

# *Exchanges of Professionals between the Public and Non-Governmental Sectors: Life-work Histories from Bangladesh\**

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## **Abstract**

Using recently-collected ethnographic life history data, this paper analyses in historical context the shifting boundary between governmental and non-governmental ‘worlds’ in Bangladesh. First, the paper explores the ways in which this boundary is an ambiguous one, and aims to show how it is constructed and maintained, through an analysis of new types of ‘boundary-crossing’ professionals who cross between the two sectors in the course of their career trajectories and their social relationships. Second, it suggests that such movements across this boundary throws light on changing professional identities in Bangladesh, such as what it means to work as a public servant or a development worker. High-achieving university graduates are now less likely to choose civil service careers than they once were, because new opportunities exist for them to work more flexibly as ‘non-governmental professionals’ in roles that may allow them to combine professional, consultant and activist identities.

## **Introduction**

Bangladesh’s extensive and increasingly high profile community of non-governmental agencies and organisations receives considerable

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attention from both researchers and policy-makers. Since the country's birth in 1971, it has evolved some of the largest and best-known non-governmental development organisations in the world—such as BRAC<sup>1</sup> and the Grameen Bank—while also containing many thousands of smaller and lesser known organisations and groups that operate in a diverse range of fields that include social services, employment generation, environment and human rights.<sup>2</sup> While the non-governmental agencies' international linkages with the aid industry have rightly been emphasized,<sup>3</sup> attempts to analyse the non-governmental organisation (NGO) phenomenon have too often been considered in isolation, both from the state and from wider Bangladesh society, history and politics.<sup>4</sup>

This paper discusses the ways in which the boundary between governmental and non-governmental activities operates. First, it explores the ways in which this boundary is an ambiguous one, and aims to show how it is constructed and maintained. It seeks to do this by analysing new types of 'boundary-crossing' professionals who cross between the two sectors in the course of their career trajectories and their social relationships. Second, the paper analyses the way such movements across the boundary can tell us about changing professional identities in Bangladesh and ideas about what it means to work as a public servant. The civil service is no longer a high prestige form of employment that attracts young people from elite families, but is increasingly populated by rural and provincial middle

<sup>1</sup> BRAC was originally an acronym that stood for 'Bangladesh Rural Advancement Group', but since the organisation has grown and diversified 'BRAC' is no longer an acronym but is simply the name of the agency. See Smillie, Ian (2009). *Freedom From Want: The Remarkable Success Story of BRAC, the Global Grassroots Organization That's Winning the Fight Against Poverty*. Stirling VA: Kumarian Press.

<sup>2</sup> Hashemi, Syed M. and Hasan, Mirza. (1995). 'Building NGO legitimacy in Bangladesh: the contested domain'. In D. Lewis, ed., *International Perspectives on Voluntary Action: Reshaping the Third Sector*, pp. 124–131, London: Earthscan; White, Sarah C. (1999). 'NGOs, civil society, and the state in Bangladesh: the politics of representing the poor'. *Development and Change*, **30**, **3**: 307–326.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Stiles, Kendall. (2002). 'International support for NGOs in Bangladesh: some unintended consequences'. *World Development*, **30**, **5**: 835–846; Hossain, Naomi. (2005). *Elite Perceptions of Poverty in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis, David. (2004). 'On the Difficulty of Studying "Civil Society": NGOs, State and Democracy in Bangladesh'. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, **38**, **3**: 299–322; Lewis, David. (2005). 'Actors, ideas and networks: trajectories of the non-governmental in development studies'. In *A Radical History of Development Studies* ed. Uma Kothari, London: Zed Books.

class bureaucrats.<sup>5</sup> High-achieving university graduates are now less likely to choose civil service careers than they once were, because new opportunities exist for them to work more flexibly as ‘non-governmental professionals’ in roles that may allow them to combine professional, consultant and activist identities. A recently collected set of ethnographic life-work histories helps reveal more of these ideas, identities and activities, and provides a deeper understanding of the changing relationships between governmental and non-governmental actors within Bangladesh’s strongly ‘developmentalist’ institutional landscape.<sup>6</sup>

