



# Civil Society and Propoor Initiatives in Rural Bangladesh: Finding a Workable Strategy

HARRY BLAIR \*

*Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA*

**Summary.** — This paper focuses on crafting a workable strategy for civil society advocacy in rural Bangladesh that can adequately represent the interests of the poorest groups. It shows how the poor and the poorest rely on patron–client ties, to avoid destitution and to survive, respectively, while arguing that the poor need to move beyond these inherently disempowering relationships. Recent agricultural progress will help such efforts, but elite domination must be expected to continue. Representatives of propoor groups should therefore ally initially with nonpoor groups to press for broader agendas that can gain widespread support, before pursuing more targeted agendas on behalf of their constituents.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The politics of how the poorest groups are—and should be—represented is closely shaped not only by the types of relationships that prevail between different groups of the poor and local power holders, but also wider processes of economic development. Changes in the economic arena can precipitate change in the political arena, but, if the poor are to benefit in any long-term sense, a strategic approach including the nonpoor initially is more likely to succeed than one excluding them. This paper argues that certain forms of civil society advocacy constitute such an alternative and can begin to secure the forms of representation that will lead to propoor policy outcomes. It develops the beginnings of a workable propoor strategy for civil society efforts in rural Bangladesh that will use advocacy to help the poor move beyond the patron–client relationships on which they have historically depended. In particular, it is suggested that rather than pursue advocacy for policies directly targeting propoor groups (e.g., land redistribution, minimum wage enforcement), it would be better to forge coalitions with nonpoor groups to press for more broad-based agendas (e.g., health, education) that can gain widespread support. This latter course can build up the experience and know-

how needed to make propoor advocacy groups credible players in a local political arena that will in the process become more pluralistic. By trading support with other groups initially, they will then later be able to pursue more targeted agendas benefiting their constituents.

The paper begins with a dynamic and differentiated taxonomy of rural poverty amid a growing rural economy in the 1990s, and then considers the consequences in terms of survival and advancement needs of the different segments of society. Present and future sources

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Table 1. *Changing rural well-being in rural Bangladesh as objectively perceived, 1987–88 to 2000*  
(numbers in parentheses indicate percentages)

Headcount status in 1987–88	Headcount status in 2000		
	Poor	Nonpoor	Total
Poor	119 <b>(31.4) Submergees</b>	98 <b>(25.9) Gainers</b>	217 (57.3)
Nonpoor	67 <b>(17.7) Descenders</b>	95 <b>(25.1) Sustainers</b>	162 (42.7)
Total	186 (49.1)	193 (50.9)	379 (100.0)

Source: Sen (2003).

of improvement are next taken up, after which the targeted and universalistic civil society strategies are discussed.

## 2. WHO ARE THE RURAL POOR? CHANGES IN RURAL BANGLADESH

Recent panel-data research has allowed the portrayal of poverty in Bangladesh to move beyond the static snapshots offered by cross-sectional studies, and enabled a more differentiated, dynamic, and durational perspective. The picture emerging from these studies is interesting indeed. Sen's (2003) panel survey for 1987–88 and 2000 gives us the data shown in Table 1, using the standard headcount measure for household poverty. The overall changes portrayed in Sen's sample of 379 households from 21 villages basically parallel the national trend in household poverty. According to national sample surveys, rural households under the poverty line declined from 49.7% in 1988–89 to 43.6% in 2000, a drop of just over 6%, while Sen's sample households in poverty fell from 57.3% in 1987–88 to 49.1% in 2000, a bit more than 8%. This trend by itself was certainly noteworthy for a country that only by the late 1980s had recovered to the poverty levels it had attained back in the mid-1960s (Sen, 1995, pp. 46–49).

But looking at the interior cells of Table 1 allows us to see this shift in a quite different way. About one-quarter of the families stayed above

the poverty line in both surveys (the “sustainers” in Table 1) and just over three-tenths remained below it both times (the “submergees”). However, we also see that almost 26% (the “gainers”) climbed out of poverty during this time, while not quite 18% (the “descenders”) fell into poverty. The difference is the same 8% characterizing the overall sample, but the number of households moving up and down is far larger; altogether, the gainers plus the descenders amount to almost 44% of rural households—a much bigger proportion of the rural population than many had realized. And when we add in the numbers of households that briefly climbed out of but returned to poverty during the dozen-year time frame comprised by the panel study (the “usually poor” identified in Hulme & Shepherd, 2003), those who temporarily fell into poverty but recovered (their “occasionally poor”), and those who bobbed up and down around the line several times (their “churning poor”), the aggregate economic movement becomes quite remarkable. Undoubtedly, well over half—likely even more than three-fifths—of all the sample households experienced some shift in category over time.

These impressions are confirmed in Table 2, which presents similar panel data from a 62-village survey taken in 1989 and 1994,<sup>1</sup> but employing a self-perception of household economic position. Again, gainers outnumbered descenders, but in this case by a much larger margin (38–10%, or almost four times), and

Table 2. *Changing rural well-being in rural Bangladesh as self-categorized, 1989 and 1994*

Self-categorization in 1989	Self-categorization in 1994		
	Poor	Nonpoor	Total
Poor	400 <b>(34.3%) Submergees</b>	444 <b>(38.1%) Gainers</b>	844 (72.4%)
Nonpoor	117 <b>(10.0%) Descenders</b>	205 <b>(17.6%) Sustainers</b>	322 (27.6%)
Total	517 (44.3%)	649 (55.7%)	1,166 (100.0%)

Source: Derived from Hossain *et al.* (2000).

those who moved either up or down came to just over 48% of all households. The large proportion of gainers is all the more noteworthy, inasmuch as the rural economy in the early 1990s was not improving nearly as rapidly as it did in the latter half of the decade. The implication is that self-perceived upward mobility may be greater than improvement by more objective standards.

