Disciplined Activists, Unruly Brokers: Exploring the Boundaries between Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Donors, and the State in Bangladesh

David Lewis

(From *Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil Society in South Asia*, edited by David N. Gellner, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010)

Introduction

This chapter explores the subjects of activism and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) within the context of Bangladesh. In particular, it revisits a troubled episode from 2002-2004 in the difficult relationship that has long existed between Bangladesh's NGO sector and the government, and it then goes on to explore some of the ways in which events during this period connect with current conceptual issues in the anthropology of development policy. Bangladesh's extensive NGO sector has been widely documented from perspectives which have both celebrated and critiqued NGOs' various roles in development, democracy, and poverty reduction (White, 1999; Karim, 2001; DFID, 2000; Stiles, 2002; Lewis, 2004).[1] This chapter is not primarily concerned with these types of issues, but instead explores the ways in which boundaries between activism, NGOs, and government are articulated.

The paper draws on observations made during regular research visits to Bangladesh since the mid 1980s, and on ethnographic data collected during a recent research project on the life histories of policy activists and professionals who have crossed between the state and non-state sectors (Lewis, 2008). Building upon an approach taken by Mosse (2005a) it argues that an important way in which policy is secured and maintained is through the establishment and protection of definitions and models of non-governmental

[1] It has been estimated that there may be more than 20,000 NGOs in Bangladesh. These are mainly small, local organizations with only a dozen or so large-scale national NGOs on the scale of the internationally known agencies such as Grameen Bank, Proshika, or Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC).

action which must be continually negotiated by a range of actors, including international donors.

The chapter first introduces and discusses the so-called 'three sector' policy model which underpins current international donor frameworks of good governance, and explores the ways in which it has taken root in Bangladesh. It then analyses recent events in the NGO sector which have led first to a rupture of the model, and then to efforts towards its restoration, through the attempt by government to establish a new set of rules and limits around non-governmental public action. The argument aims to go beyond conventional accounts of NGO-government relations that tend to emphasize the 'opening up' or the 'narrowing down' of space for NGO work to argue that we must also consider the important role played by the construction and maintenance policy representations, and the various histories in which such representations are embedded.

ACTIVISM IN BANGLADESH

The discourse of activism in Bangladesh, as it is anywhere, is wide-ranging and one that can be unpacked several different ways. The broad historical importance of the activist tradition in East Bengal among peasant, student and women's organizations is well documented. For example, the language movement was an activist response to the imposition of the Urdu language by the Pakistan authorities on the Bengali-speakers of the east. Five Dhaka university student protesters were killed by the Pakistani army on 21st February 1952, an event that is still commemorated each year in Bangladesh. This movement was a crucial component of the resistance that ultimately led to the Liberation war of 1971 in which Bangladesh emerged as a separate independent nation.

Today, to be 'active' (*shocriyo*) may imply taking part in some kind of public action or movement (*andolon*), as for example a woman activist (*shocriyo nari andolan kormi*) or an environmental activist (*poribesh andolon kormi*). Political activism in the sense of working for a particular party (*party kori*) has slowly moved from having positive social connotations to one which has become more negatively associated with the problem of confrontational politics and deadlock that characterized political life since the democratic period that began in 1991. It also speaks of a perceptions among many sections of the community of the essentially predatory relationship between the two main political blocs and the rest of society, one that led to the cautious welcoming of the unelected Caretaker Government that assumed power in December 2006 after a period of prolonged political tension and uncertainty over plans for the next national election process.

Outside the framework of party politics, individual independent activists, motivated by secular or religious values, can also be seen working through routes which intersect with activities normally associated with understandings of charity or religious duty. On a plane journey to Dhaka in 2004, I met two young British Bangladeshi men who were travelling to their original home district in Sylhet to assist people, using their own savings, with grants to rebuild houses damaged in a recent flood. They were not part of any particular organization, nor were they going back to work with family, but were driven apparently by a sense of transnational cultural solidarity. Religious activism has also become more topical in recent years. This tends to be associated – at least by more secular observers – with radical or marginal groups pursuing agendas within 'uncivil society'. Examples would be the current campaign of intimidation against the minority Ahmadiyya Muslim sect, the criminal 'Bangla bhai' gang in the north-west of the country engaged in vigilante violence against so-called anti-religious elements and *sarbahara* leftists[2], or the Islamic Chhatra Shibir student wing of the Jamaat-i-Islami political party which has long been associated with intimidation and extreme violence within student politics.

In a society strongly dominated by the institutions and discourses of international aid, one important reading of the activist identity has always been an 'oppositional' one, in the sense that an activist is usually one who steps outside the business of international aid and the NGO world in particular, in favour of an less compromised, 'purer' form of political or social action. In this perspective, a social activist in Bangladesh may in one sense be understood as a person who is in politics, research, or manages an NGO but who crucially seeks to operate, or present a view of operating, outside the formal framework of development agency funding. But activism has also long had meaning within the NGO sector itself. To be an activist is also to be an organizer (*sangathan kori*), which is also how some people within NGOs engaged in grassroots organizational work – building grassroots groups (*samitys*) for example – may describe themselves.

