Development, Democracy and the NGO Sector: Theory and Evidence from Bangladesh

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Journal of Developing Societies 2006 22: 451
DOI: 10.1177/0169796X06072650

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ABSTRACT

The presence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in developing countries is often assumed to indicate a vibrant civil society that can help promote good governance and effective policy implementation where state infrastructure is weak. Using the case of Bangladesh, this study argues that the NGO sector as a whole has shifted away from its initial focus on promoting political mobilization and accountable government, to the apolitical delivery of basic services. The result of this 'depoliticization' of NGOs is an accelerated erosion of democratic institutions in Bangladesh. While current studies of NGOs are correct to stress the influence of western donors in driving this depoliticization, the process in Bangladesh results from the combination of international donor pressure with a domestic environment inimical to political activism. The study suggests that in many developing country contexts, NGOs and civil society actors need to pay more attention to mobilization efforts that can promote both the short-term empowerment of the poor and the long-term consolidation of democratic institutions.

Keywords: Bangladesh, civil society, collective action, governance, NGOs, South Asia

Introduction: Development, Political Citizenship, and the Role of NGO

The discussion of development policy over the past two decades has centred on two broad themes. First, there has been a growing realization that development entails more than just economic change; it also relies crucially on a local political context that can promote and sustain gains in poverty alleviation and growth – a condition that has been loosely termed 'good governance.' Second, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are viewed by donors and policymakers as a grassroots-oriented alternative to corrupt or inefficient government agencies, and they have come to play an increasingly central role in shaping and implementing development policies. These two developments are often seen as mutually reinforcing. NGOs are seen as evidence of a vibrant civil society and an integral component in promoting the rise of good governance and effective policymaking in developing countries. Indeed, NGOs in countries

Vol 22(4): 451–473. DOI: 10.1177/0169796X06072650

like Bangladesh are rightly credited with major achievements in improving the welfare of the poor. Meanwhile, NGOs themselves have taken on the rhetoric of an activist civil society, and claim their programmes increase the political and social empowerment of the poor within their societies.

However, the dramatic prominence of NGOs in developing countries can be dangerous for the goal of achieving an accountable and responsive political system and a robust consolidation of political citizenship in the developing world. By their very nature, NGOs create an arena of action and discourse distinct from the public and the private sectors. The degree to which NGO activity can help animate civil society, consolidate the political rights of citizens, and ensure responsive government depends on the degree to which NGO activity is linked to the broader polity. On the one hand, NGOs can pursue what can be termed a 'social mobilization' paradigm of development, tying their activities in health care provision or education to the concepts of empowerment, collective action, and engagement with the broader political system. At the other extreme, NGOs may pursue a 'service delivery' paradigm, where the provision of services is strictly separated from engagement in the broader polity. In this approach, NGOs become providers of goods to poor 'consumers' rather than facilitators of collective action and empowerment.

Examining the case of Bangladesh, this study argues that the NGO sector has, over the last 30 years, shifted away from a social mobilization to a service delivery paradigm. The result has been a conscious effort by many NGOs to sever the link between NGO activity and broader political involvement. In exploring this shift, this article will pursue two related arguments. First, the shift away from political activism and social mobilization is best explained not as an intrinsic weakness of the NGOs themselves, but as a response by NGOs to a local socio-political climate inimical to civil society activism. This is an important point, for while there is a growing academic consensus that NGO policies have become 'depoliticized' – that is, divested of their significance and potential as political movements challenging power relations to empower the poor – most scholars attribute this shift to the dominance of western donors and western discourses of development. The case of Bangladesh, however, indicates this shift is actually the result of an affinity between international pressures on the one hand, and more subtle – and often overlooked – domestic pressures on the other.

Second, this article argues that the abandonment of political activism on the part of NGOs has, in the case of Bangladesh, led to a macro-level crisis in the country's democratic institutions and public sphere. Moreover, since the depoliticization of NGOs is driven by an elective affinity between the international donor pressures on them and by a local environment that is detrimental to social mobilization efforts, the result is a vicious cycle: the NGOs face a local and global political climate that is inimical to social mobilization, and as a result they orient their programmemes to favour service delivery. However,

the dominance of the NGO sector within Bangladeshi civil society means that this decision has a long-term effect that exacerbates the erosion of democratic institutions and the public sphere in Bangladesh. Thus, the existing weakness of Bangladeshi democracy has been exacerbated by the NGO sector's abdication of both political activism and social mobilization as central tools through which the poor can be empowered.

The implications of this study are two-fold. First, they highlight the impact of development interventions on the macro-scale political structures of a society. Second, they suggest that the negative political effects of NGO-dominated development seen in countries such as Bangladesh are not inevitable. They can be avoided through a creative rethinking of the role of NGOs in Bangladeshi society.

Bangladesh is a useful case for testing the existing body of knowledge on NGO depoliticization, since the country enjoys one of the highest concentrations of NGO activity in the world. It therefore offers an opportunity to analyse myriad NGOs and their policies within the same social, political, and economic context. As such, Bangladesh offers useful contrasts between NGO approaches to empowerment, offering clues as to why certain policy types become preferred over others. The case study material reported in this essay derives from field work conducted in the summer of 2004 in Bangladesh. It is based on semi-structured interviews with NGO officials, academics, policymakers, and the elite in the capital Dhaka, as well as observations derived from extended visits to NGO sites in rural Bangladesh.

The main argument in this article will be pursued as follows. The following section gives an overview of the rise of the Bangladeshi NGO sector, and charts the dominance of the service delivery paradigm that deliberately constrains the ability of NGO activity to promote good governance and accountability through social mobilization and collective action in the political sphere. The subsequent section examines the prevailing explanation for this depoliticization: that it is the result of NGOs facing overwhelming international economic and discursive pressures from western donors. After critiquing this explanation, we argue that the depoliticization of the NGO sector in Bangladesh is the result of an elective affinity between the international pressures identified in the existing literature, and other local pressures that are often overlooked in the NGO literature. The final section of the article argues that the reliance on (depoliticized) NGOs in Bangladesh and other countries can unintentionally erode democratic institutions, unless the NGOs make a conscious effort to rethink their policy agendas.