Other evidence has emerged as well. Hossain, Bose, Chowdhury, and Meinzen-Dick (2002), employing a dataset collected in 1987 and 2000 from the 62-village panel, again found more gainers than descenders in terms of self-perceived economic condition though the margin was not as great as that noted in the example just above. In the later study, more than 46% of respondents reported their economic condition improved over the period, while slightly more than 30% reported a decline. However, whatever criteria are used, there were significantly more gainers than descenders during the 1990s.

Poverty and even extreme poverty persist in rural Bangladesh. Sen's data in Table 1 indicate more than 31% of rural households below the poverty line both in 1987 and 2000, and though Hossain *et al.* found only about one-eighth of their rural household sample perceiving themselves as extremely poor in both 1989 and 1994 (146 out of 1,166 in Table 2<sup>2</sup>), fully 34% saw their status as either extremely or moderately poor in both surveys. But the facts that many improved their situation and that gainers outnumbered descenders would appear to reflect a more general economic improvement that should have an effect on the potential for civil society activism—an effect that I will argue is basically positive.

What is driving this improvement in the rural economy? Overwhelmingly, the answer appears to be the agricultural expansion of the 1990s, particularly in the latter half of the decade. Overall output grew quite rapidly, especially for the dry-season *boro* rice crop, which in 1998–99 passed the historically dominant wet-season *amon* crop for the first time in terms of production. This growth has exhibited all sorts of forward and backward linkages in the rural economy, many of which have been very succinctly captured in the 1987–2000 panel studies reported on by Hossain, Bose, *et al.* (2002) and Hossain, Lewis, *et al.* (2002). The most salient findings in their report show several trends of profound interest to long-term observers of the Bangladesh scene:

—Adoption of modern varieties and irrigation inverse to farm size, despite their capital-intensive qualities.

—Smaller operators farming more land as larger landowners rent out land instead of farming it, turning themselves more to off-farm economic opportunities. In the process, those taking in land are able to leverage better terms, eschewing sharecropping in favor of fixed rental rates.

—Rising demand for labor, stemming from an expanding off-farm economy and leading to

- increased rural wages in the agricultural sector;
- a smoothing out of demand for labor over the year; and
- piece-work rates replacing seasonal or daily work contracts, to the benefit of the laborers.

All these factors have considerable significance for civil society activism.

### 3. RURAL CONCERNS FOR SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT

Our four groups—gainers, descenders, sustainers, and submerges—will have different needs and wants in terms of protecting themselves against vulnerability and seeking to maintain or improve their present situation. But all four types continue to fit into the patron–client system that has long characterized the Bangladesh countryside and continues to do so.<sup>3</sup> The constantly poor need it to survive, and the newly poor find themselves grasping for it to avoid falling into irremediable destitution.<sup>4</sup> But our gainers recently emerging from poverty find they need it as well to assure that their escape will last. And the continuing non-poor sustainers also rely on it as clients if they are only a short distance away from poverty, while they use it as patrons to protect their position if they are themselves among village elites. When it comes to establishing and using links to the outside world, all those who can do so function as clients *vis-à-vis* external patrons (or those they would like to have as patrons).

These observations find support in the work undertaken by Hossain and colleagues, who conducted extensive focus group sessions to supplement their panel survey. When asked to rank their assets in order of importance, focus group members from the hard-core poor category (12% of total sample size) put good health

first, followed by “trust of the employer” and “social network.” The moderately poor (31% of the overall sample) ranked social network fourth, after rented land, house and good health, while the nonpoor (57% of the total sample) also put social network in the fourth place, following owned land, house, and education.<sup>5</sup> Even the most casual student of South Asia would identify both “employer trust” and “social network” as virtually synonymous with patron–client relationships.

The concerns people bring to the patron–client system fall into two basic categories. First come the more existential worries relating to one’s day-to-day survival and, once that is secured, one’s physical and material position. The closer one is to the bottom of the income distribution, the greater one’s worries on these

matters, but even those better off are hardly free from anxiety. All feel the need for patrons in some sense.

These *security concerns*—which [Matin and Hulme \(2003\)](#) would label as “protectional” concerns—are captured in the upper part of [Table 3](#),<sup>6</sup> which portrays four fairly distinct types. Most can be alleviated through a patron’s largesse or intervention. Some security concerns can be variously ameliorated by the market, the state, service delivery NGOs, or democratic processes, primarily civil society advocacy, as shown on the right side of [Table 3](#).<sup>7</sup> In the past decade, as indicated by the arrows in [Table 3](#)’s “progress” column, several of these concerns have abated somewhat, owing to progress in economic growth (increased food production) or state capability (responding to

Table 3. *Security and developmental concerns in rural Bangladesh, 2003*

	Main type	Subtype	Progress in last decade	Potential sources of improvement				
				Patrons	Market	State	Service delivery NGOs	Civil society advocacy
Security concerns	Destitution	Employment	↑	×	×			
		Food	↑	×	×	×	×	×
		Shelter, clothing	—	×	×		×	
	Disaster	Environmental (flood, cyclone)	↑↑	×		×	×	
		Health (epidemic)	↑			×	×	×
	Crime	Violence, extortion from <i>mastaans</i>	↓	×				×
		Domestic violence	—					×
	State	Police (esp. violence, extortion)	↓	×				×
		Corruption	↓		×			×
	Developmental concerns	Agriculture	Growth (inputs, prices, extension)	↑	×	×	×	×
Equity ( <i>khas</i> land, wages)			—			×		×
Human resources		Education	↑			×	×	×
		Health (individual & family)	—			×	×	×
Family		Gender issues, dowries	—			×		×
Infrastructure		Roads, transport	↑			×		×
		Energy	↑			×		×

“Progress” indicators: ↑, significant improvement; ↑↑, even more improvement; ↓, significant deterioration; —, little change.

floods, public health system). As a consequence of all these improvements, people generally live longer and enjoy better health than was the case a generation ago.

