintained in development organisations.

Third, the thesis advances methodologically by illustrating how intermediary and representative groups can be studied as participatory mechanisms in contexts where direct participation is limited. By examining Climate Action Groups, advisory committees, and community theatre groups as access points, the study shows how researchers can explore participation indirectly through relational and symbolic practices.

Overall, the methodological contribution of this research lies in offering a robust qualitative approach to examining co-production in complex, hierarchical environments and in providing tools and strategies that future scholars can adapt when studying participation, accountability, and institutional change in development settings.

9.3 Limitations of the Research

Although this study makes valuable contributions, it also has limitations. Firstly, it focuses primarily on a single organisational case—BRAC's Climate Change Programme—which, despite providing rich data, limits the ability to generalise the findings to other NGOs or national contexts. Secondly, the research primarily relies on qualitative data—including interviews, observations, and analyses of journals and documents—which offer deep insights into meanings and experiences but may lack quantitative validation. Using mixed-methods or longitudinal designs could strengthen the robustness of the findings and help evaluate the sustainability of behavioural change over time. Thirdly, the study was conducted within a specific socio-political and cultural setting — southern coastal Bangladesh —where hierarchical power structures, gender norms, and patron–client relationships influence participation differently from those in other contexts. These contextual features may impact how co-production functions and limit the realisation of its transformative potential.

9.4 Future Research Direction

Building on the findings of this study, several important directions for future research can be identified. This research has shown how BRAC—one of the world's largest NGOs—has institutionalised co-production through its extensive organisational capacity, participatory infrastructure, and symbolic alignment with empowerment,

inclusion, and accountability. However, future research could explore how small and medium-sized NGOs in resource-limited settings can develop similarly meaningful forms of co-production. In such contexts, limited staff capacity, financial dependence, and weaker institutional legitimacy often restrict sustained citizen engagement. Understanding how smaller NGOs might adapt co-production principles—perhaps through informal community networks, volunteer groups, or hybrid public–NGO partnerships—could provide insights into new models of locally grounded participatory governance in development practice.

Another promising avenue involves comparative research across NGOs and national contexts. Since institutional arrangements, political cultures, and donor relations differ significantly across the Global South, comparative studies could explore how various organisations implement participatory ideals in practice under different governance regimes. For example, cross-country comparisons might help identify the contextual factors—such as trust, social capital, and bureaucratic openness—that shape the success of co-production as a mechanism of social accountability (Osborne and Strokosch, 2013; Bovaird et al., 2015). Such research would not only improve theoretical generalisability but also deepen understanding of how social-symbolic processes, like meaning-making and legitimacy-building, vary across organisational and country contexts.

Methodologically, future studies could build on this qualitative research by incorporating quantitative and mixed-methods approaches to assess the long-term, measurable impacts of co-production. Surveys or longitudinal studies might explore variables such as self-efficacy, perceived empowerment, trust in NGOs, and community satisfaction to determine how co-production affects local service providers

over time (Voorberg et al., 2015; Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015). Integrating these quantitative insights with ethnographic or participatory research designs would help researchers link the symbolic aspects of participation, such as identity and meaning-making, with tangible outcomes in service delivery, community resilience, and accountability.

9.5 Summary of the Thesis

This thesis explores how co-production can act as a transformative pathway to social accountability within NGO-led development in emerging economies. Using BRAC's Climate Change Programme in Bangladesh as a qualitative case study, it shows that co-production operates through interconnected discursive, relational, and material forms of social-symbolic work that embed participatory values into organisational structures and community life. The research finds that when NGOs align meaning, relationships, and practices, they can foster citizen agency, shared responsibility, and social accountability, even in contexts characterised by hierarchy and institutional fragility. In doing so, the study broadens co-production theory beyond its traditional welfare-state origins, offering a context-sensitive model of participatory governance that emphasises empowerment, trust, and legitimacy. Ultimately, it concludes that sustainable development depends not only on efficient Programme delivery but also on the ongoing co-production of meaning and accountability between organisations and the communities they serve.