The Rise of Service Delivery among the NGO Sector in Bangladesh

David Hulme and Michael Edwards define NGOs within the sphere of development as 'intermediary organizations engaged in funding or offering other forms of support to communities and other organizations that seek to promote

development' (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 21). In Bangladesh, NGOs appeared in the aftermath of the 1971 independence struggle against Pakistan, which left much of the country and economy destroyed. Bangladesh was also afflicted by a severe famine in 1974. Several of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh today – such as BRAC, Grameen Bank, or Proshika – were founded by progressive young Bangladeshis during these early post-independence years to provide humanitarian relief, infrastructure development, and poverty alleviation, especially in light of the unresponsiveness and corruption that characterized the new Bangladeshi government (see Wood, 1992). Meanwhile, global trends in development funding came to favour NGOs as the preferred mechanisms for development assistance, resulting in dramatic increases in funding and support for the Bangladeshi NGOs (Edwards and Hulme, 1996).

Today, Bangladesh receives US$2 billion in foreign aid annually, 15 percent of which is channelled directly through NGOs (Stiles, 2002). By one count, there are approximately 22,000 NGOs operating in Bangladesh, 1250 of which receive foreign funding. Further, 78 percent of villages enjoy the presence of at least one NGO, and NGOs directly affect 35 percent of the population with credit, education, health, sanitation, and other services (Devine, 2003). These NGOs can be 'broadly situated along a continuum from primarily economic activities, such as service delivery, credit, and income generation, to more political approaches that emphasize Freirean notions of conscientization and empowerment' (Lewis, 1997: 35). More precisely, this distinction is actually a spectrum of policy choices, rather than a simple binary opposition; over time, the relative weighting of these two approaches changed.

However, over the past two decades, NGOs have increasingly shifted in favour of service delivery programmes, abandoning many earlier efforts at social mobilization or community activism. This represents a major reversal in the character of the Bangladeshi NGO sector. Following independence and the 1974 famine, the NGOs that engaged in development projects across the Bangladeshi countryside realized that the benefits of the existing infrastructure development programmemes were not accruing to the poor, and that poverty was as much an issue of rural power relations as it was a lack of resources (see BRAC, 1978). As a result, throughout the 1970s, Bangladeshi NGOs focused primarily on social mobilization programmes aimed at organizing the poor into independent groups able to resist exploitation (Hashemi, 1995).

Today, by contrast, the primary focus of the Bangladeshi NGO sector as a whole has shifted to the service delivery paradigm. While most NGOs run both service delivery programmes like the provision of microcredit along with community mobilization initiatives, on the whole Bangladeshi NGOs have had to 'significantly mute' their social mobilization programmes over time, 'either due to pressure from donors or lack of response from those who would be mobilized' (Stiles, 2002: 50–1). This supplanting of politically activist programmes mobilizing

the poor with apolitical, market-driven development approaches represents the depoliticization of NGO-led development in Bangladesh.

This growing predominance of service delivery programmes among NGOs is problematic for the goals of empowerment and poverty alleviation. As Ferguson (1994: 226) writes, on the one hand NGOs 'are supposed to bring about "social change," sometimes of a dramatic and far-reaching sort [but] at the same time, they are not supposed to "get involved in politics," and in fact have a strong de-politicizing function.' Thus, 'to do what it is set up to do (bring about socio-economic transformations), a "development" project must attempt what it is set up not to be able to do (involve itself in political struggles)'. While the depoliticized service delivery approach has achieved many important successes such as expanding health care or education coverage in countries such as Bangladesh, this approach creates what Geoff Wood has called a 'franchise state' where vital public services such as education, health, and banking are increasingly run by NGOs funded by donors and the state (Wood, 1997).

Indeed, poverty is more than simply a lack of available resources; it is also fundamentally an issue of unequal power relations in which the poor are permanently marginalized and vulnerable, dependent on local elites for patronage and material support – a dependency which undermines the ability of the poor to act autonomously of the desires of local elites (Wood, 2003). Thus, while the poor may indeed benefit from service delivery programmes which provide resources like food aid, credit, health care, and education, these programmemes cannot address the deeper systemic roots of their vulnerability: the lack of independent abilities to negotiate changes in policy with the state and local elite without fear of reprisal (Wood, 2003; Kamat, 2004).

It is important to note that, 'in themselves, there is nothing inherently wrong with such [service delivery] approaches, but they are quite inconsistent with the operations of organizations that claim to be promoting qualitative change' (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 8). As Hulme and Edwards explain, 'the case against the current …preoccupation' with service delivery among NGOs in Bangladesh 'is not about what is *included*, but rather about what is *excluded* by their model, and particularly its impact on the capacity of poor people to organize themselves independently of vested interests and structural inequalities' (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 9). As we shall see, this predominance of the service delivery paradigm among NGOs has also eroded democratic institutions and practices in Bangladesh, making it more difficult to achieve the goal of a state responsive to its citizens' needs.

Indeed, a growing literature has highlighted the importance of such social mobilization among citizens in provoking effective government responses to the issues of poverty. Sen (1999) argues that a politically engaged citizenry provokes governments to respond more forcefully to issues of underdevelopment and poverty. Evans (2002) expands Sen's argument and highlights the importance of collective action and political mobilization in translating these individual needs

into public action. Empirically, Dreze and Sen (1995) find high levels of political participation are tied to high levels of education, health care, and welfare benefits. Similarly, Besley and Burgess (2002) have found that Indian states with higher newspaper circulation and better electoral accountability (measured through empirical indicators such as higher voter turnout and a lower rate of incumbent re-election) are more effective in responding to crop and flood shocks with public food distribution and relief assistance. Reinikka and Svensson (2003) have found that the introduction of a newspaper awareness campaign dramatically increased the responsiveness of state education spending, and reduced the leakage of government spending from 80 percent to 20 percent between 1995 and 2001.