In other areas, security has deteriorated, because of increased criminal behavior (more violence, extortion from the local criminal class referred to as *mastaans*) and state misbehavior (police abuse, systemic venality). Corruption in Bangladesh has now been ranked for three years running as the absolute worst in the world (among 102 countries) by Transparency International—a remarkable achievement indeed in notoriety.

A second kind of concerns relates to *developmental* or “promotional” (Matin & Hulme, 2003) issues—enhancing material fortunes for self and family. Whereas the security concerns focus largely on preventing the immediate situation from getting worse, the developmental concerns look to making improvements. The lower part of Table 3 presents the more salient priorities under this heading. Some of these issues have a clearly propoor content, such as those connected to agricultural equity (e.g., agricultural wages, access to water bodies, and *khas* or publicly owned “surplus” land), while others such as education and health would be seen by virtually all rural households as critical to their improvement. The family concerns noted in Table 3 apply to virtually all households as well.

Some of these developmental concerns now appear to be taking on quite interesting new dimensions, particularly in agriculture. The “growth” issues in Table 3 would in the past have been of direct interest mainly to the better-off farmers, who would benefit from more plentiful or cheaper inputs, higher prices, etc. The studies undertaken by Hossain, Bose, *et al.* (2002) and Hossain, Lewis, *et al.* (2002) mentioned earlier, however, indicate that smaller and more marginal agriculturists are now very focused on these matters. In short, a significantly wider spectrum of the population, including many under the poverty line, now have a material interest in matters that were earlier the preserve of their economic betters.

#### 4. LIMITATIONS OF THE PATRON-CLIENT SYSTEM

For many of the concerns depicted in Table 3, people have traditionally relied on the patron-client system for both refuge and advancement.<sup>8</sup> Submergees and descenders look primarily for

security and hope in time to seek development, while for gainers and sustainers, the first priority is the latter, but they continue to worry about the former. Different constituencies show different needs, in other words, but all feel they need patrons to help them negotiate these needs. For submergees and descenders, this has meant seeking patrons within the village context, while for the gainers and sustainers, it has meant finding them both inside and outside the local scene. In the past, patron-client systems have protected large numbers of people from outright destitution, albeit at very low levels of subsistence for the vast majority and at subpoverty levels for a large minority, while providing unearned income or rents and power to patrons. To ensure their survival, the poor in particular, but to a lesser extent those at higher levels in the economic spectrum as well, trade away their ability to exercise their own agency to change their lives, in the “Faustian bargain” depicted by Wood (2003).

The fundamental problems with the patron-client system that rural people rely on so much are fourfold. First, although it has its base in a widely shared “moral economy” (Scott, 1976), it operates through the caprice of the patron rather than by any objective or transparent standard, leaving the client at the patron’s mercy. The result is a profound and self-perpetuating inequality between patron and client. Second, it performs its functions in many ways by diverting public funds from their ostensibly intended purpose to one of lubricating the patron-client structure through corruption at all levels. As a result, and third, the consequent rate of human capital development and economic growth is significantly less than if public funds were invested in these processes rather than squandered through patron-client ties. Finally, between elections (and often at election time as well), political leaders (who are most generally also patrons or in any event are channeling state resources to local patrons) are essentially unaccountable to their constituents, who in turn have no real voice in public policy making. Thus, people in general, and poor people in particular (since they come at the tail end of the patron-client system) have no redress against the state’s failures to provide essential services or its violations of human rights and no way to press it into meeting its obligations outside of infrequent general elections, which amount to such blunt instruments for expressing people’s policy preferences that they have little value in instructing officials to pursue particular objectives.<sup>9</sup>

## 5. REPLACING THE PATRON-CLIENT SYSTEM

One powerful challenge to the patron-client structure in Bangladesh has been built through the NGO community, with its service delivery systems targeted on the poor, and in particular its microcredit operations. The big NGOs such as BRAC and Proshika, with their millions of members and borrowers, along with the quasi-NGO Grameen Bank (now at 2.4 million borrowers), have made great strides in helping the poor attain a significant degree of self-reliance economically, and many of them have also done remarkable work in providing essential services neglected or abandoned by the state, especially in the education sector. In the process, through mechanisms like BRAC's Village Organization structure or Proshika's Primary Groups, they have built significant stocks of social capital in the countryside. These NGOs well deserve the accolades (and imitators) they get in the international development community.

But for all their successes, NGOs concerned strictly with service delivery do not deal with two critical aspects of the development process. First, they cannot hold the state accountable for its misdeeds of commission and omission, nor do they provide or facilitate citizen inputs to policy making. In short, this kind of NGO does not engage in advocacy. Second, while assisting the poor in general terms, the service delivery organizations have tended to exclude the ultrapoor, in both microcredit and social programs (Rahman & Razaque, 2000; also Matin & Hulme, 2003). Remedies to this second shortcoming can be addressed within the service delivery sector. Some NGOs have begun to move in this direction, as with BRAC's initiative in Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction (see Matin, 2002). And expanding and redirecting other efforts like CARE's and the World Food Programme's food-for-work operations can strengthen the safety net for the ultra-poor. But to strengthen citizens' input to public decision-making and increase their ability to hold the state accountable, other approaches are called for, which leads us to consider civil society advocacy institutions.<sup>10</sup>