In keeping with many country-contexts, in both the rich and poor worlds, a ‘three-sector’ model, based on the assertion of structural differences and complementarities between government, business and a civil society or ‘third’ sector, has become increasingly central to the way in which the relationship between government and society is structured.<sup>7</sup> The model forms a central component of the policy framework of ‘good governance’ promoted by the international development donor community, upon which Bangladesh remains highly dependent. This policy agenda places a strong emphasis on the promotion of synergies between government, the private sector and NGOs in the effort to improve economic growth, strengthen democratic processes and deliver public services. Yet the policy model, since it constructs an idealised view of these three sectors as distinctive and separate, generates two important sets of contradictions and tensions. The first is the problem of the poor ‘fit’ that such a model has with the messy realities of the real world of institutions and people, where such institutional separateness is at odds with everyday experience. The second is the need, once constructed, for social actors to maintain the idea of the boundary between the sectors—and if necessary police it—in order to maintain coherence within the overall logic of the model.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> BRAC (2006) *The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2006*. Centre for Governance Studies, BRAC University, Dhaka.

<sup>6</sup> Hossain, A. *et al.* (2005). ‘Developmentalism as a disciplinary strategy in Bangladesh’. *Modern Asian Studies*, **39**, **2**: 349–368.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis (2005); Lewis, David. (2006). ‘Elusive spaces and organisational forms: a partial recovery of the history of the “third sector idea”’. Unpublished Paper for the Manchester ESRC seminar series on Rethinking Economies, University of Manchester, 15th December.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis (2005), ‘Elusive spaces and organisational forms. . .’.

## Exploring 'boundaries' in Bengal

Political geographers tell us that boundaries are important because they constitute sites of change, tension and heightened activity—they are places where different sets of people, ideas and activities tend to rub up against one another. Any discussion of boundary issues in contemporary Bangladesh needs first to be contextualised within the historical frame of boundary making in Bengal. The province of Bengal was first partitioned by Lord Curzon in 1905, creating a 'storm of protest' which compelled the British colonial government to overturn its decision only six years later.<sup>9</sup> Bengal was again partitioned 1947, this time more conclusively, as a result of organized campaigning to divide Bengal into two halves on the basis of religion.

In 1947, demands for partition were driven primarily by the coalitions of Hindu leaders who sought to create and control a Hindu homeland: 'The politicians who pressed for partition made vigorous and successful efforts to shape the new border of their new state, and they did so in pursuit of clear goals'.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as with many processes of boundary making, a high level of ambiguity and disorder characterised this historical moment, and this has continued with long-term implications for the region. Partition took place 'in circumstances of administrative chaos and political uncertainty' as London's newly convened Separation Council 'began its task of unstitching Bengal's once unified administration into two separate parts'.<sup>11</sup> The result of this process was the creation of two new administrative structures which, already undermined by conflict and political meddling, became further weakened, yet formed the basis for governing the newly created units of West Bengal and East Pakistan.

Today, what Van Schendel<sup>12</sup> terms the 'Bengal borderland' between India, Bangladesh and Burma still resonates with an important set of 'territorial and human consequences': its precise location continues to be contested by many different groups, it 'is increasingly being policed, patrolled, fenced and land-mined', and yet it is an important site at which information, goods and ideas are exchanged—in both

<sup>9</sup> Chatterji, Joya. (1994). *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932–1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Chatterji, Joya. (2007) *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> Chatterji (2007), pp. 21–22.

<sup>12</sup> Van Schendel, Willem. (2005) *The Bengal Borderlands: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*. London: Anthem Press, p. 2.

legal and unauthorized ways. For Van Schendel 'borderlands are often battlegrounds of historiography, of the politics selective remembering, and forgetting'.<sup>13</sup>

The boundary which separates state and non-state actors is at one level an abstract, conceptual category distinction existing within the minds of people who are active around it (the policy maker who seeks to build a partnership between an NGO and a government service provider, for example, or the young professional trying to plan the trajectory of their career). The three sector model in this sense can be seen as a metaphor which helps to organise the institutional landscape and the worlds of professional work. But at the same time the boundary is also experienced by people as 'real' in a number of ways: by the laws that require a distinct separation between commercial activity for profit within the world of business and the rules for not-for-profit market-based activity within NGOs,<sup>14</sup> or in terms of the different kind of organizational cultures that are produced and encountered by people within different settings—such as those who work in a small informal NGO, as compared with those working within a government bureaucracy. The notion of the boundary as both an idea and a system<sup>15</sup> makes it well-suited for investigating ethnographically. This paper discusses the narratives of people who, for various reasons, operate across the boundary and in this sense are uniquely positioned to throw explanatory light upon it, since they have experiences of life on both sides.