9.6 Concluding Remarks

This thesis explores how co-production, both as a practice and a process, can transform development efforts by embedding participation, empowerment, and

accountability within a unified organisational structure. The case of BRAC's Climate Change Programme demonstrates that co-production can serve as a transformative model—one that shifts power dynamics, redefines relationships, and enhances resilience in vulnerable communities. The findings highlight that sustainable co-production depends not only on organisational commitment but also on the symbolic and relational efforts of individuals and communities who continuously interpret, adapt, and mould participatory values. When embedded in structures such as intermediary groups and supported by relational trust, co-production becomes a pathway to social accountability and to the participatory practice of NGOs' operations and services.

In conclusion, this research shows that co-production, when rooted in social-symbolic work, can transform the relationship between NGOs and the communities they serve—from a dependency on hierarchy to one based on dialogue, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. By embedding participatory values into organisational systems, fostering trust and capacity among individuals, and institutionalising representative and collective practices, NGOs can establish the social foundations of accountability. The example of BRAC's Climate Change Programme demonstrates that co-production is not just a way to improve service delivery but also a moral and relational practice that redefines legitimacy and inclusion in development governance. In the wider landscape of global development, these findings reaffirm that sustainable social change relies less on external accountability mechanisms and more on everyday co-productive relationships through which meaning, trust, and justice are continually negotiated.

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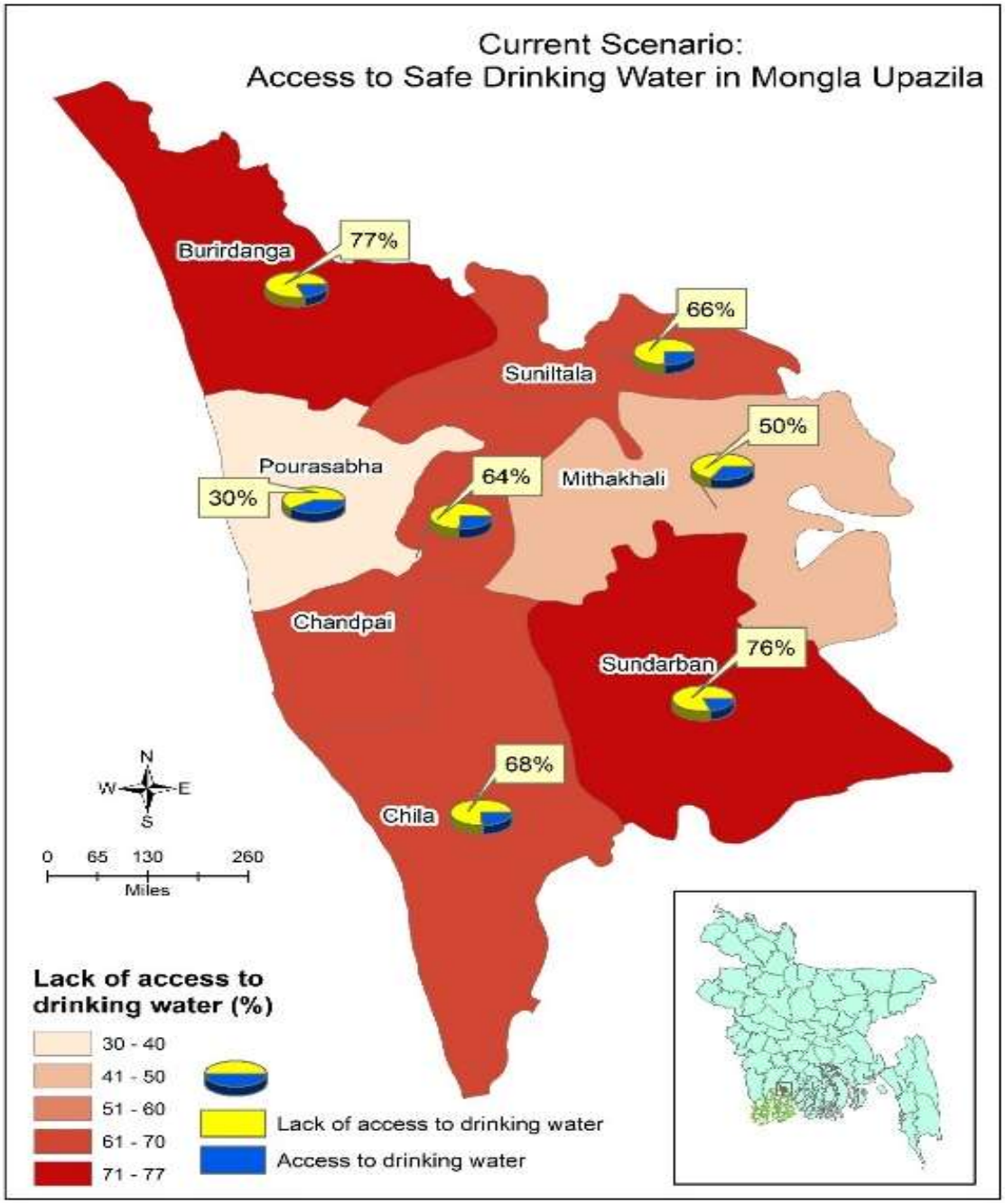
Appendix 1