## 6. THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society—both in general and in Bangladesh—comprises a diverse range of political

projects, organization and activities. In addition to the renowned development NGOs which have emerged in Bangladesh since 1971, civil society also emerges from the independence struggle, traditions of urban and rural voluntarism, and from the organization of religious life (Lewis, forthcoming). However, we focus here on a standard definition of "civil society" as

an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organisations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values. (White, 1994, p. 379).<sup>11</sup>

which allows us to focus on two key types of civil society activity: the service delivery that we have been considering just above; and advocacy, which can be defined as efforts to affect or influence public decision making (Eade, 2002). Some NGOs pursue only service delivery while others do only advocacy, but many (probably most) pursue some combination of the two. What becomes critical, then, is the balance between the two activities; most Bangladesh NGOs have tilted strongly in the service delivery direction. A number of NGOs began in the early 1970s as primarily advocacy organizations devoted to promoting social change at local level, but then changed their strategic approach to service delivery in the ensuing decade (see JNPD, n.d., pp. 7-9; also Davids & McGregor, 2000, p. 59). Only in the final run-up to the ousting of dictator H.M. Ershad in 1990 did the NGO community begin to resume some advocacy role, and even since then, they have largely (though not completely) emphasized their service delivery undertakings.

What is it that NGOs with a significant advocacy emphasis might be expected to do in Bangladesh? Let us move back to our earlier considerations about security and development concerns. For the security concerns, in addition to patrons there are four channels through which amelioration might be hoped for, as indicated on the right side of Table 3. For *destitution* and *disaster* issues, where things have for the most part improved over the last decade, further advancement can come from several quarters. Market forces, which have responded favorably to restructured incentives in the agricultural sector, can help significantly in improving availability of food, shelter and clothing among the poor, even the poorest strata of society. More effective state intervention encour-

ages higher food production and consumption by making inputs more available, allowing international trading, etc. (see Ahmed, Haggblade, & Tawfiq-e-Elahi, 2000). In addition, improved state machinery can continue earlier progress in responding to natural disasters (as with the 1998 floods, for example), and can do better in dealing with health epidemics such as cholera outbreaks. Service delivery NGOs can improve on their past achievements in all the destitution/disaster areas shown in Table 3. Civil society advocacy organizations can press the state to be more equitable in allocating safety net mechanisms such as Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) ration cards (Bode, 2002).

For the security concerns in Table 3 dealing with civilian *crime* and the *state*, however, where we have noted that matters have materially deteriorated over the last decade, most of these avenues have little to offer. The state, being the source of police misbehavior and the principal partner in corruption, can scarcely be expected to become the source of amelioration in these spheres. And with its history of ignoring or abetting civilian crime, the state cannot be looked to for much help here either, certainly not on its own initiative. Nor can the market or service delivery NGOs be expected to provide much help here. Civil society, in contrast, does offer a real potential for dealing with security concerns stemming from criminal and state institutional behavior, for NGOs through advocacy can press the state to fulfill its responsibilities to protect citizens from civilian crime, as well as from its own organs (police, corrupt government servants).

To meet developmental concerns such as education and health, service delivery NGOs will continue to be critical, as indicated in Table 3. There will continue to be an abiding need for NGOs to provide education and personal health services, as well as assisting the agricultural sector with microfinance, extension, and the like. But NGOs clearly cannot carry the entire developmental load for rural Bangladesh in these sectors.<sup>12</sup> The state itself will have to assume the greater share of it by providing a closer approximation of the quality services that it should have been offering all along. And while the electoral process may produce some progress on this front by impelling candidates for office to promise state institutional upgrading and then holding the winners to account in the next election for delivering on their promises, this classical mode of electoral account-

ability has not performed very well at such a task in the past.<sup>13</sup>

The reasons for the failure of state institutions to deliver services effectively lie partly in their weak capacity, to be sure, but also significantly in the historical function of local governance, which has been more to support patron-client networks than to promote development. Given the importance of finding and maintaining patrons for all the categories across our vulnerability spectrum in Tables 1 and 2, such a pattern cannot be unexpected. The focus of local politics has been largely on patronage, not on performance, and the result is that funds and working time that could (and should) be devoted to promoting development are instead squandered in significant measure on lubricating patronage linkages. The principal development challenge at the local rural level, especially now that basic food production has improved, is to redirect local resources to productive activities, especially efforts that will benefit the poor.

What this means in practical terms is that schoolteachers should instruct their classes rather than spend their government-paid time on private tutorials, health officials should provide needed drugs and medical assistance rather than selling their government stocks on the black market and directing patients to private clinics, roads should be built and maintained to specification rather than constructed so far below requirement (because so much of the funding has been siphoned off) that they disintegrate at the first monsoon, police constables and their officers should preserve public order and security rather than shaking down citizens for protection money and protecting (even assisting) local gangsters, and so on. Such a list could go on endlessly. If we assume that (a) the state bureaucracy itself has little incentive and even less interest in undertaking what would be the major administrative reforms needed to effect such action, and (b) elected officers are more concerned with patronage than with development,<sup>14</sup> then the impetus will have to come from elsewhere, which means civil society advocacy efforts.

## 7. A LOCUS FOR ACTION

If the local governance structure that has been promised by successive ministries ever since the restoration of democracy in 1991<sup>15</sup> had ever been put into place, a roadmap for local civil

society activism to promote propoor development would be relatively straightforward to draw up (if admittedly nonetheless still difficult to implement). Elected bodies would exist at the village (perhaps ward), union, upazila/thana, and zila/district levels,<sup>16</sup> all of which would presumably receive some government funding and would form suitable venues for civil society advocacy.

As things turned out, however, successive governments elected to office in 1991, 1996, and 2001 had up to the summer of 2003 notably failed to implement any elected governmental tiers outside of the union parishads (UPs) already in place. Finally, in 2003, the government formulated and began to implement a ward level structure that combined elected officials with representatives from different occupational groups and three women to be selected by “consensus” at a public meeting. These new “gram sarkar” (village government) units will be funded from a share of the allocations already going to the union parishads. It remains to be seen whether the new units will actually have any serious developmental functions (Hye, 2003).

