

NGOs and the Political Empowerment of Poor People in Rural Bangladesh: Cultivating the Habits of Democracy?

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Summary. — Recent research in Bangladesh highlights an interesting paradox: impressive development outcomes combined with extremely poor quality of governance. The country's active development NGO sector has been credited with some of the more positive development achievements. The question that this paper sets out to address is why the sector has not made an equivalent contribution on the governance front. It draws on primary survey data to explore the hypothesis that the problem lies in the increasing homogenization of NGOs around the delivery of services, primarily microfinance services, and its shift away from social mobilization organizations.
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1. THE BANGLADESH PARADOX: DEVELOPMENT PROGRESS IN A CONTEXT OF BAD GOVERNANCE

Bangladesh represents an interesting paradox for scholars of development studies. It has made considerable progress in development terms. Along with rising rates of growth and a slow but steady decline in poverty, it has performed well on the social front and is on track to achieve key MDGS more rapidly than some of its more prosperous neighbors (Ahluwalia & Mahmud, 2004; Rahman, 2006a; Sen, 2001). At the same time, the quality of governance remains abysmal. Indeed it was classified by Transparency International as the world's most corrupt country for five consecutive years (1997–2001). The “unique role” of Bangladesh's development NGOs (World Bank, 2006) and their “pioneering social entrepreneurship” in the design and delivery of pro-poor services (World Bank, 2003) has been singled out in recent literature seeking to explain the country's remarkable progress on the development front (BRAC, 2006). However, they have clearly not achieved commensurate improvements in the quality of democracy in the country. The hypothesis that informs this paper is that lack of attention by the country's NGO sector to the political empowerment of its constituency has contributed to the country's failure to make progress on the governance front. Although we explore this hypothesis using micro-level survey data on six major development NGOs in Bangladesh, we argue that change at the grassroots level is a key missing ingredient in explaining this larger failure.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 of the paper discusses the theoretical rationale for our focus on the political impacts of development NGOs. While much of this literature is concerned with civil society more generally, we note how a great deal of the mainstream development dis-

course has tended to focus on NGOs as the primary representatives of civil society. This focus makes sense in the context of Bangladesh because it is the development NGOs that are most active in the rural areas where most of the country's poor people are located. NGOs now operate in more than 78% of rural villages in Bangladesh and their activities directly benefit 35% of the entire population (Devine, 2003). Section 3 provides a brief account of the history of the NGO sector in Bangladesh, with particular attention to the six organizations that are the subject of this study. Section 4 introduces the study, describing the methodology used and the key characteristics of the NGO members selected for the study. Section 5 provides a two stage analysis of the data, a preliminary analysis using descriptive statistics followed by multivariate analysis to control for selection bias and differences in relevant characteristics of the respondents, their households and their location. Section 6 draws on some of the qualitative research carried out as part of the project as well as the larger secondary literature in order to interpret the findings. Section 7 returns to our theoretical discussion and makes some general points about the role of NGOs in the promotion of democratic development in contexts like Bangladesh.

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2. COMPETING PERSPECTIVES ON CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

Ideas about civil society have come to feature with increasing frequency in current discussions about both democracy and development within the international donor community. There are, of course, competing conceptualizations of civil society within this literature, with competing implications for its role in development and democracy. We consider these in relation to the concerns of this paper. Following Howell and Pearce (2001), we distinguish between “mainstream” and “alternative” approaches.

Mainstream approaches are generally rooted within a liberal political tradition which views civil society as the realm of voluntary associations existing in the space between state, market, and the privatized domain of kinship and family and providing an important counter-balance to the power of the state. The work of Tocqueville has been particularly influential with its emphasis on the importance of voluntarism, community spirit, and independent associational life in safeguarding society from state domination. Such normative views had strong appeal within the development mainstream in the context of neo-liberal critiques of the 1980s which saw bloated, bureaucratic, and rent-seeking states as the major factor behind the poor growth performance of many developing countries. The policy logic flowing from this critique was the need to cut back on the role of the state and allow market forces and private sector initiatives to flourish in its place. Development NGOs were singled out as the favored representatives of civil society in the drive to privatize the provision of social services. It was widely believed that their grassroots location, participatory approaches, and proximity to poor people made them particularly well-suited to this role (Cernea, 1988; Fowler, 1990).