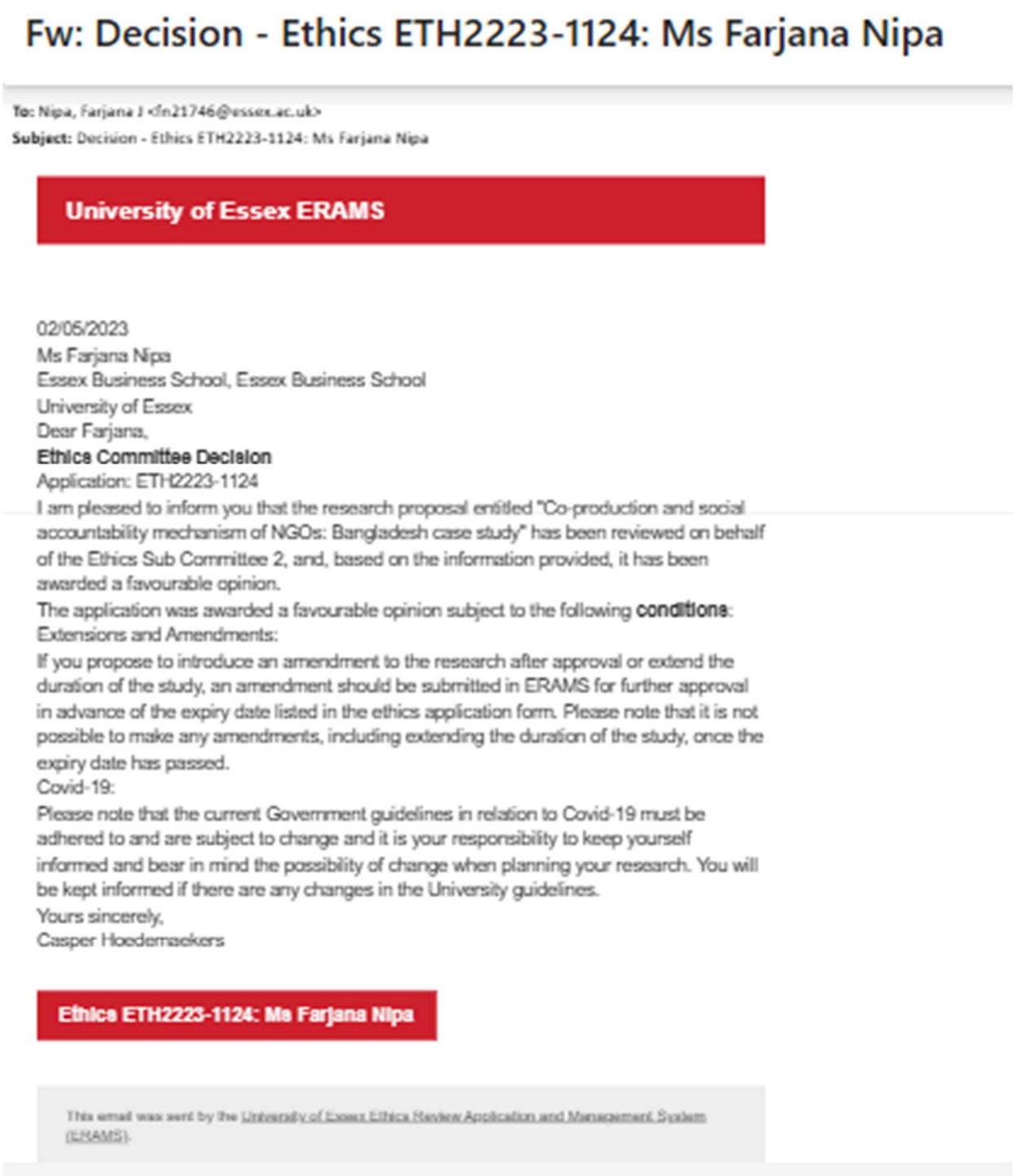
Figure A1: Map of Mongla Upazila and Water Scarcity

