



Elusive Partnerships: Gas extraction and CSR in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Chevron's programme of CSR at a gas field in Bangladesh. Whilst apparently building partnerships in the villages that surround the Bibiyana Gas Field, we suggest that the corporation remains detached from the local population via their community development programmes and employment policies. This contradiction is submerged by ideas and practices within global development discourse which celebrate the disconnection and disengagement of donors via the rhetoric of sustainability. Chiming with development praxis and the neo-liberal values which underscore it by stressing self-reliance, entrepreneurship and 'helping people to help themselves', the corporation's Community Engagement Programme does little to meet the demands of local people who hoped for employment and long term investment, a form of connection that is discordant to discourses of self-reliance and sustainability.

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Introduction

This article examines a programme of 'Community Engagement' undertaken by the multinational corporation Chevron at a gas field in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Our aim is to examine the ideologies and practices of the programme, digging beneath the corporation's claims of partnership with the 'community' and suggesting that, paradoxically, 'community engagement' allows Chevron to remain detached from the area and its inhabitants, creating instead a particular set of practices and relationships which we term 'disconnect development'. The paper is based on anthropological fieldwork in the area from 2008–10, carried out by a small research team co-ordinated by the universities of Sussex and Jahangirnagar.¹ Our methods were largely qualitative, involving interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation, but also included household and community surveys, and drew upon Katy Gardner's long term research in the area, which dates back to the late 1980s.²

As far as we are aware, Chevron's programme of community engagement is the first CSR programme to take place amongst communities surrounding a mining or gas extraction site in

Bangladesh. As such it should be examined carefully, not so much for lessons it might impart about 'how to do CSR', but more, for the role of such programmes in changing or reproducing hierarchy and inequality, promoting or suppressing rights and providing pathways out of, or contributing to, poverty. Whilst the focus of the paper is upon one case study, our broader objective is thus to contribute to the broader literature on whether or not CSR is 'good for development' (Rajak, 2011; Jenkins, 2005; Gardner, 2012).

Within Bangladesh, the wider context is one in which energy shortages are a major hindrance to the country's economic growth. A 2010 report by the Asian Development Bank states, for example, 'acute power and energy shortages have reduced Bangladesh's short term growth prospects'³. Meanwhile, the extraction of the country's energy resources by multinationals, in particular gas and coal, has become one of the most explosive issues on the political agenda. Whereas people once rioted over food, increasingly civil disturbance in Bangladesh is caused by the issue of energy, whether involving protests against power shedding (when the power supply is turned off by the electricity board, often for many hours, in order to save energy)⁴, or over the presence in the country of extractive multinationals which, protesters argue, are plundering the country's resources. The role of extractive multinationals has caused serious political unrest in the country in the last decade. In 2006 protests

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² For a detailed account, see Gardner, 2012.

³ See: <http://www.chevron.com/about/chevronway/-201002.asp>.

⁴ See: for example, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Six-dead,-100-reportedly-wounded-in-Bangladesh-electricity-protest-5196.html> (accessed 14 October 2010).

against a proposed open cast mine in Phulbari, in the North East, to be operated by Asia Energy, which, it was said, would leave over 20,000 displaced people, led to the death of three and injury of around a hundred when police shot into the crowd. More recently national agitation has centred around the content of Power Share Contracts with foreign companies, with the activists arguing that these exploit the country's natural resources, leading to large profits for the multinationals, generous backhanders for corrupt government officials and nothing for Bangladesh. In September 2009, for example, a rally called to protest against the leasing of rights to extract offshore gas resources to multinationals led to police violence and the injury of 30 people.

At the heart of these protests is the widely held belief in Bangladesh that the state is corrupt. Those protesting at power shedding, for example, accuse electricity board officials of taking bribes, whilst disputes over multinationals revolve around the content of power share contracts, and allegations of bribery by corporations of government ministers. Rumour, counter rumour, civil unrest, accusations and arrests are the order of the day in a fragile democracy marked by lack of accountability, secret deals and limited if no transparency. It is significant that the research was carried out during a period in which the country was controlled by a caretaker government which took radical action over corruption (from 2007–08) arresting and holding in detention hundreds of politicians and business people. Recent reports from groups such as Transparency International suggest that under the new Awami League government, perceptions of corruption remain extremely high.⁵