The war of Liberation created an independent Bangladesh, but in the subsequent decades periods of democracy have been interrupted by periods of authoritarian rule. During the periods of intense nation-building, catastrophic natural disaster, and increasing authoritarianism that followed 1971, a concept of the 'non-governmental organization' emerged, influenced both by international agencies and the resources they brought to the newly formed country and by local activists. One important component of the idea of the NGO was as a means by which young idealists from student politics, as

---

[2] The Purba Banglar Sarbahara Party (PBSP) was a pro-China faction of the Bengali left. It was active militarily against Pakistan and Jamaat-i-Islami during the Liberation war, and later opposed the Awami League after 1971. Contemporary off-shoots still operate underground in small numbers in some parts of the country, with longstanding political scores and new struggles over resources still occasionally being settled by force.

well as some from sections of business and academia (e.g. F.H. Abed and M. Yunus respectively), could connect their work to the challenges of national reconstruction and poverty reduction (Lewis, 2004; Seabrook, 2001).

For example, recent work on understanding the life histories of activists and professionals within the NGO sector in Bangladesh and their relations with government provides insights into some of the trajectories taken during this period and subsequently, and a few brief ethnographic sketches from this work can serve to illustrate some of the archetypal trajectories of such individuals (Lewis, 2008). One informant described how growing up during the 1960s in southern Bangladesh he was active in local village associations and later became a freedom fighter during the 1971 war. After graduating from university soon afterwards with a degree in commerce, he nevertheless joined first an international NGO as a volunteer and then later helped establish a small rural development organization where he has subsequently remained, though he has also spent periods of his career working on government placements within foreign-funded projects in order to support his family. The balance of engaging in social change activity within the NGO sector is often combined with periods of work within other, better-resourced sectors. Another informant who began as an activist within a left political party as a student in the mid 1960s subsequently drifted into the civil service, speaking of "noble examples" of "serious activists who had turned into first-class administrators". He went on to play an important role in building the government's social welfare capacity during the 1970s before ending up towards the end of his career back in the NGO sector as executive director of a legal aid organization. For a younger generation coming from the middle classes, NGOs and civil society have provided a relatively professionalized arena for activism which can also serve as a space in which a person can gain experience and knowledge for careers in other sectors. For example, another informant had spent several years working with a human rights network before she went on to build a career in the public sector judiciary as a human rights lawyer with an activist agenda around gender issues (see also Strulik, this volume, for comparisons with India).

Today, the vast majority of NGOs are providers of credit and other developmental services to local communities. In some ways this resembles the view of NGOs as the depoliticized end-points of once-vibrant social movements that have lost their radical edge and evolved into professionalized organizations (Kaldor, 2003: 94). But the NGO sector in Bangladesh still contains some diversity, with some organizations remaining located outside the 'mainstream NGO sector' within a sub-sector of 'activist NGOs'. For example, Samata has evolved from origins in small-scale grassroots activist work to seek influence over the allocation and use of

government *khas* land to landless rural people.[3] Nijera Kori has set out to build the 'collective capabilities' of women and men as citizens as opposed to the individualized identities of 'beneficiaries', 'clients', or 'customers' (Kabeer, 2003). There are also pockets of activist activity within more mainstream development agencies, such as individuals who claim to be carrying forward activist reform agendas. One such person was a social development adviser at the World Bank who had been recruited from the women's NGO sector, and who presented herself within the agency as an outsider/insider playing an 'activist' role in relation to gender and civil society.

THE 2002-2004 RIFT

In 2001, an important section of the NGO community entered a period of crisis after the election of the BNP-led coalition government in October. Five well-established NGOs were accused by the new government of both financial irregularities and politically partisan behaviour. In particular, it was alleged that certain NGOs had lent assistance to the electoral campaign of the ruling Awami League party, which some felt had unexpectedly lost the election. The best known of these NGOs was Proshika, a national-level organization engaged in a wide range of development activities across Bangladesh (and the second-largest NGO in the country), including a range of service delivery and campaigning work.[4] As we have seen, leftist student activists in the 1970s had been inspired by the recent liberation of the country from Pakistan, but felt constrained in the pursuit of their style of progressive politics by the increasingly authoritarian style of government of Sheikh Mujib Rahman. When Proshika was established in 1976, it provided a way of linking of activist and developmental objectives. In the words of Smillie and Hailey (2001: 8), "Proshika grew out of a donor project which was also staffed, and later taken over, by young social activists." Led by its founder Q.F. Ahmed, Proshika had always tried to set itself apart from the mainstream development NGO community by seeking to maintain and project a strong 'activist' public profile.

As discussed earlier, while it has been usual for many of Bangladesh's NGOs to claim and display their radical roots – Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was a formative text for several founder leaders and supporters in the 1970s – much of the sector by the 1990s had followed organizations such as Grameen Bank and the Association for Social Advancement (ASA) into work which had microfinance service provision at its centre in place of 'social mobilization' strategies. Proshika, on the other hand, while it also operated an

---

[3] The allocation of *khas* land, which is unowned land that emerges from river and coastal realignments, is supposed to be made by government to landless households but plots are frequently seized by force by local landowners. See Devine (2002).