(Data source: Field Survey by BRAC, 2020)



Appendix 2

Figure A2: Ethical Approval



Fw: Decision - Ethics ETH2223-1124: Ms Farjana Nipa

To: Nipa, Farjana J <fn21746@essex.ac.uk>
Subject: Decision - Ethics ETH2223-1124: Ms Farjana Nipa

University of Essex ERAMS

02/05/2023
Ms Farjana Nipa
Essex Business School, Essex Business School
University of Essex
Dear Farjana,

Ethics Committee Decision

Application: ETH2223-1124

I am pleased to inform you that the research proposal entitled "Co-production and social accountability mechanism of NGOs: Bangladesh case study" has been reviewed on behalf of the Ethics Sub Committee 2, and, based on the information provided, it has been awarded a favourable opinion.

The application was awarded a favourable opinion subject to the following **conditions**:

Extensions and Amendments:

If you propose to introduce an amendment to the research after approval or extend the duration of the study, an amendment should be submitted in ERAMS for further approval in advance of the expiry date listed in the ethics application form. Please note that it is not possible to make any amendments, including extending the duration of the study, once the expiry date has passed.

Covid-19:

Please note that the current Government guidelines in relation to Covid-19 must be adhered to and are subject to change and it is your responsibility to keep yourself informed and bear in mind the possibility of change when planning your research. You will be kept informed if there are any changes in the University guidelines.

Yours sincerely,
Casper Hoedemaekers

Ethics ETH2223-1124: Ms Farjana Nipa

This email was sent by the University of Essex Ethics Review Application and Management System (ERAMS).

Appendix 3

Figure A3: Flipchart (Secondary Data)

Appendix 4

Table A1: Image of the Consent Form

Consent Form

Project Title: Co-production and social accountability mechanism of NGOs: Bangladesh case study