Present indications are that no new tiers will be added in the foreseeable future at either the upazila or zila levels. Resistance from Members of Parliament (MPs) motivated by turf concerns has proven too great to overcome. So local civil society initiatives will be confined to the union level, where there has so far been little funding and less technical capacity. UP budgets have run on average around 200,000 taka (about US\$4,000), the great bulk of which consists of central government grants (most of which are allocated to specific sectors), and the UP establishment has consisted of a secretary to manage records and several village constables—not many resources for advocacy NGOs to try to redirect to the public good.<sup>17</sup>

Even so, there remain several avenues to pursue. First, at the *union* level, where directly elected union parishad bodies cover territories, which include about 23,000 people on average, there is considerable scope. The Awami League ministry in the late 1990s launched a “UP complex” initiative, aimed at constructing a headquarters building complex at each UP headquarters in the country and to staff it with a small cadre of technical experts. Although representing a far smaller presence in the union than their counterparts at the upazila level, these officers would bring a real degree of tech-

nical competence in such sectors as health and agricultural extension to the union level for the first time. As of the end of 2002, as many as 1,200 such complexes had been constructed, representing just over 25% of the country’s 4,484 unions (USAID, pers. comm.).

Supporting civil society advocacy activities at the UP level would then amount to a viable donor option within the unions that have already (or will soon be) upgraded to UP complexes, for they will have available a new technical expertise resource as well as the additional funding that is supposed to become part of the national government’s Annual Development Plan. This newly augmented governmental resource will take some time to attain an enhanced capacity, to be sure. But the way seems open for donor-supported programs involving some mix of increasing demand through civil society mobilization and building “supply” (i.e., of government services) by enhancing local government capacity to respond to such demand.

A second possible front appears at the *upazila* level, even if the long-promised upazila parishad never becomes a reality. Federations of UP grassroots organizations can be formed, perhaps using the approach developed by Nijera Kori, to act as advocates at the upazila level, pressing line ministry officers and the upazila nirbahi officer (the civil service officer in charge of the thana-level bureaucracy) to work more effectively in the public interest (see Kabeer, 2002). They could be materially assisted in this task by Transparency International Bangladesh’s (TIB’s) efforts to set up upazila-level chapters focusing on corruption. For example, the TIB “report card survey” on eight upazilas in greater Mymensingh district indicated considerable corruption within the primary education system in terms of admission fees, examination fees, the Food for Education Program intended for functionally landless families, etc. Analogous exercises would doubtless reveal equal or greater levels of corruption in the health, police, land records, or tax collection offices (Thampi, 2002). Local civil society federations could then use the TIB evidence to demand greater probity in the delivery of these public services, first at the upazila level, and then if necessary at higher levels.

A third option would be to accept the *primacy of the MP* as the main political link between village and capital and to strengthen the capacity of local NGOs to work directly



with MPs. Current indications are that each MP will be allocated something on the order of a Tk 10 million (roughly US\$200,000) annual discretionary fund to distribute within his/her constituency. The temptation for the MP will be to use the money as a patronage slush fund, but this new setup also provides civil society the opportunity to demand some real accountability. Why should the MPs not be required to report publicly how they allot their discretionary funds, and why should they not be pressured to allot a good portion of those funds toward projects that will benefit the poor? Indeed, and as Hossain (this volume) suggests, local elites may in fact be more supportive of efforts to reach the poorest. A second reason to work with the MPs comes from recent changes giving them the power to pass on UP budgets. Whether or not the UZP ever comes into being, civil society efforts to lobby MPs on spending their discretionary funds should be pursued. If the UZPs do come to life, then there will be two channels for civil society to work through in endeavoring to affect public funding patterns, and if they do not at least there will be one.

*Advocacy strategy—programs for the poor versus aiming more broadly*

What should be the focus of propoor civil society activism at local level? More specifically, to what extent should NGOs press for public policy decisions benefiting the poor exclusively? There are basically two choices available here: First, advocacy groups can push the propoor cause directly, pressing local governmental units in such areas as distributing *khas* land, guaranteeing access to water bodies

such as tanks and *jheels*, enforcing minimum wage regulations, and assuring a fair allocation of VGF cards. This has been the agenda pursued most notably by Nijera Kori, and it has attained some successes in these spheres. Second, advocacy NGOs can channel their efforts toward goals desired by nonpoor elements as well as the poor, making common cause for larger alliances with other groups pursuing similar ends.

Pulling together our earlier analysis, Table 4 attempts to lay out the various public policy desiderata for different elements of the rural population.<sup>18</sup> Some of the issues presented here (e.g., destitution and agricultural equity) can be expected to have high salience for submergees and descenders but only low importance for gainers and sustainers. Other issues (e.g., those connected with agricultural growth) should have more relevance for gainers and sustainers than for the two lower levels.<sup>19</sup> Some like individual health will be highly important to rural people in all our status groups. Others like education may have two levels of relevance, with those at the lower end of the income spectrum more focused on primary education, while those further up think that secondary schooling is at least as important. The question for propoor NGOs, then, is whether to involve themselves in agendas tailored more exclusively to the needs of the poor or to work with the more "universalistic" endeavors that would benefit the entire population.