[4] The other organizations were smaller, more specialized NGOs: PRIP Trust, Bangladesh Nari Pragati Sangha (BNPS), and the Centre for Development Services (CDS).

extensive national level programme of credit provision in both rural and urban areas, had also gradually expanded its campaigning and activism, establishing a dedicated research and advocacy centre, and seeking to build what it termed a 'civil society movement' that could help link together other like-minded NGOs, women's organizations, trade unions, and newspapers in support of issues such as women's rights, environmental issues, and democratic governance.[5]

By the end of the 1990s, the space available for this type of work appeared to have narrowed, due to a combination of both internal and external factors. One important set of internal factors was undoubtedly organizational. Favoured by international donors to a high degree, many NGOs had expanded very rapidly and this growth had placed a considerable strain on their administrative systems and overall coherence.[6] At the external level, several types of macro factors have operated, including the changing priorities of international donors, the increased flow of private finance alongside development initiatives, and a set of Islamizing processes within national politics. NGOs in Bangladesh had been subject to changing priorities within the international donor community, where an earlier and somewhat uncritical pro-NGO position was hardening into one which more emphasis was being placed on performance and accountability issues, in which the measurable targets of the millennium development goals were gaining in priority. The government too, always somewhat wary of the NGOs but having reached an effective accommodation with them around service delivery partnerships and common interests in expanding microfinance provision, was also changing its position.[7]

The key for activist development NGOs going about their work in South Asia has generally involved "keeping politically neutral and negotiating with whoever is in power", as Appadurai (2001: 23) has put it, in connection with

---

[5] This is illustrated by several initiatives, including the establishment of the Institute for Development Policy Analysis and Advocacy (IDPAA) in 1994 as a semi-autonomous research, advocacy, and training institution. Its activities included coordinating the Pro-Poor National Budget campaign to promote participatory budgeting approaches and the Structural Adjustment Participatory Research Initiative (SAPRI) which brought a range of non-state actors together to debate and challenge the World Bank's structural adjustment programme.

[6] One high profile earlier casualty of this had been Gonoshahajjo Sangstha (GSS), one of the largest NGOs in the country which had been funded by European Union, DFID, and Sida, among others. GSS was taken over by the government in June 1999 amidst allegations of financial mismanagement of international aid funds. This severely disrupted GSS's national level network of innovative non-formal village schools. At the same time, GSS's origins had been in radical Freirean social mobilization, it had resisted the microfinance agenda and its founder had had a long history of activism on the political left.

[7] A earlier period of confrontation with the BNP government in the early 1990s, which led to the establishment of an NGO Affairs Bureau to improve the regulation of NGOs' use of international funds, was in the end resolved in favour of the NGOs largely through the intervention of donors (Hashemi, 1995).

his work with the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) in India. But by 2002 the difficulty of maintaining such an approach, and the political hazards of grassroots organizing work, began to become more starkly apparent for Proshika and the other NGOs. What were the reasons for the subsequent rupture that took place, and what are its implications for our understandings of the ways in which governance relationships are negotiated and secured within the current complex policy framework of international development assistance (cf. Mosse, 2005b) and within the Bangladesh state's own fragile systems, strategies, and structures?

Since the fall of General Ershad in 1990, the new system of parliamentary democracy has produced regular general elections and a BNP-led government from 1991-96, an Awami League government for 1996-2001, and the subsequent BNP-led alliance government that continued until 2006. Despite this democratic process, as Kochanek (2003: 1) puts it,

> Formal democratic institutions have proven to be weak and there persists an informal political process that has failed to instil or support equality of access to core political institutions, an adequate popular voice, effective governmental performance and full protection of citizen's rights.

Frequent *hartal*s (politically organized enforced stoppages that originally evolved as a form of resistance to British colonial rule), increasing political violence, and frequent boycotts of parliament have each come to characterize political life, alienating many citizens from any trust in formal political processes. Some sections of the NGO community have responded to increasingly confrontational and gridlocked parliamentary politics with a more activist in style and approach. A wide range of mass demonstrations and civil society alliances were effectively coordinated by Proshika and the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) during the second half of the 1990s. Karim (2001) in my view exaggerates when she suggests that at this time a section of the NGO community – led by Proshika – had actually 'taken over' oppositional political processes in the name of 'non-party politics', but the higher political profile of such NGOs had clearly begun to rattle some nerves.

Like many of the development NGOs, Proshika was broadly identified with the secular nationalist vision of a democratic Bangladesh, and one that was loosely associated with the Awami League party. But its leadership had also long been vocal in its criticisms of what it saw as extremist and unpatriotic religious elements in the public sphere, such as the Jamaat-i-Islami party, elements of which are believed to have collaborated with the Pakistan army in the killing of thousands of citizens during the liberation war in 1971. As Riaz (2003: 301-2) has argued, there has indeed been a "conservative Islamization

process" underway in Bangladesh for the past few decades.[8] But it would be a mistake to interpret this as driven by the "reassertion of a dormant Muslim identity". Rather, it is encouraged primarily by the "crises of hegemony" of the ruling elites and by a "politics of expediency" on the part of the secularist political parties. As a result, there have been cases of violence in some parts of the country by religious activists against Proshika and other NGO offices and fieldworkers and Proshika's president himself became the target of several *fatwa* by local religious leaders. The increasing profile and voice of Islamist political interests, which had for some time been hostile to the development NGO community in relation to their foreign funding and discourses of women's empowerment, was another factor that disturbed the uneasy equilibrium between NGOs and government.