The mechanisms for political accountability, effective democratic institutions and a politically active civil society are central to ensuring effective government responses to poverty. Yet these conditions are far from met. As much of the recent development literature stresses, democratic institutions are often weak and plagued by corruption. Moreover, political mobilization is highly costly for the poor, since it involves an investment of time and resources that the poor can hardly afford, and it risks elite retribution (Engberg-Pedersen and Webster, 2002; Wood, 2003). To this must be added the fact that instead of facilitating popular mobilization and civil society activism to improve governance and government responses to the problems of poverty and development, the NGO sector in Bangladesh has settled on an explicitly apolitical policy paradigm, which is exacerbating rather than ameliorating the decline of both activism in civil society and democratic responsiveness in Bangladesh.

Explaining the Depoliticization of NGO Development Efforts

As mentioned above, the depoliticization of NGO development efforts experienced in Bangladesh over the last 20 years is part of a broader global trend in NGO policies (see Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Fisher, 1997; Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Kamat, 2004). As a result, there is a growing literature that seeks to explain this pattern as the result of economic and discursive pressures emanating from western donors. However, this explanation is one-sided, since it ignores the important influence of local conditions on the constraints and policy choices facing NGOs. Moreover, it does not take into account the fact that depoliticization is the result of an elective affinity or convenient response to both local and international pressures. Consequently, NGOs do have the option and can choose to be an important element both in driving development and reanimating political activism in many developing countries.

The current academic literature on NGO depoliticization is heavily influenced by the work of Arturo Escobar and James Ferguson, who attribute the depoliticization of development to the dominance or hegemony of the western development discourse (see Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995).[1] According to Escobar and Ferguson, the financial dependence of NGOs on donors creates a

situation where, as NGOs increase in size and prestige, their increasing need for foreign funding binds them to the discursive hegemony and dictates of western donors and academics. Thus, as small and autonomous NGOs develop into large bureaucracies, they must alter their goals and actions to maximize donor funding by specializing and streamlining their activities into projects that enable them to make successful cases for donor funding (Ferguson, 1994). As a result, the NGO are increasingly shaped by the western-dominated international development discourse.

This development discourse conceptualizes development as a technical, apolitical project that involves providing resources and it drives NGOs to substitute service delivery projects for efforts to achieve social change through social mobilization. As Ferguson explains,

> Whatever interests may be at work, and whatever they [development practi-tioners] may think they are doing, they can only operate through a complex set of social and cultural structures so deeply embedded and so ill-perceived that the outcome may be only a baroque and unrecognizable transformation of the original intention. (Ferguson, 1994: 17)

As a result, in development projects 'intentional plans interact with *unacknowledged* structures and chance events to produce *unintended* outcomes which turn out to be intelligible not only as the unforeseen effects of an intended intervention, but also as the unlikely instruments of an unplotted strategy' (Ferguson, 1994: 20, emphasis added). The ultimate result is that NGOs become 'constitutionally unfit' to engage in the kind of explicit political activism necessary to bring about genuine social change (Ferguson, 1994: 226).

According to Ferguson and Escobar's explanation, therefore, depoliticization is the result of a dual dependency: first, there is the economic dependency of NGOs on western donors which makes them vulnerable to the ideological preferences of these donors; and second, they are influenced by the broader discursive dependency of Third World development practitioners on the discourse and conceptions of development and development policy emanating from the intellectual and policymaking hubs of the First World. Thus, donor dependency explains the NGO shift to a service delivery emphasis. In this regard it is important to note that several studies have explicitly confirmed the arguments of Escobar and Ferguson regarding the depoliticization of the NGO sector (see, for example, Ulvila and Hossain, 2002). Additional studies support the contention that international donors' unease with social mobilization results in the depoliticization of NGOs, which are financially dependent on these donors (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Fernando and Heston, 1997).

A recent study of the budgets of Bangladesh's 11 largest NGOs reveals that as these NGOs became more concerned with maintaining inflows of donor funds, service delivery programmes like microcredit and economic technical assistance

increasingly absorbed their resources to the point that social mobilization programmes geared towards facilitating collective action among the poor have been completely marginalized in the NGO budgets (Devine, 2003). Furthermore, the donors predicate their funding on NGO financial sustainability. Thus, as donor funds for the biggest NGOs run out, these NGOs must make up their budget shortfall through revenues from microcredit interest payments, or other fees charged to the poor in exchange for NGO services. This introduction of the concept of interest payments and fees for services into the programmes of many NGOs has undermined their former ability to act as legitimate representatives of the poor and weakened their ability to engage in social mobilization. At the local level, individual NGO members have become increasingly dissatisfied and criticize these NGOs for being more interested in financial self-sufficiency than in the welfare and empowerment of the poor (Devine, 2003).

While Escobar and Ferguson are correct in identifying the depoliticization of development and in criticizing how this depoliticization undermines the project of achieving the genuine empowerment of the poor, their reliance on a dependency argument to explain the origins of depoliticization results in a critique of development that we view as overly deterministic. This argument ignores the important influence of local conditions and the decisive element of choice, and also obscures the ways in which the financial and discursive dominance of donors can be contested or circumvented to allow NGOs pursue an alternative role in developing countries such as Bangladesh. The weakness of this argument is fundamentally methodological: Ferguson and Escobar focus their analysis on the global discursive and politico-economic structures of dependency that exist between developing and developed countries, and between donors and development organizations. But while both authors build their arguments based on case studies in Lesotho and Latin America respectively, they give little attention to the actual dynamics internal or specific to the countries in question (see Fisher, 1997; Lehmann, 1997).