Researcher: Farjana Jahan Nipa

Taking Part	**Please Tick**
I confirm that I am over 18 years old.	
I have read and understood the project information sheet.	
I have been given adequate opportunities to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that taking part in the project is voluntary. I can withdraw from the study at any time and do not have to give any reason for my withdrawal.	
I agree to take part in the project:	
-Informal discussion	
-Individual interview	
-Focus group interview	
-Observation	
I agree to the interview being audio recorded.	
I agree to the interview being video recorded.	
I agree to appear in photographs.	
Use of information I provide for the project only	
I understand my personal details, such as name, address, phone number, work location etc., will not be revealed to anyone	
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages and any other research outputs.	
Please choose one of the following two options:	
I would like my real name used in the above.	
I would NOT like my real name used in the above.	
If you would like to use your own pseudonym (fake name), please write it here.	
Use of information I provide for the project only	
I agree for the data I provide to be archived in UK Data Archive (Details can be discussed later)	
I understand that other genuine researchers will have access to this date only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as required in this form.	
I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as required in this form.	
So we can use the information you provide legally	
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to Farjana Jahan Nipa	
Further information	
I understand that I may contact the researcher Farjana Jahan Nipa, at fn21746@essex.ac.uk	
If I require further information about the research or if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research, I may contact the 'supervisory team'; at t.g.arun@essex.ac.uk or andre.lino@essex.ac.uk	
If the 'supervisory team' unable to resolve the issues, then I may contact to the Director of PhD program	
If above mentioned people unable to resolve my complain, I may contact to Essex University's Research Governance and Planning management at sarahm@essex.ac.uk	