After the 2001 election, the Jamaat-i-Islami political party for the first time gained significant electoral ground within the ruling coalition formed by the BNP. Both parties saw an opportunity to settle old scores with Proshika and other NGOs which they regarded as unruly. The government began in 2002 by blocking around US$50 million in donor funds which were due to Proshika on the basis of alleged 'financial irregularities', after an audit of Proshika was ordered by the Prime Minister. This action led the European Union, one of Proshika's main funders, to intervene and raise concerns with the government about the lack of accountability of its investigation, suggesting that an international audit of Proshika's accounts should be undertaken, but this appeal was ignored by the government. Meanwhile, harassment of Proshika staff and looting of local offices by ruling party activists was reported around the country. This continued at a low level until in May 2004 the President and the Vice-President of Proshika – along with some other staff – were arrested and held in custody for several weeks, without clear charges being brought, and triggering an Urgent Action appeal from Amnesty International. This time, the government announced that it had clear evidence that Proshika had assisted the opposition party in its election campaign and had diverted donor funds for political purposes, pointing in particular to its work with voter education and its funding of small local NGOs in certain parts of the country. The final straw for the government, according to *The New York Times* (25 May, 2004), was the Awami League's statement earlier in 2004 that it would undertake a mass campaign to bring down the government by the end of April, and allegations that Proshika would lend its support to such a movement.[9]

At the same time, the government quickly moved to reassert its control over the NGO sector more generally. It began efforts to amend a 1978 Ordinance that regulates donations to NGOs from foreign sources through a new 'NGO Bill' – currently said to be stalled – which would give the government new

---

[8] The state principle of secularism was removed from the Constitution in 1977 and Islam was declared to be the state religion in 1988.

[9] Q.F. Ahmed was released on 25 July 2004 without any charges having been brought.

powers to intervene in any NGO that it suspected of misusing funds or transgressing the sectoral rules and expectations around NGO participation in politics or business.[10] The government also set about sidelining ADAB which had, since its foundation in 1974, acted as the NGO umbrella coordinating organization. In practice, ADAB had by the 1990s moved well beyond this coordination role and was now running its own projects and, as in the case of some of the other larger NGOs, funding many small local NGOs around the country. Some argued that ADAB had become rendered less effective by the accumulation of these new roles, and by the emergence of political tensions and wider patronage relations within the NGO sector. In the government's view, ADAB had ceased to act as a neutral NGO apex body with an ability to coordinate NGO work effectively and it regarded ADAB as a politicized obstacle to building an effective regulatory environment for NGOs. In early 2003, an invitation from the government was issued to development NGOs to attend a meeting intended to create a new alternative NGO forum with which the government could work.

This new forum took the form of a brand new organization – the Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB). As a result, a new 'government-friendly' national NGO network was established, with a comprehensively laid out organizational structure that was specifically designed to promote clearer lines of accountability than had previously existed, and with strong barriers to deter party politicization.[11] The Memorandum of Association for the FNB states clearly that "no organization shall be recognised as an NGO if it or any of its office bearers is aligned or associated with any political party in any form whatsoever" (p.16).[12] This issue was given particular prominence because the Proshika President, a known Awami League sympathiser, had himself previously occupied the position of ADAB chair for more than one term.

CHANGING POLICY FRAMEWORKS FOR NGOs

What is the significance of these events, and what do they tell us about the changing forms of activism and the nature of civil society in Bangladesh? The subject of NGOs and development has now generated a considerable research literature, but one which has generally been theoretically weakened by its overwhelming focus on normative agendas (Fisher, 1997; Igoe and Kelsall, 2005; Lewis, 2005). Among a set of diverse themes and issues in this literature,

---

[10] Another area of controversy in relation to the 'three sectors' (a concept explored more fully in the next section of the paper) has been the issue of whether NGOs such as BRAC, which has an extensive network of not-for-profit businesses, should pay taxes on earnings. Some in the private sector have argued the case of unfair competition.
[11] Some suggested that this was open invitation; others that certain NGOs unpopular with the government for their more 'political' stance were deliberately excluded from this meeting.
[12] *Memorandum of Association and Articles of Association*, FNB, Dhaka, 30 April 2003.

two broad theoretical frameworks can be seen to have entered research and policy debates in relation to NGOs and their operation.

The first is the 'three sector' idea which sets out a tripartite institutional model of organized social action based on state, market, and a 'third' category of non-state, not-for-profit actors. The concept of the third sector has its roots in organizational theory and draws on Etzioni's (1961) analysis of three different kinds of power relationships or 'compliance' in the determination of organizational forms.[13] Najam (1996) shows how Etzioni's framework is used to argue that essential differences exist between three institutional 'sectors', namely coercion and legitimate authority (the state), negotiated exchange in markets (business), and shared values in consensus-based systems (voluntary organizations). Within policy circles the discovery of the 'third sector' idea has been seen as having several possible purposes: as another potential delivery system for services, as an area of 'private' activity into which government can shift responsibilities, and as a public arena in which individuals can organize social action. The concept of the 'third sector' can therefore be seen as a guiding metaphor (Wuthnow, 1991) or as a Weberian 'ideal type', which at the policy level in particular has provided a framework for structuring organizational and institutional relationships. Despite this, the 'three sector' framework is unlikely to correspond closely with political and organizational realities on the ground, as I shall show below..

The three sector model underpins the 'good governance' agenda that emerged among international development donors in the 1990s. This centred on the promotion of positive synergies between state, market, and the third sector and which, while appearing to bring the state more firmly into development policy, remained essentially a "market-driven, competitive model which favours the strong in every area – technical, educational, political, economic, financial" (Archer, 1994: 8). In Bangladesh, the three-sector model achieved particular prominence during the mid 1990s through the World Bank and the ADB's explicit interest in promoting partnership between government and NGOs (White, 1999).