The depoliticization of the NGO sector must be explained by looking beyond the current literature's focus on international economic and discursive influences and examining in addition the local political contexts in which NGOs are situated. By overlooking local dynamics, the donor dependency argument erroneously suggests that the shift to service delivery is a process inherent to the evolution of internationally-funded NGOs that are implicated in global economic and discursive structures – an argument that effectively condemns the entire NGO sector to failure in the struggle against poverty and for the empowerment of the poor. Yet, there exist examples of NGOs such as Nijera Kori, Proshika, and GSS (Gano Shahajyo Sangstha), who have secured donor support while engaging in social mobilization programmemes, but have faced depoliticizing pressures from other sources such as the Bangladeshi government and even Bangladeshi civil society itself.

Furthermore, BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), one of Bangladesh's largest NGOs – which has 'sought to present itself as shying away from a politicized interpretation of poverty in Bangladesh in favour of a more technocratic and credit-based' service delivery approach – has recently experimented with reviving social mobilization through its donor-supported Targeting Ultra-Poor (TUP) initiative (Davis and McGregor, 2000: 61). The TUP programme was explicitly constituted as an effort to combine service delivery that builds 'the physical, financial, human and socio-political assets of the poor' with social mobilization that reduces 'the exclusion, exploitation, and other risks faced by the poor by changing structures (government, political structures, traditional social institutions, and market transactions) and processes (laws, regulations, policies, social norms, market relations)' (Chen, 2002; BRAC RED, 2004). As one recent internal study indicates, the weaknesses of the TUP programme's social mobilization component is the result not of BRAC's dependence on donors or the hegemony of the global development discourse, but of inadequacies – which can be remedied – in BRAC's own policy approach towards fostering and catalyzing collective action among the ultra-poor (Huda et al., 2005).

An alternative approach to explaining the depoliticization of NGO policies is therefore needed, one that can account for the local contextual forces as well as the influence of international donors and the dominant development discourse. This study argues that it is the 'elective affinity' between the international pressures (identified by the existing literature on NGOs) and these local contexts which drives the depoliticization of NGO approaches to development.

To pursue this argument, the rest of this study will utilize the concept of 'political space', defined as 'the types and range of possibilities present for pursuing poverty reduction by the poor or on behalf of the poor by local organizations' (Engberg-Pederson and Webster, 2002: 8). In this context, we use the concept of political space as comprised of two primary components: 'institutional channels through which policy formulation and implementation can be accessed, controlled or contested by the poor' and 'political discourses in which poverty and poverty reduction are significant issues' (Engberg-Pederson and Webster, 2002: 8).

The institutional and discursive factors in Bangladesh have created a local political space that is inimical to social mobilization programmes, and that has promoted the NGO shift to apolitical service delivery. First, institutional channels undermine the viability of social mobilization since most collective action institutions in civil society and local government are quite weak in Bangladesh. In the Bangladeshi context, government repression of NGOs that engage in social mobilization and the historical penetration of civil society and local government by the central state have greatly restricted the institutional arenas for promoting the voice and social mobilization of the poor. Second, the dominant political discourse in Bangladesh favours the shift to service delivery due to the historical

distrust among Bangladeshi elites of the political aspects of development policy. They have come to view political action itself as an illegitimate enterprise, thereby negating the legitimacy of and support for social mobilization initiatives. Each of these local conditions – the undermining of the institutions for voice, and the delegitimization of political action – have contributed to the depoliticization of NGO development programmes in Bangladesh.

Each of these local pressures reinforces each other to undermine the ability of NGOs to pursue social mobilization. Thus, NGOs find themselves without the institutional support and legitimacy among the elite that they need to survive. This type of institutional and elite support is difficult to restore without government reforms and changes in Bangladeshi politics. This confluence of local factors, combined with the existing donor preference for service delivery, explains why NGOs 'elect' or choose to pursue apolitical service delivery approaches to development rather than more activist empowerment and social mobilization approaches.

National Political Space and the Undermining of Social Mobilization

Historically, government repression has played a major role in shaping the policy choices available to Bangladeshi NGOs. The harassment of NGO officials and members by government elites, police forces, and local elites has been a constant theme in Bangladesh since the military governments of the 1980s, and as a result, many of the NGOs that were involved in social mobilization no longer exist. According to the head of one these NGOs, the combination of these factors with pressure from donors to engage in microcredit and service delivery – which became more important for some NGOs seeking financial stability – resulted in the abandonment of social mobilization (personal interview). A national political space marked by government repression therefore combined with international pressures to drive many NGOs into adopting a more apolitical service delivery approach.

Historically, the relationship between the Bangladeshi government and the NGO sector has ranged 'from benign neglect to co-option to smear campaigns and repression', depending on the state's 'perception of the balance of power between it and the NGO sector' (Stiles, 2002: 125). In 1978 and 1982, military governments under Generals Ziaur Rahman and Ershad respectively passed laws to intervene against the allegedly radical mobilizations of the NGO sector by requiring NGOs to seek approval from relevant government ministries in order to receive foreign donations. These regulations made it clear to NGOs that activities perceived as being against the government would result in harassment and repression. Since the late 1980s successive governments have increased cooperation with NGOs, but in the areas of service delivery such as health care, education, credit, and sanitation.

Since the fall of Ershad's military government and the restoration of democracy in 1991, NGOs have been managed by the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), officially created to ensure NGO accountability and to monitor the inflow of foreign donations so that the government could allocate its own spending most efficiently. However, the NGOAB has provided a mechanism, similar to those under the Zia and Ershad governments, to regulate the policy choices of NGOs. According to NGO officials, while the NGOAB stresses its support for NGOs, this support is actually limited to larger NGOs that stress service delivery projects. On former official of NGOAB told us: 'Heavyweights like BRAC can bypass NGOAB because they know higher level people in the government, so they can get approval from the top even lacking the necessary paperwork.'