Name of the Participant (printed): _____

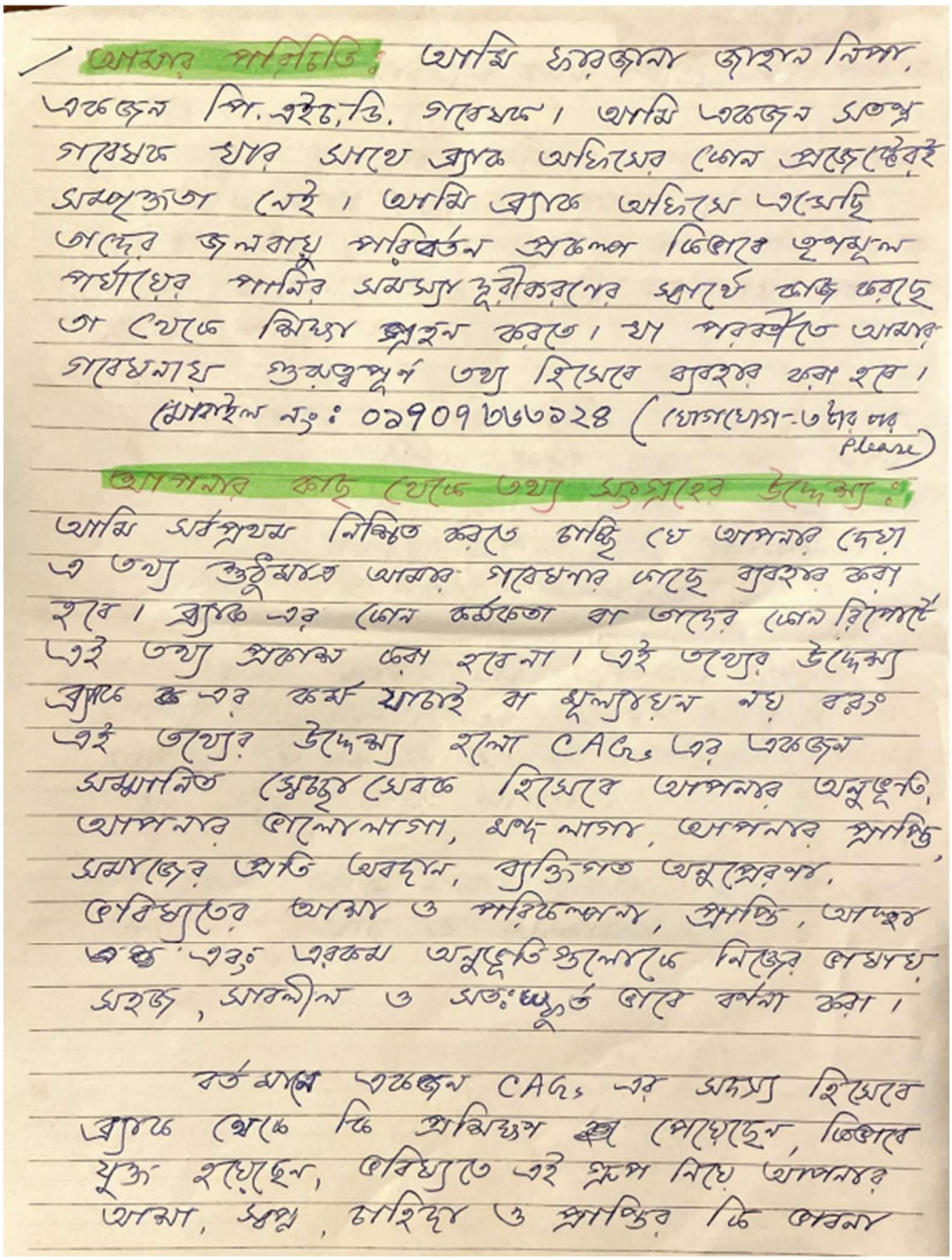
Signature:_____

Name of the Researcher(printed):_____

Signature:_____

Appendix 5

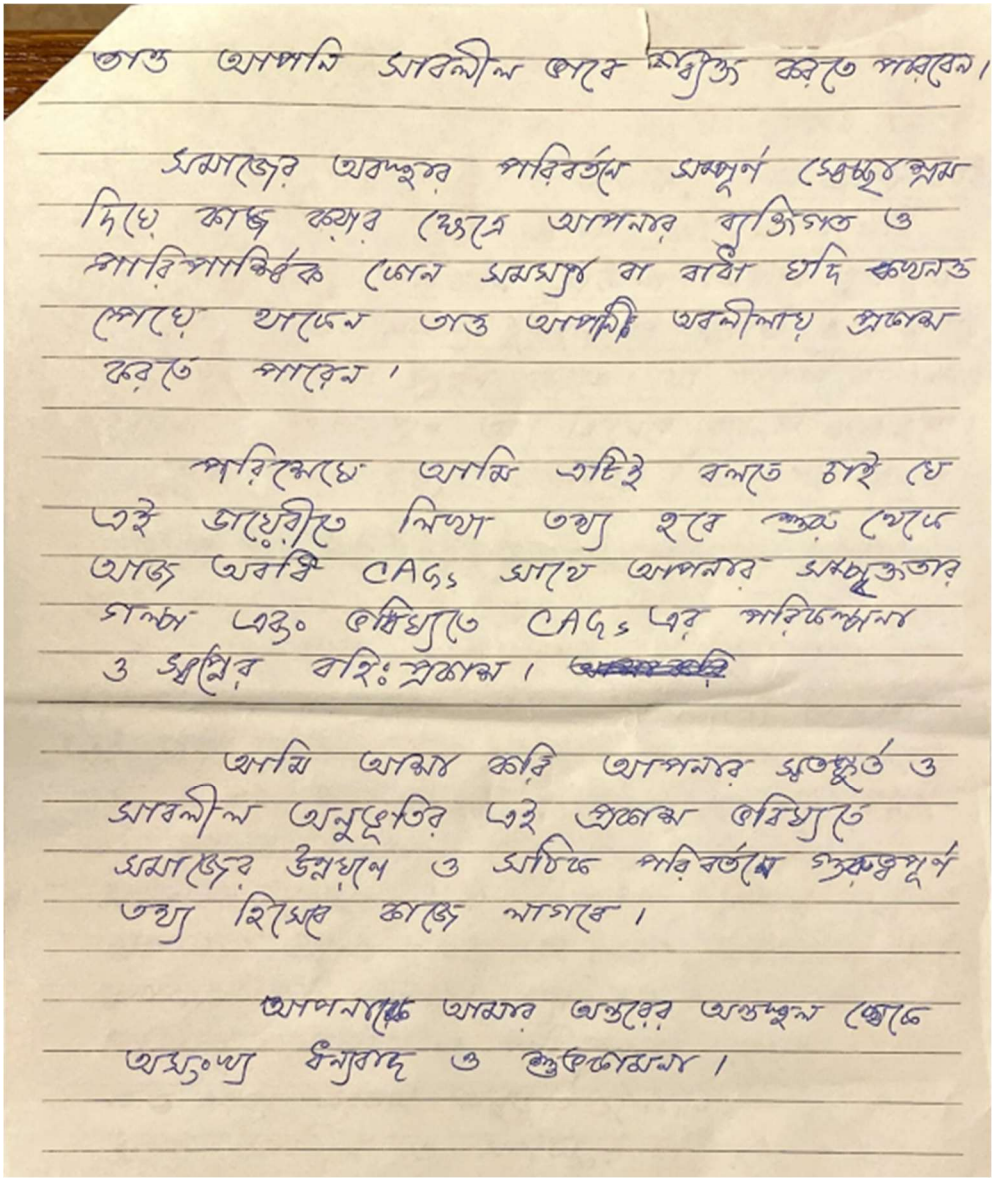
Figure A4: Written Instruction for CAGs Journal Entry