To the extent that my earlier observations were essentially correct regarding the continuing domination of elites in rural affairs, it will be difficult—and in all likelihood impossible—to cobble together a constituency large and powerful enough to realize the propoor agenda

Table 4. Household status and types of concerns: levels of priority

		Household status			
		Submergees	Descenders	Gainers	Sustainers
Security concerns	Destitution	High	High	Low	Low
	Disaster	High	High	Some	Some
	Crime (civilian)	High	High	High	Some
	State illegalities	High	High	Some	Some
Development concerns	Agr growth	Some	Some	High	High
	Agr equity	High	High	Some	Low
	Education (primary)	High	High	High	High
	Education (secondary)	Low	Some	High	High
	Health (indiv. & family)	High	High	High	High
	Family/gender	High	High	High	High
	Communication	Some	Some	Some	Some

on any exclusive basis. There are possibilities, to be sure, as with Nijera Kori's approach focusing on grassroots mobilization, especially in regard to the three women members of the UP, but it is very management intensive in terms of NGO resources, as well as time consuming. And it is difficult to see how it could be expanded to a large area except over a very long period of time.<sup>20</sup> The approach should be supported, nurtured, and expanded as a laboratory for learning what are very likely to become critical lessons in promoting social change from below, but this methodology probably should not be thought of as a template for a country-wide program.

On the other hand, if propoor NGOs ally themselves with others to pursue a broader agenda, two things can happen. First, the universalistic goals are more likely to be realized, bringing benefits to all strata of the citizenry; and second, in this process, these organizations will accumulate the experience and skills they can then use to add propoor elements to wider agendas, particularly in allying with local elite factions as the ebb and flow of local politics create opportunities.<sup>21</sup>

Another way to look at the strategic options is laid out in Table 5, where elites and nonelites are shown each to have two basic strategies with respect to local policy making. Elites can either be open to initiatives from below or can repress them, while nonelites can either advocate their own policy preferences or comply with decisions rendered from above. The archetypal situation in today's Bangladesh villages is elite repression and nonelite compliance, which produces the present patron-client system, or alternative (d) in Table 5. If nonelites should mobilize and advocate change and elites react with repression, the result is conflict, or

alternative (c). There are certainly examples in recent Bangladesh history. When NGOs such as Gono Shahajjo Shangstha (GSS) have pursued advocacy initiatives in the past, (c) has often been the outcome.<sup>22</sup> Even much milder propoor initiatives such as human rights literacy campaigns and girls education efforts have at times drawn violent reactions from fundamentalists and village elites.<sup>23</sup> Even today higher governmental levels harbor suspicions that NGOs may upset the status quo in the countryside.

The challenge is how to induce elites to adopt openness rather than repression as their response to nonelite initiatives, so that pluralism—alternative (a)—will ensue, in which the political arena accepts policy proposals from all sides. One very good path to (a) would be to have nonelites initially advocate universalistic agendas in such areas as primary education and health, enabling them to become players in the local political dynamic, building experience that they can then use to further their more particularistic agendas later on. Recent economic improvements should make rural people, including many among the poor, a bit more willing to undertake the risks involved in advocacy, but such risks would probably be easier to bear if more universalistic agendas were pursued at the beginning.

Good openings for launching such efforts will surely arise often, for at least two reasons: First, the competition between Bangladesh's two major parties has long ago seeped down to the village level, so that rival local factions align themselves with the parties, thus replicating the divisions so rampant elsewhere in society (e.g., in professional associations, trade organizations, labor unions, the bureaucracy) (Bode, 2002; see also Siddiqui, 2000, p. 285, &ff). Second, the personality-driven differences between the parties means that at village level they are scarcely distinguishable on any ideological or programmatic basis, and that consequently it is eminently easy to switch opportunistically from one party to the other. Party loyalties, in short, are extremely fluid, giving propoor advocacy organizations frequent chances to change their own alliances with one or another elite faction, as the occasion arises. In this kind of milieu, the scope for defecting, allying, and making deals is large indeed, presenting many opportunities to trade support for an elite faction in return for that faction's backing at first a universalistic agenda and in time a more propoor one.

Table 5. *Elite and nonelite strategies on policy making at local level*

Elite strategy	Nonelite strategy	
	Advocate	Comply
Be open	(a)	(b) <sup>a</sup>
	Pluralism	n.a.
Repress	(c)	(d)
	Conflict	Patron-client system

<sup>a</sup> In theory, elites could be open to policy input from below and nonelites could be compliant—cell (b) in the table—but it is difficult to imagine such a situation in rural Bangladesh (or elsewhere for that matter), so this cell is unfilled.

Table 6. Rural income distribution and benefits from public spending on education in Bangladesh, 1994

Decile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
Income share %	1.9	3.3	4.1	5.6	6.1	6.9	9.5	12.6	17.4	32.6	100.0
Benefit % share from spending on											
Primary education	9.5	9.9	9.4	9.9	9.6	10.1	10.4	10.4	10.6	10.3	100.1
Secondary education	3.0	3.0	5.1	7.0	8.0	10.1	13.1	15.8	17.1	17.8	100.0

Source: World Bank (1998), derived from CIRDAF (1997). Totals over 100.0% reflect rounding.

We should also ask what kinds of groups are likely to form as advocacy groups in the countryside and who they might represent. One notable absence among civil society players in Bangladesh thus far has been any kind of organized farmers' associations. Unlike India, where *kisan* organizations have exercised a powerful influence in politics for at least a couple of decades, with their steady din of demands for lower input prices, higher state procurement prices, and the like (see especially Rudolph & Rudolph, 1987), Bangladesh has seen virtually nothing of such groups. But the agricultural boom of the late 1990s and the early 2000s can be expected to give rise to groups of market-oriented farmers, hoping to consolidate their position and gain access to new largesse from the state.

In previous decades, the emergence of an organized peasant constituency would have spelled trouble for the rural poor as it lobbied for state assistance to agricultural production. But the recent economic growth that has led to growing numbers of small and tenant farmers and to increased use of new technologies among them means that profarmer agendas will bring benefits to lower economic strata as well as (perhaps even more than?) upper levels. Such developments would contradict much of that criticism directed at the Green Revolution which held that its benefits served largely to exacerbate rural inequalities. These speculations are of course only conjecture at this point, but they are provocative and deserve further scrutiny as any local level civil society initiative is designed.