NGOs engaging in social mobilization programmes, by contrast, find themselves under greater government scrutiny. Social mobilization NGOs address the structural causes of poverty and seek structural transformation. They necessarily 'intervene directly within the political space that defines the status quo', thereby threatening the established relations of power which support government and parliament members, and their patrons (Hashemi, 1995: 105). Government repression and NGOAB's regulation of donor funds has been used to regulate the policy approaches of most NGOs, and specifically to prevent these NGOs from engaging in social mobilization (see Dannecker, 2000).

The history of state penetration of civil society and local government has had a much broader inhibitory effect on social mobilization approaches. It has undermined the institutional support for social mobilization NGOs and limited the arenas in which NGOs can engage in legitimate political action. In practice, any political action is conflated with partisan support for opposition parties, and ultimately reduces the legitimacy and the efficacy of NGOs to serve as the voice for the poor. One official in a small social mobilization NGO explained to us how this conflation of the partisan with the political undermines their ability to act as an institution of voice for the landless poor. According to this official:

> There is no neutrally accepted policy organization. Success of advocacy is related to how close you are to the government. But there is no neutral policy system where civil society can turn for political advocacy. So we cannot be successful in this context; instead we are always in fear of how the government will react – with policy change, or with repression. We are sandwiched between the *jotdars* [local elite] and the government.

Because there is no distinction between partisan activity and political action, each political party supports only those NGOs viewed as friendly to its agenda. Furthermore, in addition to viewing development as a technical issue of service delivery rather than as a political issue involving the empowerment of the poor, government policies have historically sought to undermine local government and civil society – the institutions necessary for political empowerment of the poor – in an effort to retain centralized control over development and political authority.

The result has been a systematic undermining of the arenas and institutions – civil society groups and local government bodies – for giving voice to the poor. Together with the conflation of all political action with partisan political action, this centralized control of development and political authority has undermined the efficacy and viability of NGOs as institutions of voice.

Theorists of state–society relations have stressed the importance of an oppositional civil society in holding government accountable to the demands of the population. However, while government co-option of civil society groups undermines the oppositional capability of civil society, it may lead to beneficial policy reforms if the co-opted groups can translate their new status into concrete influences on policy (Dryzek, 1996). In the case of Bangladesh, the co-option of these groups has weakened oppositional civil society by removing key institutions for voicing popular grievances; and the co-optation of these groups has only won benefits for their leaders rather than for the broader public. Civil society in Bangladesh has been penetrated by the two-party struggle for state power, and now lacks the oppositional strength to influence public policy in a broadly beneficial manner.

Historically, the political elites in Bangladesh have viewed oppositional civil society as a 'threat to the state', and as a result these elites have sought to 'either co-opt or exclude civil society actors' (Stiles, 2002: 140). The result, as Stiles writes, is that most non-state organizations are 'deeply enmeshed in political machines', to the point that party affiliations 'split[s] almost all "voluntary associations"'. Civil society lacks the autonomous oppositional character it needs in order to engage with the institutions of the state and force the political elites to respond to the needs of voters in general and the poor in particular. In fact, the major political parties are collectively and unofficially in control of the major student groups, workers' unions, business associations, and many newspapers (Stiles, 2002).

This extreme penetration of civil society by partisan politics has severely undermined the popular legitimacy of the co-opted civil society groups, resulting in the narrowing of the legitimate avenues through which people can engage in expressing their voice and demanding policy reforms. For example, the major unions are dismissed by common people in Bangladesh as self-serving tools of the party elites (Dannecker, 2000; Stiles, 2002). Furthermore, co-opted civil society groups do not use their access to the state apparatus to win concessions for the public at large, instead they have become pawns in the inter-elite struggle for political power. Indeed, the deep mistrust between the two major parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has fuelled a penchant for extra-constitutional agitation rather than legislative compromise in policymaking (Hasanuzzaman, 1998).

Whereas in the past *hartals* – or strikes – used to represent popularly-supported grassroots protests during eras of authoritarian and military rule, the vicious inter-elite conflict for power among the major political parties has transformed

the *hartal* into a partisan tool, implemented by individuals in the pay of party officials. Instead of providing opportunities for individuals at the grassroots level to voice their discontent, *hartals* have become dangerous experiences for most Bangladeshis who cannot go to work as armed party thugs force people to comply with work stoppages across major urban areas (Rashiduzzaman, 1997). This co-option of civil society and delegitimization of protest politics has severely undermined the institutional support for NGOs that engage in the kind of political collective action associated with social mobilization.

There does remain one further institutional avenue for the expression of political demands – local government bodies, but as mentioned above this arena has also been undermined by state policy. Without effective national civil society organizations to provide avenues for expressions of voice, individuals can still demand accountability and reforms from ruling elites through the system of local governments. In West Bengal, for example, popular political mobilization successfully has led to pro-poor economic reforms in this Indian state. Despite the one-party rule of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in West Bengal, the rural poor were able to use local government as an alternative institutional channel for promoting their interests (Sengupta and Gazdar, 1998).

In Bangladesh, however, local government bodies continue to be dominated by elites, while successive regimes have reorganized the system of local governance to undermine its autonomy in the hopes of transforming the system into a rural power base for the elites in power (Khan, 2001). This repeated reorganization of local government structures has not only weakened the power and authority of local government, it has also undermined the legitimacy of local government as an institution for expressing the voice of the citizenry. In the eyes of most Bangladeshis, local government has become simply another element of the elite contest for political power (Siddiquee, 1998; Khan, 2001). Combined with increasing corruption in local government and in the provision of social services at the local level, the rural poor have come to see political participation at the local government level as irrelevant, relying instead on kinship and patronage networks for assistance and support (Khan and Asaduzzaman, 1996).