By overstating the firmness of the boundaries, the three-sector model serves to obscure important historical differences between diverse organizations and contrasting historical contexts, feeding a functionalist policy view of NGO-government complementarity based comparative advantage (Tvedt, 1998). It also overlooks the private or personal connections that cross sectoral boundaries and may help structure NGO-government relations. One could

---

[13] Power relations differ in terms of the means used to achieve compliance. They are either *coercive*, which is the application or threat of physical sanctions (such as pain or restrictions on the freedom of movement); *remunerative*, which is based on control over material resources and rewards such as wages or benefits); or *normative*, which is based on the manipulation of symbolic rewards and deprivations, the use of the power of persuasion, and on appeals to shared values and idealism.

cite examples such as the college cohort links of the first NGO Affairs Director with various NGO leaders (Lewis and Sobhan, 1999) or the family relationship that links the director of one major NGO with the current opposition through a brother who is an opposition MP (Siraj, 2004), or the director of another leading radical NGO connected to the current BNP cabinet through a brother in law.

The shortcomings of the model are also illustrated by the fact that NGO structures and processes are now firmly embedded in the strategies of local rural elites' livelihood strategies. NGOs are now intertwined with the pursuit of patronage, networking with kin, and bargaining for government resources as powerful rural families seek to diversify their power base far beyond the traditional foundation of landownership. In Hilhorst's (2003) phrase, "the practice of NGO-ing" has become an important strategy for some powerful households. In one village in Faridpur district, a local NGO called Polli Bandhu (meaning 'Village Friends') was established in 1994 by a graduate from a well-established rural family, suggested by two uncles who were mid-level civil servants in Dhaka (Lewis and Hossain, 2008). They suggested starting an NGO as a way of improving his social and economic position, and to get him started, one of them within the Environment Ministry provided him with government start-up funds for a 'fake' project concerned with pollution awareness. Despite the lack of priority of this issue in the area, he held some public meetings carried out some activities and soon the organization had built a 'real' profile. Before long, the NGO had attracted other funders to support a range of activities which included credit, education, health, and land rights. Out of seven persons involved in the governance of the NGO, four were family and the others were close friends.

In 2001, with the NGO doing well, the founder became involved with the activist NGO Samata and received funding for *khas* land work. Before starting, he first went to the local Union chairman[14] in order to get him on his side in challenging powerful interests at the sub-district level who were supporting illegal land occupations in the area, and to remove potential opposition from the chairman, who had been highly critical of local NGOs previously in relation to their micro-credit work. Since the chairman knew these interests were supporters of his political rival (the previous chairman) he agreed to back the NGO with the result that 114 acres of *khas* land was recovered from local business interests and despite an ongoing legal challenge, are being redistributed to Samata members. Although this founder initially used 'corrupt' connections to establish the NGO, he later negotiated effectively with government and NGO actors to undertake potentially transformative redistributive work.

Nevertheless, in Bangladesh the three sector model remains firmly embedded among donors and government. For example, the Word Bank's policy

---

[14] Union is the lowest tier of local government, with an elected Chairman.

framework is analysed by White (1999: 308), who deconstructs the politics of representation within an influential World Bank report published in Bangladesh in 1996 entitled *Pursuing Common Goals*. This set out the challenges of guiding government and NGOs towards a higher level of complementarity and partnership:

> The image on the report's front cover … aptly expresses the vision contained within it. It shows the two parallel rails of a train-track, in perfect harmony and perfect complementarity, seeming to converge as they lead off into the middle distance, with the beams that support them appearing like the rungs of a ladder, leading onward and ever upward.

Despite its central position as a simple policy map, the model's loose fit with the institutional and political realities requires constant effort of maintenance to ensure that it remains in place.[15]

While NGOs today are perhaps no longer the favoured children of the development industry that they once were, civil society is still a key part of the good governance agenda (Lewis, 2005). There has been some disappointment with emerging evidence about NGO performance and accountability, and there has been a subsequent shift in policy discourse. As disillusionment with NGOs has set in, NGOs as an idea within development policy became subsumed beneath continuing but broader versions of the good governance model based increasingly on wider – though often conceptually vague – ideas about 'civil society'. The long and complex philosophical roots of the concept of civil society are less relevant for our discussion here than the fact that two basic understandings of the term can be identified: the 'liberal' and the 'radical' (Lewis, 2002). In the liberal view, which is generally favoured by governments and donors, civil society is an arena of organized citizens that balances state and market. It has, as Howell and Pearce (2000) have argued, been associated with initiatives seeking to 'build' civil society along externally determined lines much of which has in the end, perhaps ironically, led back to the NGOs again as the most visible and recognizable proxies for civil society in non-Western contexts. In the radical view of civil society, derived mainly from Gramsci, there is – in place of harmony and synergy – an emphasis on conflict, on struggles for power among different interest groups, and on unclear boundaries with the state (see also Fisher, this volume).