By the 1990s, neo-liberal efforts to restructure state-society relations had given rise to a preoccupation with the quality of governance and efforts to make the state more accountable to its citizens. The “neo-Tocquevillian” ideas of Putnam (1993a, 1993b) provided a strong theoretical rationale for the central place assigned to civil society within this emerging “good governance” agenda. In his view, participation in the voluntary associations of civil society generated “social capital” in the form of trust, norms of reciprocity, and networks of civic engagement which could then be harnessed to promote democratically accountable government. Such associations did not have to be overtly political. It was the *density* of associational life that mattered for these positive outcomes. Within the development arena, it was once again NGOs that were seen to be the primary representatives of civil society who could contribute to the fostering of these voluntary relationships and promoting democratic participation (Bratton, 1989; Lewis & Kanji, 2009; Mercer, 2002).

The “alternative” approach to civil society was less sanguine about its role. Strongly influenced by the work of Marx, Gramsci, and others, it saw civil society as a sphere of conflict over competing ideas and interests separate from, but interacting with power structures within both state and market and incorporating “darker” forms of social capital, such as clientelist relationships, as well as the more positive forms discussed by Putnam (Clarke, 1998; Davis & McGregor, 2000; Howell & Pearce, 2001; Putzel, 1997). Gramsci’s work was particularly influential in pointing out that democratic capitalist regimes rule through consent as much as coercion. While the state had the power to use coercion to defend the established order, civil society was the realm where consent of the ruled was constructed—and contested—through the struggle for ideological hegemony. Civil society could therefore be seen

to be comprised by a diversity of associations, some of which co-operated with or were co-opted by the established structures of power in society while others sought to challenge them. NGOs would not a priori be seen as a “good thing” from this perspective: they would have to be judged on the basis of their performance and achievements.

While these very different approaches to civil society largely concerned themselves with the kinds of institutions that would promote better development and governance outcomes, Betteille (2000) draws out an important analytical insight regarding the significance of the politics of everyday life which was woven into some of this work and constituted a distinct contribution to debates about the role of civil society in promoting democratic governance. This insight is embedded, for instance, in Gramsci’s concept of ideological hegemony which relates to capacity of the ruling class to translate its values and interests into the taken-for-granted “common sense” of society. The resilience of the social order within this view depended as much on the “multitude of ordinary, unnoticed and even obscure social habits and practices” that governed daily life as it did on the formal institutions of state, church, and market place (Betteille, 2000, p. 178).

For Tocqueville as well, democracy was more than just a political system: it depended on “good customs” as well as “good laws.” His concept of custom encompassed what he called the “habits of the heart”: “the mores and manners of daily life as well as to the notions, opinions and ideas which make up the character of people’s minds” (de Toqueville, 1956, p. 299). Enacting the right laws would do little for democracy if people had not learnt and internalized the democratic habits of the heart that were essential if these laws were to be translated into everyday practice.

This bottom-up, sociologically-grounded understanding of the conditions necessary for democracy to take root and flourish in a society provides the conceptual justification for the approach taken in this paper. Bangladesh provides a particularly appropriate context for exploring the hypothesis that informs the paper. The constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the formal rights of citizenship, it has had multi-party democracy since 1991 (apart from a brief period under quasi-military rule) and it has one of the largest NGO sectors in the developing world. It has performed remarkably well on the development front, but, as we have seen, continues to suffer from very poor governance. The paper explores the extent to which part of this problem of governance can be traced to the failure of the NGO sector to promote the habits of democracy at the very least among its own membership, let alone in the wider society.

3. THE NGO SECTOR IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh came into existence after a devastating war of liberation from Pakistan in 1971. After a brief period of democracy, it came under military rule in 1976. Multi-party democracy was not restored till 1991 when the then military regime was overthrown by a popular movement but there has not been an improvement in the quality of governance. Despite constitutional guarantees, the state in Bangladesh has consistently failed to protect the rights of its citizens. The two main political parties treat elections as part of an on-going “zero-sum” struggle to capture state power and the opportunities for rent-seeking that go with it.

The legal system itself is part of the larger problem of governance (Dunn, Gain, Hossain, & Hubert, 2000). The chances of getting formal justice are random for most citizens, but they are

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