As a result of these historical processes that have undermined Bangladeshi civil society and local government, there are no legitimate arenas in which NGOs could engage in social or political mobilization. NGOs engaging in such activity lack the support of other institutions of civil society or local government when faced with government suspicion. 'The outcome of all this', explains Stiles, 'is a strong tendency for NGOs to simply divorce themselves from civil society in practice while at the same time taking on its mantle' (Stiles, 2002: 111). While NGOs deserve to be viewed as civil society actors in that 'they provide services beyond the purview of the state, they advocate for the poor and facilitate their mobilization, they promote freedom in politics and the market, and help to hold the state more accountable', the institutional context of Bangladeshi political space makes it difficult for NGOs to engage in the kind of oppositional activity

expected of civil society (Stiles, 2002: 111). Social mobilization groups like Proshika and GSS face government repression even as large NGOs like BRAC or Grameen Bank enjoy cooperative relations with the government and widespread public support among the Bangladeshi elite.

While all the major NGOs in Bangladesh are part of ADAB (Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh), the umbrella organization charged with lobbying the government for pro-NGO policies, ADAB itself has been unable to secure legitimate arenas for NGO activity in the political sphere. In the case of NGOs like Proshika and GSS, ADAB has refused to aid these organizations when they faced government repression. ADAB has been increasingly split on the issue of NGO political involvement. In 2001, the leaders of Proshika and Nijera Kori, who were the elected heads of ADAB, pushed ADAB to become more politically active, arguing that NGOs that promoted popular governance and human rights should help the people elect better governments. However, a large majority of ADAB members disliked this proposal, and ultimately left ADAB to create an alternative umbrella organization called the Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB) – an organization which is now headed by BRAC.

The fragmentation of ADAB removed another source of support for social mobilization NGOs, and can be interpreted as the result of another attempt by the state to penetrate and fracture a civil society group along partisan lines. Yet, the split of ADAB was also implemented because many NGO leaders themselves were wary of an explicit social mobilization and political orientation. As a former ADAB official explained to us, 'NGOs as a part of a strong civil society could play a better role if the relationship of the government with NGOs would not have suffered this recent fallout' following the fragmentation of ADAB and the Proshika crisis.' NGOs have, as a result, lost their ability to engage in dialogue. Given this institutional context, it is unsurprising that most NGOs have chosen a more prudent path, pursuing apolitical service delivery to avoid antagonizing the government and jeopardizing their ability to promote positive change. Government repression and the lack of institutional support for social mobilization therefore reinforce each other to induce the depoliticization of NGOs.

The story of ADAB's fragmentation indicates that, in addition to institutional pressures against social mobilization and political activism, there is a deep ideological unease among the Bangladeshi progressive elite regarding the role of NGOs in politics.[2] In response to the historical penetration and undermining of civil society and local government described above, the Bangladeshi elite have come to view the very concept of political action as an illegitimate approach to poverty reduction and development. This delegitimization of politics and wariness of the elite towards more politically-oriented social mobilization programmemes creates a further pressure on social mobilization NGOs, and comprises the second component driving the depoliticization of NGO development.

The vicious political struggle between the two main political parties in Bangladesh – the centre-left AL and the centre-right BNP – is less about public policy (indeed both parties have been fairly consistent in their pursuit of market-oriented development policies and wariness of social mobilization NGOs), and is more about issues of identity and personality (White, 1999). Indeed, interview-based studies of political opinions among rural women and the rural poor indicate that most Bangladeshis do vote, but do not expect any changes in public policy to result from their participation (see Shehabuddin, 1999). This sentiment is also common among lower and even middle-class Bangladeshis. When asked about political competitions or the potential of political parties, lobbying groups, and civil society to promote beneficial reforms, the commonly expressed response is one of distrust. Political action has come to be viewed as synonymous with corruption, patronage, and the often violent competition between *mastaans* (armed thugs) tied to individual political patrons or parties.

In fact, development policy is viewed by most Bangladeshis as above the partisan political contest, to be implemented as part of a national consensus focusing on market-based policies (Hossain, 2003).[3] The Bangladeshi state's history of corruption, partisan penetration of civil society, and ineffectiveness 'contributes to the national elites' concerns about the politicization of poverty, an issue which many view as preferably 'above politics' – 'a matter of national consensus rather than party competition' (Hossain, 2003: 109). The prevailing sentiment is that the state should focus simply on creating an 'enabling environment' for individuals, providing them with basic services such as health care and education to allow the poor to improve their own standards of living. In effect, the corruption and the co-optation of civil society has led Bangladeshi elites to support the transfer of authority over development policy away from the political arena altogether to the 'apolitical market' and the service delivery NGO sector. Just as the Bangladeshi government equates political action with partisan action, the Bangladeshi national elite equates political NGOs with problematic partisan activities that can taint the development process.

As a result, most Bangladeshi elites share a distrust of NGOs which are politically active, or which are interpreted as becoming too 'political' – a tendency apparent in the experience of NGOs like GSS and Proshika which engaged in political activism aimed at promoting pro-poor candidates in elections, and were subsequently faced with a government crackdown. In a statement emblematic of the opinions expressed by most members of the Bangladeshi national elite, one editor of a major Bangladeshi daily paper has stated:

> If NGOs are politicized, then that is dangerous. Government shouldn't overregulate NGOs, but NGOs shouldn't enter politics. Some of the conflicts in poverty are *social*, but none are *political*. These social conflicts can only be resolved by sustained economic development.

This statement is remarkable for its rejection of the efficacy, legitimacy, and even importance of political action as a means of bringing about poverty reduction. To the extent that Bangladeshi elites recognize that non-economic ('social') components to poverty exist, even these factors can be solved, in the prevailing elite view, through economic growth. NGOs which extend their activities beyond promoting such growth through service delivery therefore are viewed as illegitimate.