আমার পরিচিতি: আমি ফারজানা জাহান নিপা, একজন পি.এইচ.ডি. গবেষক। আমি একজন একক গবেষক যার সাথে ব্র্যাক অফিসের কোন প্রজেক্টেরই সম্পৃক্ততা নেই। আমি ব্র্যাক অফিসে এসেছি তাদের জলবায়ু পরিবর্তন প্রকল্প ডিজাইনে তৃণমূল পর্যায়ের পানির সমস্যা দূরীকরণের প্রার্থে কাজ করছে তা থেকে শিক্ষা গ্রহণ করতে। যা পরবর্তীতে আমার গবেষনায় গুরুত্বপূর্ণ তথ্য হিসেবে ব্যবহার করা হবে।
মোবাইল নং: ০১৭০৭৬৬৬২৪ (যোগাযোগ-৬টার পর Please)

আপনার কাছ থেকে তথ্য সংগ্রহের উদ্দেশ্য:
আমি সর্বপ্রথম নিশ্চিত করতে চাচ্ছি যে আপনার দেয়া এ তথ্য শুধুমাত্র আমার গবেষনার কাজে ব্যবহার করা হবে। ব্র্যাক এর কোন কর্মতা বা তাদের কোন রিপোর্টে এই তথ্য প্রকাশ করা হবেনা। এই তথ্যের উদ্দেশ্য ব্র্যাক এর কর্ম যাচাই বা মূল্যায়ন নয় বরং এই তথ্যের উদ্দেশ্য হলো CAGs এর একজন সম্মানিত স্বেচ্ছাসেবক হিসেবে আপনার অনুভূতি, আপনার ভালোলাগা, মন্দ লাগা, আপনার প্রাপ্তি, সমাজের প্রতি অবদান, ব্যক্তিগত অনুপ্রেরণা, ভবিষ্যতের আশা ও পরিকল্পনা, প্রাপ্তি, আক্ষেপ এবং এরকম অনুভূতিগুলোকে নিজের ভাষায় সহজ, সাবলীল ও স্বতঃস্ফূর্ত ভাবে বর্ণনা করা।

বর্তমানে একজন CAGs এর সদস্য হিসেবে ব্র্যাক থেকে কি প্রশিক্ষণ কোর্স পেয়েছেন, কিভাবে যুক্ত হয়েছেন, ভবিষ্যতে এই গ্রুপ নিয়ে আপনার আশা, স্বপ্ন, চাহিদা ও প্রাপ্তির কি ভাবনা