In Bangladesh, where as we have seen, there is an unusually diverse and extensive NGO sector, and as much as a third of the population receives some form of service from non-governmental sources, the concept of civil society has been widely debated by activists and academics. While the historical

---

[15] Wade's idea of the 'art of paradigm maintenance' is comparable, although his analysis goes well beyond the role of NGOs (Wade, 1996).

importance of organized action by citizens in Bangladesh (such as the historical role of the language movement and the importance of cultural activists, professionals, and other citizen groups in the construction of national identities in the 1950s and 1960s) provides a counter-narrative to current discourses of civil society generated among contemporary NGO actors, there were signs (as we have seen) that the NGO-centred civil society activity was becoming more political by the mid 1990s. For example, ADAB's Democracy Awareness Programme coordinated the activities of 15,000 trainers across the country substantially increasing turnout and other NGOs promoted landless candidates in local government elections, sometimes meeting with violent resistance by established interests (Ashman 1997: 31).

Although there have long been criticisms by government of the ways the NGO sector has conducted itself, and a set of long-running tensions between NGOs, government, and other sections of society, the events of 2004 represented a 'sea change'. Government was able to make it clear that a significant part of the 'NGO community' had crossed a line, moving beyond what is defined as the acceptable limits of complementary development work on poverty reduction. In the words of the Director of the FNB, whom I interviewed in 2005, action had been necessary because elements of the NGO sector had become "infected with politics".

The dominant paradigm – shared by government and some, though not all, of the donors[16] - of a distinct developmental 'NGO sector' which is largely set apart from politics and confined to a safe sphere of developmental activities away from the messy realities of politics and patronage, had broken down. The new government saw itself as instituting a process of reform and discipline for troublesome or transgressive non-governmental individuals and actors. On one level, this failure to maintain a coherent set of representations and explanations in relation to the NGO sector is reminiscent of Mosse's (2005a) arguments, which draw on drawing on Latour's work within science studies, about the need to understand the workings of development projects in relation to the imperatives of project actors to maintain coherent explanations and social representations of their actions. In this case, the prevailing equilibrium within a negotiated set of shared meanings about what NGOs are and what they do became untenable and unsustainable within the context of wider political changes. The unruliness of activists within a significant section of the NGO 'community' prompted a set

---

[16] In recent years, a division has opened up between a 'mainstream' large donor grouping composed of the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), USAID, and Japan – who provide the bulk of Bangladesh's foreign aid – and a smaller grouping of bilateral donors including the Scandinavians, the Dutch, and the Canadians who tend to take a more politically radical stance in relation to policy advocacy and civil society campaigning. There were suggestions in diplomatic circles and in the press during 2005 that the government might follow India's example and expel this group of small-scale but inconveniently 'shrill' donor group (sometimes referred to disparagingly by government officials as the 'five taka donors').

of realignments among both government and NGOs, and to a certain extent, donors. This failure was also partly an outcome of the Bangladesh state's increasingly troubled efforts to stabilize an acceptable representation of its own role and legitimacy. After military rule ended in 1990, what had emerged was a period of confrontational politics and increasingly uncertain democracy. This 'evolving institutions' argument is made against a comparatively recent authoritarian past, the history of Liberation, and the more distant experience of colonialism from which ongoing tensions over power and identity are still derived.

ASSERTING PARADIGMS, DISCIPLINING ACTIVISTS?

If the three-sector model has been re-asserted, what then has happened to the policy discourse around 'civil society'? The neo-Tocquevillian 'liberal' model of self-regulating stability can be seen to have been ruptured by the intrusion of organizations and events embodying the 'radical' civil society tradition of Gramsci, in which struggle and conflict triumph over harmony and balance. By taking action against a significant section of the NGO sector, the government has acted to restore order through the deployment of the mutually reinforcing orders of the three-sector model and the liberal civil-society paradigm. This restoration can be considered in the light of Foucaultian ideas about 'governmentality', i.e. the changes need to be viewed in the context of Bangladesh's relatively recent transition to democracy from an authoritarian past, and as part of a process of institutional adaptation and adjustment to changing local and global realities. In other words, these events can be seen as part of the ongoing and essentially 'failing' project of the 'governmentalization of the state', part of which is the process through which government is operationalized by co-opting what it does not control (Rose and Miller, 1992). This is in part achieved through the direct curbing of NGO action, but also works more subtly by presenting and shaping a definition of self-identity to which NGOs must subscribe.

Beyond the Proshika story, the way in which this process operates can also be seen in other areas of the NGO sector, such as the Manusher Jonno (MJ) project.[17] MJ – which means 'for the people' – is a large-scale (£13.5m) local fund established in 2002 by DFID to fund innovative human rights work. Its progress to date illustrates the ways in which the more activist approaches to development work have been both facilitated but also constrained by recent political events. Designed to promote and support a wide range of civil-society partners through a decentralized locally controlled funding mechanism, MJ, once constituted, was immediately faced with the practical problem gaining government approval via the NGO Affairs Bureau,

---

[17] I was involved as a consultant with another colleague to document this project in order to generate lessons and learning. More detail of the initiative can be found in Beall (2005). MJ became an independent local trust in 2007.

particularly since it aimed for projects and partners interested in pushing at the boundaries of mainstream work. Fearing that government approval would be difficult or impossible to secure for sensitive activities such as voter awareness or the rights of religious minorities (likely to be considered 'political' after the recent tensions) the project managers opted for a more 'softly softly' approach to governance and human rights which emphasized the less contentious – though still very relevant – issues of child rights, violence against women, and local government accountability.