This economistic vision of market-oriented development supplanting more political approaches of social mobilization is challenged by the ideological Left. Yet, leftist politics have declined in Bangladesh, partly because NGOs have come to play the role of former progressive leftist political movements. NGOs in Bangladesh were largely founded by leftist activists in the aftermath of the independence war and the military dictatorships of the late 1970s and 1980s. Today, the NGO sector continues to absorb the energies of the country's progressive elite; as one scholar notes, 'it is likely that at least some of the NGO leaders would in different political conditions have gone into politics,' but given the growing distrust of politics by the Bangladeshi elite, these individuals instead enter the more legitimate, apolitical NGO sector (White, 1999: 321; Hossain, 2003). Thus, while 'NGOs occupy the political space once filled by left parties – claiming with some legitimacy to represent the interests of the poorest, and working among and with the rural poor, to some degree organizing them,' they do so in 'non-threatening and usually non-partisan ways' (Hossain, 2003: 69). The weakness of the Bangladeshi left – which has been sublimated by the NGO sector – means that 'there is no political force able and willing to politicize this fact [of persisting poverty], capable of keeping the goal of poverty reduction high on the political agenda, either as a corrective to the long-term direction of policy or as a spur to increasing present provisions for the poor' (Hossain, 2003: 87).

Among the Bangladeshi elite as well as many members of the middle and lower classes, therefore, the concept of political action has been delegitimized. As a result of the systematic penetration of civil society and local government by the state, political activity and institutions are conflated in the public discourse with partisan politics and the historical experience of corrupt politicians, armed gangs. This conflation between the political and the partisan, in turn, has led many Bangladeshis to feel that progress can only be achieved by transferring authority over development policy to the market or apolitical NGOs – thereby circumventing the perceived corruption and illegitimacy of the state and partisan politics. This explains the widespread support for neoliberal market-oriented development, and service delivery NGOs on the one hand, and the suspicion and distrust accorded to social mobilization NGOs like Proshika and GSS on the other. At the same time, the processes which have delegitimized politics – the historical co-option and penetration of civil society by the two party struggle for power, and the undermining of local government institutions – have weakened

institutions and arenas for voice, thereby making it more difficult for social mobilization NGOs to engage in legitimate political action.

Depoliticization and the Crisis of Democracy

Over the past two decades, NGOs in Bangladesh and elsewhere have gradually shifted away from their early experimentation with the social mobilization paradigm of development – where policies are structured to facilitate the collective action of the poor, empowering them to provoke government and elite responses on crucial issues. Instead, NGOs today prefer an apolitical service delivery paradigm. While the critical academic literature on NGOs suggests that the depoliticization of NGO policies derives from NGOs' dependency on western donors and the western-dominated development discourse, the case of Bangladesh illustrates that the depoliticization of NGO policies and actions is actually the result of an elective affinity between these international pressures and various domestic conditions inimical to politically activist paradigms of development. Specifically, there has been a delegitimization of political action in general and the undermining of the institutions and processes for collective political action and the expression of voice on the part of the poor in particular.

Pursuing this argument further will require further research into the political economy of policy choices made by specific NGOs. Interviews with officials in social mobilization NGOs like GSS, Nijera Kori, Samata, and Proshika indicate that the local pressures – government repression, the co-optation of civil society, and the delegitimization of political activity – comprise a significant barrier to the efforts of these NGOs at political activism and social mobilization (see Westergaard, 1994; Ulvila and Hossain, 2002). More recently, in late 2004 and 2005, Proshika was shut down by the government and abandoned by the NGO sector and the urban elite. Proshika's leaders, because they became increasingly active in mobilizing the rural and urban poor to pressure the BNP-led government, have been accused of sedition and corruption.

By advancing an elective affinity argument for NGO depoliticization, this study suggests that there is nothing inherent about the NGO sector which precludes it from promoting social mobilization and a more explicitly political or activist vision of development and empowerment. Further, the vision of repoliticized NGO approaches to development does not require a romanticized culturally authentic grassroots movement as posited by several scholars; rather it requires a paradigm shift in conceptions of what types of public sphere political activity are legitimate and effective, and corresponding reforms that create an institutional environment more favourable to social mobilization and the activism of civil society groups and organizations. Despite the pressures on NGOs, there remains considerable room for NGOs, progressive civil society groups, and citizens to re-engage in social mobilization and advocacy programmemes – such as the initial actions taken by BRAC's TUP programme or the continuing work of

Nijera Kori in Bangladesh. Further, a more aggressive umbrella organization for NGOs in Bangladesh could provide political protection for NGOs that face reprisals for their social mobilization agendas. For example, GSS and Proshika were crippled by the government largely because the ADAB chose not to come to their defence.

Despite the general shift from social mobilization to service delivery, most NGOs feel their goals are largely unchanged: they still seek to promote widespread social change. But instead of relying on social mobilization to promote social change directly through activism, NGOs now prefer to rely on the indirect mechanism of apolitical, economistic development, providing the poor with services and resources which can in turn enable the poor to engage with elites and the state on their own accord to press for broader reforms and change. However, if the depoliticization of NGOs is partly a response to the severe weakening of civil society and local government as well as current conceptions of legitimate political action, then this indirect causal approach can no longer be successful – the very democratic institutions and processes with which the poor are supposed to use on their own accord are themselves crippled and inaccessible to them.

In the current setting of depoliticized development the ability of NGOs to empower the poor is greatly weakened, but so is the ability of the Bangladeshi citizenry to engage in political action. Depoliticization of development creates a crisis not only in terms of public policy that favours the poor, but also for political citizenship itself. The undermining of democratic citizenship represents a crucial but underappreciated cost of the admittedly pragmatic focus on service delivery programmes. Development programmes must be analysed and evaluated not just on the basis of their economic effects, but also on the basis of their very real influence on the political and institutional formation of developing countries. As Woods suggests, the dominance of service delivery NGOs can lead to a 'franchise state', where individual citizens are transformed from political agents into passive consumers of goods and services provided by NGOs, and the very concept of individual political rights guaranteed by democratic citizenship is threatened (Wood, 1997).[4] This outcome is particularly troubling in a country such as Bangladesh, where the ability of the existing political infrastructure to represent and respond to the needs of its citizens is seriously in question. The depoliticization of NGOs makes it 'unlikely that NGOs can be the honest brokers of people's interests', raising the 'disquieting question that if neither the state nor NGOs represent the public good, then who does?' (Kamat, 2004: 171).