Movement of personnel between the governmental and non-governmental sectors can be increasingly observed in many countries around the world within the flexible governance arrangements favoured under neo-liberal policy regimes, suggesting an increasingly blurred boundary between the two sectors.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, the motivations of these boundary-crossers, and the primary direction in which they travel, varies between particular country contexts. In the United Kingdom, an increasingly porous boundary between

<sup>13</sup> Van Schendel (2005), p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Sidel, Mark. (2004). 'States, markets and the nonprofit sector in South Asia: judiciaries and the struggle for capital in comparative perspective'. *Tulane Law Review* **78,5**: 1611–1669.

<sup>15</sup> Abrams, Philip. (1981). 'On the Difficulty of Studying the State (1977)', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, **1(1)**: 58–98.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, David. (2008). 'Crossing the boundaries between third sector and state: life-work histories from Philippines, UK and Bangladesh'. *Third World Quarterly* **29,1**: 125–142.

the two sectors has become apparent since the election of the Labour government in 1997, which has brought people from the non-governmental sector into government on secondments—both as a potential way to accessing fresh ideas and perspectives to develop new policies and as a means of co-opting opponents and critics. Those crossings-over are often attracted by better pay and conditions, but as activists or reformers may also be tempted by the opportunity to get closer to the levers of policy change. In the Philippines, there has been regular movement of individuals, who see themselves as ‘civil society’ activists, into each of the four governments elected since the fall of Marcos in 1986 where they have been active in attempts at reform within key government Departments such as agrarian reform and housing, their entry, in part, facilitated by political alliances and patronage with ruling political coalitions.<sup>17</sup>

In Bangladesh, there has also been movement across the boundary, but exchange between the sectors is politically sensitive and takes locally-specific forms. Politically, the boundary is important in Bangladesh because of a long history of tension and mistrust between government and NGOs. Both sectors have attempted to build their legitimacy at the same time as they have competed for international donor funds.<sup>18</sup> Sanyal memorably characterised the relationship as one of ‘antagonistic cooperation’, drawing attention to the complexity of a co-existence that involved both mutual interdependence and competition for external resources. On the surface, he argued, government and NGOs maintain a strong degree of separation and clear identities, but that underneath there are a set of informal linkages that allow a measure of coordination and thus a mechanism for the resolution of disputes. Outside agencies such as the World Bank have tended to represent the sectors as existing in separate spheres, needing to be brought carefully together in partnership arrangements in order to create synergies in public policy based on their comparative advantages in a range of public policy activities—such as the provision of services. Yet as Sarah White [2] shows, they are not in practice discrete, but are inter-connected in a range of important ways.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, David. (2008). ‘Using Life-Work Histories in Social Policy Research: The Case of Third Sector/Public Sector Boundary Crossing.’ *Journal of Social Policy* **37**, **4**: 559–578.

<sup>18</sup> Sanyal, Bishwapriya. (1991). ‘Antagonistic cooperation: a case study of NGOs, government and donors’ relationships in income generation projects in Bangladesh.’ *World Development*, **19**, **10**: 1367–1379.

<sup>19</sup> White (1999).

In order to understand better the nature of this boundary, fieldwork was undertaken with a selection of people who ‘cross over’ between the two sectors, since these are people who experience the boundary directly, and in specific ways. Ethnographic life history interviews were carried out with people whose working experiences, either as professionals or activists (some people saw themselves as one or the other, or sometimes as a hybrid of both), had led them either to cross over the boundary (in a career shift that took them from the public sector into the non-governmental sector, or *vice versa*) or to transcend it (by becoming involved simultaneously in activities in both sectors).

The life history method is not new, but after a period of disuse in the social sciences under the domination of positivist paradigms from the 1950s onwards, it began to attract renewed attention from the 1980s, in fields as diverse as education and social work, feminist research, oral history, action research and medical studies.<sup>20</sup> For example, life histories have formed part of the work undertaken to construct archives which record Asian working-class histories in Britain.<sup>21</sup> Of particular relevance to the present article is the increasing adoption of life history methods within development studies, where it has served to counter-balance the tendency for researchers on poverty issues to over-rely on the ‘big picture’ information such as aggregated household data or material drawn from group-based participatory information gathering.<sup>22</sup> Of particular interest here is work undertaken by the Chronic Poverty Research Centre at the University of Manchester, where the life history method has been explicitly incorporated into a toolkit of qualitative methods for economic researchers. Its work has taken Bangladesh as a major research site, where the use of life histories have begun to ‘complement and contest’ elements of existing authoritative accounts of poverty in Bangladesh.<sup>23</sup>

An adapted form of life history interviewing was used in the ESRC research in Bangladesh, the Philippines and in the United Kingdom from which the present data has been drawn, which I have termed

<sup>20</sup> Lewis (2008), ‘Using Life-Work Histories. . .’.