Probably the most clear-cut sector for crafting broad alliances is primary education, for all strata of the rural population have a strong self-perceived interest in improving it. The benefits of investing in primary education are extraordinarily well distributed across the entire population, as is shown in Table 6. The contrast with secondary education is instructive here, when we note the definite bias of benefits toward the upper income levels.

Two other agendas in particular that offer potential for alliances are what I have labeled in Table 4 as "crime" and "family" concerns. The criminal concern is domestic violence, while the family issues are dowry and *purdah* customs, as well as general gender biases that discriminate against women so pervasively at village level. Although often lumped in with propoor issues, most of these issues in fact have great salience across the entire social spectrum. Women from elite households as well as poor ones suffer domestic violence. Elite women are dehumanized by dowries and *purdah* restrictions perhaps even more than are poor women, in that the dowries demanded are greater, and they tend to come under greater pressure to observe *purdah* than in poor households that cannot afford either high dowries or to keep potential income earners indoors. While elite women may be less subject to rape and other violence from outside the household than poor women, such violations are scarcely unknown in rural Bangladesh. In sum, there are many good reasons why all four of our social status groups from Table 1 should make common cause on family issues.

## 8. CONCLUSION

All these approaches will take a good deal of time to develop and bring to enough maturity to think of replicating them. None of them will lead to quick impacts (at least of any meaningful type) that can be gauged with the quantifiable results-focused approaches that became popular with the donor community over the last decade. For rural Bangladeshis to change from being clients to becoming citizens will not occur rapidly, but if Bangladesh is to transform itself from the electoral democracy that it became in the 1990s to something more like a liberal democracy which encourages public policy inputs from all its citizens including its poor and which has a government genuinely accountable to them, such fundamental changes are necessary. To embark on them is to think of minimal five-year timeframes for

starters and in all likelihood considerably longer terms to see any significant results.

Moreover, the approaches laid out here are all subject to risk and change. Among the pitfalls that could occur, the following pose real dangers:

—The agricultural boom of the past several years may fade, undermining the base attained by the gainers, and generating larger numbers of descenders, throwing them back to the mercies of the patron–client system. For example, the high-yielding rice cultivars now adopted by more than 80% of marginal (under one acre) farmers (per Hossain, Lewis, *et al.*, 2002) could put them at great risk if widespread diseases or pest resistance should develop. Or two bad flood years in a row could severely diminish the government’s capacity to deal with disasters.

—Propoor advocacy NGOs following universalistic program agendas may still provoke hostility from elites obsessed with zero-sum games. Attempts to move the dominant political mode from a patron–client structure to the pluralism noted in Table 5 may instead simply shift it to a conflict relationship.

—Propoor organizations may get coopted by predatory elites more skilled at playing the political game, so that in Table 5’s terms, the political discourse never really leaves the patron–client cell. Decentralization initiatives have a long history of being taken over by local elites (see Blair, 2000a; Manor, 1999), and it will take great effort to avoid such outcomes in Bangladesh.<sup>24</sup>

—“Transformation”—expanding “participation” to include active citizenship on the part of those previously excluded (Hickey

& Mohan, 2004; White, 1995)—is difficult enough for NGOs even under the best of circumstances. Would the complex strategy suggested here simply be too much for groups of the rural poor in Bangladesh to master?

—The long legacy of patron–client linkages is insidious. NGOs themselves can all too easily become new patrons with their members turning into clients (Lewis, *forthcoming*), and even within NGOs patron–client ties can develop (Wood, 1997). Would these patterns become debilitating over time?

I have sketched out a scenario of opportunity for local propoor activism, enhanced by an agricultural expansion that has improved the economy, created more gainers than descenders among the poor, and should be enhancing people’s willingness to take the risks inherent in compromising their places in patron–client relationships and undertaking the collective action of NGO advocacy. But the poor may really have little choice in leaving their patron–client ties, as the market economy increasingly displaces the moral economy that had earlier reinforced the patron–client nexus and leads patrons to cut the poor off from dependent relationships. As the rural economy moves from a feudal to a capitalist order, Wood’s (2003) Faustian bargain that linked the vulnerable client to the controlling patron will get sundered from Satan’s side. This, after all, has been part and parcel of the shift from feudalism to market economy elsewhere; similar patterns must be expected to affect rural Bangladesh. It behooves those being cut off to begin making alternative arrangements.

## NOTES

1. For an account of the survey and its methodology, see Rahman and Hossain (1995, pp. 28–38).

2. Hossain, Sen, and Rahman (2000) employed a four-level taxonomy in their study (extremely poor/poor/self-reliant/solvent), which I have collapsed to two in Table 2 in order to facilitate comparison with Table 1.

3. Patron–client systems of the sort found in South Asia arose historically in the context of highly unequal distributions of resources (mainly land) combined with low levels of overall output and high levels of uncer-

tainty, especially with regard to climate. A patron–client structure is characterized by a mutual but unequal exchange in which the patron provides security (access to food and housing, protection from natural disasters and marauders), while the client offers labor and loyalty. Contestation in such systems is generally not along horizontal (class) lines but rather along vertical ones, so that patrons compete with each other for dominance and clients vie among themselves for a patron’s favor. Patron–client behavior also characterizes much of the relationship between individuals outside of agriculture in Bangladesh, for example, elected government officials

and citizens, or superiors and subordinates within a government department. For a good overview of patron–client systems in general, see Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984, especially pp. 43–50; also Scott, 1977); for more detailed analyses of the patron–client system in rural Bangladesh see Bode (2002), Barenstein (2000), Hartmann and Boyce (1983), and Hulme (2003).

4. Matin and Hulme (2003) provide insights into how Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) card distribution fits into the patron–client system.