What of the donors' role in the crisis? Hossain (2004) shows how donors successfully backed the NGO sector against government hostility to the NGOs in the early 1990s. However, the reality today is that donors no longer carry the same level of influence they once did in Bangladesh, since the role of foreign aid has been overtaken within the overall economy by the growth of export income and remittances.[18] The imperatives of the millennium development goals (MDGs) and the more intrusive mechanisms of aid that link donors more directly into government (such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers) have both led donors away from NGOs as mechanisms for stabilizing governance indirectly towards a more direct relationships with government (Mosse, 2005b). This can be seen in the changing attitude of DFID since the original design of the MJ project five years ago as a 'flagship process project' to a situation in which it is now seen as a project that must generate measurable impacts. By contrast, its initial brief had given it considerable leeway to experiment and learn from the process of building a set of new approaches to human rights and governance work. Even the 'blueprint' tools of development management have become flexible and shifting during this process of realignment. The original project design documents stated clearly that only 50% of MJ's partner projects needed be 'successful' in terms of meeting their objectives and that the others would still be valued, since even if they did not succeed on their own terms they would generate useful 'lessons and learning'. At a meeting with local DFID staff in April 2005 I was surprised to find that the logical framework[19] for the project that stated this clearly – normally the foundation blueprint for any bilateral project to which donors make usually explicit reference at points of debate or crisis – was waved aside as being unimportant in this case. In the way that development donors are always moving forward, erasing history and promising a next phase of this time 'getting it right' (Mosse 2005a), governance and rights work in this case appeared to have been sacrificed to the wider and more tangible priorities of growth promotion and measurable poverty impacts.

---

[18] In 1993-97 aid was 71% of total development expenditure, but this had fallen to 51% by 1998-2002 (Hossain, 2004).

[19] The logical framework is the dominant planning tool used by many donors and NGOs for projects design, and takes the form of a grid setting out project objectives, purposes, indicators and assumptions.

CONCLUSION: NGOs AND ACTIVISM

Normative assumptions about NGOs and civil society can be analysed using an anthropological perspective in order to better understand how the organization and practices of civil society are shaped by state and international aid agencies. The conventional 'story' of the relationship between activists and NGOs is one in which NGOs serve to tame or domesticate the unruliness of the activist. An activist, already mobilized by some earlier engagement within the political arena (such as within the student movement or environmental campaigning) comes into contact with international development agencies and eventually sees an opportunity or is persuaded to establish their own NGO. In setting up an NGO, the 'activist impulse' then becomes contained within this more formal vehicle, and begins to lose its radical edge and, for many other activists, its legitimacy. The activist herself becomes constrained within the apparatus of the international development industry where, depending on one's point of view, a person either becomes an 'activist insider' working to subvert neoliberal development policies from within, or alternatively, is fatally co-opted within 'the system' by foreign aid, its associated managerialism and the wider workings of Ferguson's 'anti-politics machine'.

Activists – particularly those in senior leadership roles within NGOs in the case discussed here – can therefore be seen as brokers or intermediaries operating at the interfaces between the organized worlds of NGOs and a wider set of informal arenas, relationships, and resources that lie beyond civil society, closer to government and donors. Such activists can provide useful insights into the fault-lines and ambiguous boundaries between the worlds of state and non-state national and international actors. The construction of the three-sector model, and the ways in which it may be simultaneously both maintained and undermined, forms part of the regulation process of the overall organization of neoliberal aid and governance. As Mosse and Lewis (2006: 7) put it,

> ... we should be far less confident about the *a priori* existence of social and institutional realms. All actors (and not just sociologists) produce interpretations, and powerful actors offer scripts into which others can be recruited for a period…

The three sectors may be illusory, but the model serves a set of policy interests and has powerful effects in terms of resource allocation. In this sense, the three-sector model exists in the realm of Mitchell's (2002: 15) "politics of techno-science", as part of a primarily managerialist logic of governance.

An important aspect of the NGO sector that therefore needs further exploration is its role – within the wider context of the power of international development – in containing or 'disciplining' activists seeking to challenge or redefine governability. NGOs may act as organizational spaces for activism, but they also present spaces into which governmental power can be projected. In this paper, the 'rupture' between the BNP coalition government and a section of the NGO sector in the period after the 2001 elections has provided an entry point to the analysis of NGOs, government, and activism in the distinctive context of Bangladesh. Analysis of these events help to illustrate the ways in which the liberal definitions of 'civil society' favoured by donors tend to obscure tensions and conflicts among non-state actors. It also throws light on the ways in which the 'three-sector model' (government, market, and civil society) that helps to frame current 'governance' policies, oversimplifies dramatically the ways in which power operates among institutions. As part of its negotiation with the overall imperatives of neoliberal policy, the government of Bangladesh has attempted to reassert the three sector and the liberal civil society models and place them at the centre of policy. Nevertheless, these policy models remain very thinly stretched over complex local realities of NGO patronage, kinship and conflict, and local traditions of activism.

REFERENCES

Appadurai, A. 2001. 'Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics', *Environment and Urbanization*, 13(2): 23-43.

Archer, R. 1994. 'Markets and Good Government', in A. Clayton (ed.), *Governance, Democracy and Conditionality: What Role for NGOs?* Oxford: International NGO Research and Training Centre (INTRAC), pp. 7–34.

Beall, J. 2005. *Local Funds for Local Governance*. London: ITDG Publications.