<sup>21</sup> Ramamurthy, Anandi. (2006). ‘The politics of Britain’s Asian youth movements’. *Race and Class*, **48**, **2**: 38–60.

<sup>22</sup> Hulme, David. (2004). ‘Thinking small and the understanding of poverty: Maymana and Mofizul’s story’. *Journal of Human Development* **5**,**2**: 161–174.

<sup>23</sup> Hulme (2004) ‘Thinking small. . .’, p.164; see [www.chronicpoverty.org/toolbox/Lifehistories.php](http://www.chronicpoverty.org/toolbox/Lifehistories.php) [accessed 17 March 2010].

'life-work history'.<sup>24</sup> To summarise briefly, the method was found to offer a useful way to dig deeper in the everyday experiences and practices of activists, managers and officials which challenge conventional assumptions about the government and NGO sectors (such as an exaggerated notion of their separateness), to counteract excessive reliance on an over-generalised picture of diverse state and non-state organisational actors and their histories, and to identify and open up analysis of the complex boundaries between them.

### **Public and non-governmental sectors in Bangladesh**

In conceptualising the governmental and the non-governmental sectors, I have in this research taken a broad view of both of them. The governmental sector is deployed as a general umbrella term that includes the public sector bureaucracy (including the judiciary and areas of public administration that have been 'projectised' within the interventions of international donors), the elite Bangladesh Civil Service and agencies of the government itself including parliament. By the term 'non-governmental sector', I am including both national and international NGOs, as well as the diverse group of 'civil society' or 'third sector' groups such as human rights networks, professional associations and foundations.

The public sector in Bangladesh today employs about one million people, and constitutes around one third of all formal sector employment. Bangladesh has inherited its bureaucracy from the British period, and has largely continued a system of public administration that is characterised by a high level of hierarchy and inflexibility. This has led observers, such as the economist Kamal Siddiqui,<sup>25</sup> himself a civil servant, to characterise the system that now exists as a 'colonial hangover', a problem exacerbated by the fact that successive government have been 'interested more in 'capturing' than 'reforming' the bureaucracy'. Public sector salaries have declined in real terms and are now considered low in relation to other forms of employment, particularly those in the private sector and in the better-resourced aid agencies. It is estimated that mid- to

<sup>24</sup> Its conceptualisation and deployment is discussed in more detail in Lewis (2008), 'Using Life-Work Histories...'.  
<sup>25</sup> Siddiqui, Kamal. (1996). *Towards Good Governance in Bangladesh: Fifty Unpleasant Essays*. Dhaka: University Press, p. 14.

senior-level public servants earn four to six times less than colleagues in the private sector. It is common for public servants to use other sources of income such as other jobs, inherited land, and bribes, to increase their income.<sup>26</sup>

For Ahmed and Mahmud there has been little change among public servants in terms of 'basic attitude and accountabilities' but over time 'the quality of civil service has weakened', citing the main reasons as declining selection standards, deteriorating pay and conditions, and weak accountability.<sup>27</sup> However, in common with other countries of the Subcontinent, despite the limitations and shortcomings noted above, the public sector in Bangladesh has for many people remained a desirable, prestigious and—perhaps most importantly—secure form of employment in a country with high un- and under-employment and other forms of insecurity. For hundreds of thousands of lower-level public employees it operates as a kind of welfare system, not only providing a base-line income for economically vulnerable lower-middle class rural and urban households but also as a means for socialising individual employees into important and useful sets of networks.

The non-governmental sector in Bangladesh is a large and diverse one, made up of development NGOs, professional associations, social movement organisations, and religious cultural and educational groups of various kinds. The country has become well-known internationally for its NGOs, partly on account of the extensive role that foreign aid plays in supporting such organisations, but also partly due to the innovative ways in which some NGOs have successfully reduced the level of this dependence. In fact, the NGO sector is relatively diverse and can be broken down into about a dozen large-scale Bangladeshi organisations such as BRAC (the second largest employer in the country after the government) and the Association for Social Advancement (ASA), a comparatively number of international NGOs such as Care and Oxfam, and thousands of medium and small Bangladeshi organisations undertaking service delivery work, mainly credit, in local areas across the country.