This hollowing-out of the concept of citizenship is obviously problematic for the poor, who lack both the market power to acquire substitutes for public services and the effective exercise of their political rights. It is also problematic for the national elite as well, who have exited from the public sphere. Public goods have been increasingly privatized: private security guards have become ubiquitous, families send their children to private tutors and private universities, and health

care is purchased from private clinics. While the wealthiest Bangladeshis can afford to privately purchase market-based services originally provided by the public sector, there remains a widespread concern about the decay of democratic citizenship. Most elites voice concerns over rising crime, deteriorating security, and the weak rule of law, indicating a deeper unease with a situation in which the state and the political sphere are crippled, and where the elites themselves feel unable to affect change through their roles as political citizens and voters.

The way forward for Bangladesh therefore requires a revival of the public sphere and a restoration of the concept of active political citizenship itself, such that elite and poor alike have access to political institutions of representation which can engage, challenge, and reform public policy. It is for this reason that the implicit normative focus of this article is so important. This article has suggested that the provision of services by itself is inadequate to empower the poor; such empowerment necessitates collective action that addresses the sociopolitical bases of poverty.[5] Social mobilization to promote the empowerment of the poor has value for the entire Bangladeshi polity: social mobilization in this case is fundamentally about establishing processes for the democratic participation of citizens, rather than about delivering goods for the consumption of market actors. Examining the sources of NGO depoliticization offers insight into the mechanisms through which development can be repoliticized and the public sphere revitalized.

One may ask why should such a study of social mobilization focus on NGOs, when the problem really seems to be the consolidation of a system of governance that holds the state responsive to the needs of its citizens? One can argue that the task of holding the state accountable seems to be one better suited for other civil society and advocacy groups, rather than NGOs per se. But in many developing countries like Bangladesh, NGOs themselves have assumed the mantle of civil society (Stiles, 2002) and therefore have placed themselves at the focal point for this discussion of governance and civil society. Donors place more trust in NGOs than government as a means of shaping civil society in developing countries, since NGOs are thought of as independent, non-profit, and closely tied to poor communities. Further, the very co-option of civil society and the decline of the Left which have contributed to the depoliticization of the NGO sector have also made NGOs one of the sole remaining sectors capable of harnessing the organizational capacity and grassroots support to repoliticize development, revive the public sphere as a whole, and provoke progressive reform in countries such as Bangladesh.

This is not to say, however, that NGOs can fully substitute for the oppositional civil society that is missing in Bangladesh. Donor dependency, while not totalizing, is still a limiting factor on most NGOs. Similarly, as NGOs become more invested in private sector for-profit ventures and institutional structures to support their development activities, they are less capable of serving as autonomous civil

society actors. There is a niche for apolitical NGOs providing necessary services to the poor, distinct from the need for politically mobilizing citizens to engage with the state and its policymakers. Thus far, it is the fundamental ambivalence among NGOs and among the progressive elements in the Bangladeshi elite about the legitimacy of NGO political activism which has limited most NGOs from playing a larger role in supporting democratic processes and institutions in Bangladesh. But given the erosion of democratic institutions, the history of partisan corruption, and the weakness of civil society, NGOs have become more important as potential political agents – whether they like it or not. These organizations posses the potential to reshape both the current approach to development in Bangladesh as well as the strengthening and consolidation of democratic institutions. With a readjustment of their priorities and programme designs, NGOs in Bangladesh can deliver on this potential. They can continue to provide important development initiatives, but do so with an eye towards reanimating the engagement of the citizens – particularly the poor – in the processes and institutions of governance, civil society, and democracy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Ajantha Subramanian at Harvard University for her extensive guidance with the development and writing of this article. Thanks also to Grzegorz Ekiert, Matthias Scheundeln, Ngaire Woods, and Lindsay Whitfield for their helpful comments. Finally, thanks also to Susan Mathai, Vaughn Tan, and Florence Twu for helping shape the earliest drafts of this article.

NOTES

1. It should be noted that Ferguson and Escobar initially directed their depoliticization critique against state and international organization-led development projects, holding NGOs as examples of local alternatives challenging the flawed models of development. However, their explication of the depoliticization dynamic has since been used to explain trends in the NGO sector itself. See for example, the work of Ulvila and Hossain (2002).
2. While the term 'elite' is difficult to define precisely, the elite in Bangladesh are easily identified. 'While not especially rich or high status, a single and fairly cohesive Bangladeshi national elite is readily identifiable from amongst the wider population,' writes Naomi Hossain in her study of Bangladeshi elite opinions regarding poverty. 'This group is mainly based in Dhaka, although they may have links with 'home' districts. They are not very distinct from the rest of the population, being predominantly Bengali-speaking Sunni Muslims, mostly with comparatively recent rural origins. They are chiefly distinguished by their high levels of education, in addition to their institutional positions, inter-connectedness, and in many cases, wealth.' Further, they occupy the top positions in the government bureaucracy,

business organizations, universities, media groups, and political institutions. See Hossain (2003: 7–8).

3. It should be noted that these insights from Hossain's study (2003) parallel my own findings regarding elite public opinion in Dhaka. Hossain's study, however, draws from a larger sample size of nearly 100 prominent elites from a wide cross-section of backgrounds, occupations, and interests.
4. As Wood explains: 'this fragmentation of the delivery function [into a franchise state model] entails a corresponding fragmentation of voice, with political parties and unions sidelined in the process, their respective voices denied primacy and legitimacy in the specific, sectional contexts of service provision' (Wood 1997: 84).
5. The BRAC study authored by Huda, Rahman, and Guirguis (2005) indicates that had a major NGO like BRAC taken a more activist role in promoting the social mobilization component of the TUP programme, the ultra-poor in the villages studied could have benefited tremendously.

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