তাও আপনি সাবলীল ভাবে অনুবাদ করতে পারবেন।

সমাজের অবস্থার পরিবর্তন সম্পূর্ণ স্বেচ্ছাসেবা দিয়ে কাজ করার ক্ষেত্রে আপনার ব্যক্তিগত ও পারিপার্শ্বিক কোন সমস্যা বা বাধা যদি কখনও দেখে থাকেন তাও আপনি অবলীলায় প্রকাশ করতে পারেন।

পরিশেষে আমি এটিই বলতে চাই যে এই ডায়েরীতে লিপ্যা তথ্য হবে শুরু থেকে আজ অবধি CAGs সাথে আপনার সম্পৃক্ততার গল্প এবং ভবিষ্যতে CAGs এর পরিচালনা ও সুপ্রিম বহিঃপ্রকাশ। ~~আপনারই~~

আমি আশা করি আপনার মূল্যবান ও সাবলীল অনুভূতির এই প্রকাশ ভবিষ্যতে সমাজের উন্নয়নে ও সঠিক পরিবর্তনে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ তথ্য হিসেবে কাজে লাগবে।

আপনাদের আমার অন্তরের অন্তস্থল থেকে অসংখ্য ধন্যবাদ ও শুভেচ্ছা রইল।

Appendix 6

Explanation of the Coding Structure and Theme Development

The coding structure evolved through a multi-stage analytical process that systematically progressed from raw empirical observations to theoretically informed themes. Initial/open codes were generated inductively from interviews, observations, respondent journals, and documentary evidence. These codes captured recurring actions, interactions, meanings, and practices evident in the data.

Subsequently, related codes were grouped into more focused axial categories to identify broader patterns and relationships among the data. At this stage, interpretation was informed by the social-symbolic work framework, particularly in relation to discursive, relational, and material practices shaping co-production and social accountability processes.

Finally, these focused categories were synthesised into overarching themes that structured the empirical analysis presented across Chapters 5–8. The progression from initial codes to final themes is summarised below in Table A2

Table A2: Coding Structure and Theme Development

Initial/Open Codes	Axial/Focused Categories	Final Themes	Empirical Chapter
Awareness training	Capacity building	Building self-efficacy	Chapters 5 & 6
Community meetings	Participatory engagement	Valued citizens	Chapters 5 & 6
NGO–community trust	Relational collaboration	Relational accountability	Chapters 6 & 7
Youth mobilisation	Collective participation / Representative co-production	Uniting the community	Chapters 6 & 7

Initial/Open Codes	Axial/Focused Categories	Final Themes	Empirical Chapter
Involving UNO	Institutional collaboration / Power dynamics	Sustainable approach	Chapters 6 & 7

This analytical progression enabled the study to move beyond descriptive accounts of participation towards a deeper understanding of how social-symbolic practices shaped co-production processes, accountability relationships, and community engagement outcomes.

Appendix 7: Collected Secondary Data

Table A3 summarises the secondary data used in this study, including the time frame, types of documents reviewed, and the approximate number of documents analysed.

Table A3: Summary of Secondary Data Collection

Time Frame	Types of Documents Studied and Analysed	Approx. Number of Documents
October–November 2022	CCP's Project Proposal to DANIDA	1
Literature review to data analysis period (2022–2024)	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Several (exact number not recorded)
	BRAC annual and thematic reports	Several (exact number not recorded)
	BRAC research and evaluation papers	Selected documents (not systematically counted)
	Final Project Report of CCP	1
	CCP training modules	3
	CCP branch reports	2
	CAG training module	1
	CAG leaders' training module	1
	CCP awareness-building program module	1
	Guidelines for the Water Management Committee (WMC)	1
	Posters, flipcharts, and awareness-building materials	Various (not systematically counted)

Notes

- Some categories of documents (e.g., BRAC's Annual Reports and awareness materials such as posters and flipcharts) were used extensively throughout the research process; however, an exact count was not maintained.
- Journal articles were selected based on relevance to the research topic and ranged.
- The documents span both organisational records and academic literature, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the research context.