5. Hossain, Lewis, *et al.* (2002, p. 10). Interestingly, nonpoor respondents put “political affiliation” in the fifth place, while the other groups did not mention it at all, giving additional credence to the idea that political patronage favors those better off to begin with.

6. The entries in Table 3 are impressionistic, based mainly on my own observations of rural Bangladesh over three decades. Accordingly, the table’s presentation should be regarded as approximate, although the findings do find support in other studies (see Holland & Blackburn, 1998, p. 95; Nabi, Datta, Chakrabarty, Begum, & Chaudhury, 1999, p. 44; UNDP, 1996).

7. In a World Bank study, eight focus groups specified local institutions that most influenced their lives. Those mentioned most frequently were NGOs, union parishad representatives, and moneylenders. NGOs ranked very high in terms of positive influence, trust and confidence, and effectiveness, while the representatives ranked quite low on all three measures. Interestingly, moneylenders, while regarded negatively by all groups in terms of influence, ranked significantly higher than the representatives when it came to trust and confidence (Nabi *et al.*, 1999, pp. 52–58).

8. Some would argue that I have understated the relevance of patrons to the issues listed in Table 3, saying that rural people of whatever station depend on patrons for virtually all these concerns. Given the immense role corruption and increasingly criminality plays in Bangladesh, it may well be that patrons are seen as necessary for gaining access to even the most rudimentary government services (for examples, see Bode, 2002; Hulme, 2003).

9. Another way of stating this is to say that Bangladesh can be classified as an “electoral democracy” that has regular elections that are more or less free and fair and do result in regime changes, but it is not yet a “liberal democracy,” in which “freedom, fairness, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law [are extended] from the electoral process into all other major aspects of

governance and interest articulation, competition, and representation.” See Diamond (2002, p. 35).

10. Enthusiasm for civil society organizations as the engines of activism and advocacy should not obscure the valuable contribution that service delivery organizations often make to civil society by building social capital in the course of their work. This can compensate powerfully for the tendency of service delivery NGOs to reduce poverty alleviation to a technical issue, thus depoliticizing it (see Hobley, 2003, Section 2.3.10; also White, 1999, pp. 324–325).

11. White’s definition has become widely (though by no means universally) accepted in the much-contested terrain of pinning down the meaning of this term

12. It is difficult to estimate the actual coverage of NGOs in Bangladesh. Landell-Mills *et al.* (2002, p. 60) estimate that “NGOs have a strong presence in less than half of all villages,” while Thornton *et al.* (2000, p. 2) put the figure at 80% of villages and 35% of population. Crook and Manor (1998, p. 102) estimate that grassroots NGOs have “reached no more than 20% of the rural population.” Speaking only of credit programs, Hossain, Bose, *et al.* (2002, p. 15) state that they include over half of the country’s functionally landless households. By any of these measures, the coverage is impressive indeed, given the huge rural population (20 million households and 99 million people in 87,000 villages, according to the 2001 census). But the number of people left uncovered by NGOs also remains huge by any accounting, and even if NGOs expand greatly in the future, most of these people will have to be served by government programs if they are to be reached at all.

13. There is some evidence of voters disciplining local officials. Crook and Manor (1998, pp. 120–121) report that in the 1990 upazila chairman elections, for a sample of 30 incumbent chairmen, only two were returned to office. All the others were either defeated or chose not to run, knowing they were likely to face defeat from angry voters. In the 2003 union parishad elections, almost three-quarters of sitting UP chairmen ran for re-election, but over half of them were defeated (ARD, 2003). Thus, a kind of crude check can be exercised over an official’s overall performance, but accountability for specific actions remains impossible through elections.

14. It is unfair to say that elected officials in Bangladesh have no interest in promoting development, for they do see themselves engaged in this task. For example, in a recent survey of 20 unions, some 63% of a union parishad member sample saw the main service they rendered as economic development functions (Landell-Mills *et al.*, 2002, p. 62). The problem is that

the need to build and maintain patronage networks far outweighs the call to undertake serious development work, so government funding ostensibly intended for the latter goes instead to serve the former.

15. For example, for the present government, see **GOB** (2002, para. 3.9); for the previous administration, see **GOB** (1997, pp. 10–13).

16. Villages average around 1,200 population, wards 2,500, unions 23,000, upazilas 200,000 and zilas 1.9 million.

17. The Tk 200,000 figure is the one most widely quoted. See, for example, **Aminuzzaman** (2000, p. 9). The UP has much influence over how other moneys are spent as well, as with the various winter season infrastructure projects like Food for Work, distribution of VGF cards, and the like (**Hobley**, 2003, pp. 17–20).

18. Like the information presented in **Table 3**, the priority levels indicated in **Table 4** are essentially impressionistic, based on my experience, reading, and observations over the years. It would be highly worthwhile to obtain some good empirical data on how people actually do prioritize their concerns about public policy issues.

19. As noted earlier in the paper, many among the lower socioeconomic strata are likely coming to have more interest in agricultural policy issues, owing to current economic growth in the countryside.

20. Although it has accomplished a great deal in forming more than 8,600 groups with over 180,000 members, nonetheless after more than two decades of work, Nijera Kori had spread to only 37 upazilas out of some 506 in the country (see **Kabeer**, 2002, especially p. 69; also **Kabeer**, 2003).

21. My thinking here is indebted to William Julius Wilson, who has advanced similar strategic ideas for propoor activism in the USA. See **Wilson** (1996), and **Blair** (2000b) for more detail.

22. See **Hobley** (2003, Section 2.3.11), also **Rao** and **Hashemi** (1999).

23. On human rights literacy, see **Rafi and Chowdhury** (2000); on the backlash against female literacy programs in the mid-1990s, see **Crawley** (1996).

24. A related danger is that advocacy NGOs themselves may consciously (or subconsciously) accommodate their efforts to fit in with the local power structure. See **White** (1999, especially p. 316).

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