Devine, J. 2002. 'Ethnography of a Policy Process: A Case Study of Land Redistribution in Bangladesh', *Public Administration and Development*, 22: 403-14.

DFID. 2000. *Partners in Development: A Review of Big NGOs in Bangladesh.* Dhaka: UK Department for International Development (DFID).

Etzioni, A. 1961 *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations: On Power, Involvement and their Correlates*, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.

Fisher, W.F. 1997. 'Doing Good? The Politics and Anti-politics of NGO Practices', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26: 439-64.

Hashemi, S.M. 1995. 'NGO accountability in Bangladesh: NGOs, State and Donors', in M. Edwards and D. Hulme (eds), *NGO Performance and Accountability: Beyond the Magic Bullet.* London: Earthscan, pp.103-10.

Hilhorst, D. 2003. The *Real World of NGOs: Discourses, Diversity and Development*. London: Zed Books.

Hossain, N. 2004. 'The Real-life Relationship between Donors and Recipients in Bangladesh: Exploratory Research into the Sociology of Aid Relations'. IDS, mimeo.

Howell, J. and J. Pearce. 2000. 'Civil Society: Technical Instrument or Force for Change?', in D. Lewis and T. Wallace (eds), *New Roles and Relevance: Development NGOs and the Challenge of Change*. Hartford: Kumarian Press, pp.75-88.

Igoe, J. and T. Kelsall (eds) 2005. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: African NGOs, Donors and the State*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

Kabeer, N. 2003. *Making Rights Work for the Poor: Nijera Kori and the Construction of 'Collective Capabilities' in Rural Bangladesh'* (IDS Working Paper

200). Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, Sussex. (www.research4development.info)

Kaldor, M. 2003 *Global Civil Society: An Answer To War*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Karim, L. 2001. 'Politics of the Poor?: NGOs and Grassroots Political Mobilisation in Bangladesh', *Political and Legal Anthropology Review (PoLAR)*, 24(1): 92-107.

Kochanek, S. 2003. 'Policy Process in Bangladesh'. Report for DFID - Bangladesh, Dhaka. UK Department for International Development.

Lewis, D. 2002. 'Civil Society in African Contexts: Reflections on the "Usefulness" of a Concept', *Development and Change*, 33(4): 569-86.

Lewis, D. 2004. 'On the Difficulty of Studying "Civil Society": Reflections on NGOs, State and Democracy in Bangladesh', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 38(3): 299-322.

Lewis, D. 2005. 'Actors, Ideas and Networks: Trajectories of the Non-governmental in Development Studies', in U. Kothari (ed.), *A Radical History of Development Studies.* London: Zed Books, pp. 200-21.

Lewis, D. 2008. 'Crossing the Boundaries between 'Third Sector' and State: Life-work Histories from Philippines, Bangladesh and the UK', *Third World Quarterly*, 29(1): 125-42.

Lewis, D. and A. Hossain. 2008. *Understanding the Local Power Structure in Rural Bangladesh*. Sida Studies No 22, Stockholm: Swedish International Development Agency.

Lewis, D. and B. Sobhan. 1999. 'Routes of Funding, Roots of Trust? Northern NGOs, Southern NGOs, Donors, and the Rise of Direct Funding', *Development in Practice*, 9(1 & 2): 117-29.

Mitchell, T. 2002. *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Mosse, D. 2005a. *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. London: Pluto Press.

Mosse, D. 2005b. 'Global Governance and the Ethnography of International Aid', in D. Mosse and D. Lewis (eds), *The Aid Effect: Giving and Governing in International Development*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 1-36.

Mosse, D. and D. Lewis. 2006. 'Introduction' in D. Lewis and D. Mosse (eds), *Development Brokers and Translators: the Ethnography of Aid and Agencies.* Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian, pp. 1-26.

Najam, A. 1996. 'Understanding the Third Sector: Revisiting the Prince, the Merchant and the Citizen', *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, 7(2): 203-19.

Riaz, A. 2003. '"God Willing": The Politics and Ideology of Islamism in Bangladesh', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23(1-2): 301-20.

Rose, N. and P. Miller. 1992. 'Political Power beyond the State: Problematics of Government', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 43(2): 173-205.

Seabrook, J. 2001. *Freedom Unfinished: Fundamentalism and Popular Resistance in Bangladesh Today.* London: Zed Books.

Siraj, S.M.B. 2004. 'Good Governance as a Policy Agenda in EU Development Assistance: Conditionality and Effectiveness'. Paper to European Studies Association (ECSA) Conference, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, 24-25 September.

Smillie, I. and J. Hailey. 2001. *Managing for Change: Leadership, Strategy and Management.* London: Earthscan.

Stiles, K. 2002. 'International support for NGOs in Bangladesh: some unintended consequences'. *World Development* 30,5: 835-846.

Tvedt, T. 1998. *Angels of Mercy or Development Diplomats? NGOs and Foreign Aid*, Oxford: James Currey.

Wade, R. 1996. 'Japan, the World Bank and the Art of Paradigm Maintenance: The East Asian Miracle in Political Perspective', *New Left Review*, 217: 3-36.

White, S.C. 1999. 'NGOs, Civil Society, and the State in Bangladesh: The Politics of Representing the Poor', *Development and Change*, 30(3): 307-26.

Wuthnow, R. 1991. *Between States and Markets: The Voluntary Sector in Comparative Perspective*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.