The role of the Bangladeshi state and its lack of accountability therefore underscores any discussion of Extractive Industry CSR in Bangladesh. As such, our findings are probably similar to those of other research projects which examine the micropolitics of CSR in contexts where the state is weak and unaccountable (see, for example, Zalik, 2004; Welker, 2009). As suggested at the end of the paper, besides providing employment and adding to the country's economic growth, corporations aiming at 'socially responsible' policies would do well to place their energies in pressing the governments they work with for greater transparency in their dealings, as well as being transparent themselves. Although Chevron is a signatory to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, for example, neither the details of its deals nor the findings of its environmental or social impact assessments are made public in Bangladesh.⁶ Indeed, whilst the company scores 88% for 'Organisational Disclosure' in Transparency International/Revenue Watch's 2011 data, it scores only 8% for 'Country led disclosure', figures which hint at corporate double standards.⁷

Chevron's vision of partnership

Chevron have a vision. Put simply, this is:

" To be the global energy company most admired for its people, partnership and performance".⁸

That 'partnership' is valued so highly by the company is reiterated time and time again in their promotional literature. Indeed, it is integral to 'The Chevron Way':

Partnership

We have an unwavering commitment to being a good partner focused on building productive, collaborative, trusting and beneficial relationships with governments, other companies, our customers, our communities and each other⁹

Besides sounding good, what does such 'partnership' mean and what does it involve? Why, indeed, do global extractive industries need to have a vision or a 'Way'? Isn't it enough for them to simply make a profit? That demonstrable ethically sound practice and social responsibility are crucial to multinational corporations in the Twenty-First Century has been established for some time by a burgeoning literature on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR),¹⁰ the best of which seeks not simply to address whether or not this is 'good for business', or indeed 'good for development', but the power relationships and moralities involved, as well as the unintended consequences (Rajak, 2011). In the extractive industries, in which security considerations are often paramount, anthropologists have also pointed out how CSR and the relationships it involves, be these of patronage, 'partnership' or both, are designed in part to gain a 'social licence to operate', particularly in locations where there has been a history of resistance against operations and violent confrontation such as Nigeria (Zalik, 2004) or Indonesia (Welker, 2009). In these cases 'partnership' does not merely look good for global shareholders, it creates compliance. Indeed, CSR and its attendant discourse of partnership may be core to the creation of 'secured enclaves' in which extractive industries can successfully operate (Ferguson, 2005). And whilst global capital is usually highly mobile, moving on to more peaceful sites of production if one becomes too tricky, the extraction of natural resources is necessarily fixed. It is in these contexts that 'partnership development' comes in so handy (Zalik, 2004).

Yet although 'partnership'¹¹ implies an ongoing relationship, countervailing forces push in the opposite direction. Alongside the rhetorics of connection, corporations need to disconnect, for whilst a degree of territorial fixity is necessary for natural resource extraction, geopolitical as well as environmental and geological uncertainty mean that if conditions change they must quickly disinvest and move on to pastures (or gas fields) new. These contradictory pressures mean that they need create and celebrate partnership whilst simultaneously following what Jamie Cross has dubbed 'the corporate ethic of detachment' (Cross, 2011).

In what follows we suggest that whilst apparently building partnerships in the villages that surround one of their largest operations in Bangladesh, the Bibiyana Gas Field in Sylhet, Chevron successfully remains detached from the local population via their community development programmes and employment policies. This contradiction is submerged by ideas and practices within global development discourse which celebrate the disconnection and disengagement of donors via the rhetoric of sustainability. Chiming with development praxis and the neo-liberal values which underscore it by stressing self-reliance, entrepreneurship and 'helping people to help themselves', the corporation's Community Engagement Programme does little to meet the demands of local people who hoped for employment and long term investment, a form of connection that is discordant to discourses of self-reliance and sustainability.

⁵ In 2010 Bangladesh scored 2.4 in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, which ranged from 9.3 in New Zealand, to 1.4 for Afghanistan and Myanmar (http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results accessed 3/11/11).

⁶ Freedom of information legislation will mean that this information will be available in the US from 2012.

⁷ See Revenue Watch/Transparency International, 2011 'Promoting Revenue Transparency: 2011 Report on Oil and Gas Companies' (available at http://www.transparency.org/publications/publications/other/prt_2011; accessed 3/11/11).

⁸ <http://www.chevron.com/countries/bangladesh/inthecommunity/>; accessed February 23rd 2010.

⁹ <http://www.chevron.com/about/chevronway/> (accessed 2/09/11).

¹⁰ Cf Blowfield and Frynas, 2005; Kapelus, 2002; Doane, 2005; Burton, 2002; Jenkins, 2005

¹¹ Partnership is 'the relationship between two or more people or organisations that are involved in the same activity', according to the Encarta Dictionary

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