The NGO community has proved highly controversial. An extensive literature has emerged that is polarised between those observers who celebrate NGOs as important and innovative actors within

<sup>26</sup> World Bank. (2000). *Bangladesh: The Experience and Perceptions of Public Officials*. Washington DC: World Bank.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmed, S. and Mahmud, W. (2006). (eds.). *Introduction to Growth and Poverty: The Development Experience of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, p. 127.

Bangladesh's ongoing struggle to improve the wellbeing of its population. Others argue instead that their rapid growth has cut away ground from beneath a still-weak state, eroded public accountability and provided the international aid community with a set of flexible tools with which to intrude upon and shape domestic policy.<sup>28</sup> For example, Wood has drawn attention to the way important state service delivery functions have effectively been 'franchised' out to private actors such as NGOs.<sup>29</sup> Since such organisations may often rely heavily on foreign donors for their resources, citizen accountability is further compromised. Whilst the idea that NGOs need to be analysed in relation to the state is recognized by researchers and policy-makers, the focus still tends to be more on understanding issues of 'complementarities' between state and non-state actors in relation to the delivery of public services or the building of 'public private partnerships', than on other, less visible aspects of the relationship. In particular, the nature of the *boundary* between the public and the non-governmental sectors has rarely been explored.

### **Sector exchanges in the Bangladesh context**

The quality of civil servants within Bangladesh's system of public administration has declined in recent decades. While the civil service remains important as a desired source of employment and identity for primarily provincial and/or rural middle classes, active interest in a public service career among the bright children of the elite has waned. There are both 'push' factors involved in this change, such as a lack of enthusiasm for the over-rigid hierarchical structure of the bureaucracy and the declining real value of public sector salaries, and a set of 'pull' factors, such as the lure of incomes that might be up to seven times higher in the private sector, and the promise of more interesting or stimulating work outside public sector organizational cultures.

<sup>28</sup> Karim, Lamia. (2001). 'Politics of the poor?: NGOs and grassroots political mobilisation in Bangladesh'. *Political and Legal Anthropology Review (PoLAR)* 24, 1: 92–107.

<sup>29</sup> Wood, Geoffrey D. (1997) 'States without citizens: the problem of the franchise state'. In Hulme, D. and Edwards, M (eds) *Too Close for Comfort? NGOs, States and Donors*. London: Macmillan.

This resultant 'brain drain' of elites is one that primarily benefits the business sector, but Zafrullah *et al.*<sup>30</sup> argue that there is also a flow of such people moving into the non-governmental sector. There is a widespread perception in Bangladesh that NGO staff are relatively more highly paid than those in government due to many NGOs' links with foreign aid flows. Despite this perception, and the undoubted fact that in a few NGOs the more senior positions may be extremely well compensated, there is little hard evidence to suggest that salaries are generally higher in NGOs than they are in government. A recent World Bank study found no evidence to support such a view. Surprisingly, it suggested that NGOs, too, face problems holding on to their staff, because many are in fact still attracted to government positions:

NGOs report high staff turn-over levels, with staff leaving to enter public sector employment, which remains attractive in large part because of the prestige associated with it, the scope for additional earnings and security of employment.<sup>31</sup>

What are we to make of this apparent contradiction? The ethnographic evidence suggests a far more complex picture, in which a bundle of different kinds of motivations and incentives is contributing to several different kinds of sector shifts. Moving beyond the generalisations that are made in development agency reports (in which so much knowledge about Bangladesh tends to be contained) it becomes possible to engage with the views and perceptions of people who seek to make such transitions.

In Bangladesh there has been little of the movement of activists and leaders from NGOs and 'civil society' into government that has characterised the four post-Marcos democratic regimes in the Philippines.<sup>32</sup> Instead, it is the redistributive interests of factions which have determined political life through pyramidal forms of clientelism which have largely precluded the kind of bargaining power which might allow civil society actors to negotiate their way

<sup>30</sup> Zafarullah, H., M.M. Khan, and M.H. Rahman. (2001). 'The Civil Service System of Bangladesh' in *Civil Service Systems in Asia*, edited by J.P. Burns and B. Bowornwathana, London: Edward Elgar, pp. 24–78.

<sup>31</sup> World Bank. (2005). *The Economics and Governance of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh*. Washington DC: World Bank, p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> Lewis (2008). 'Crossing the boundaries ...'.

into government or bureaucracy.<sup>33</sup> And as Zafrullah *et al.*<sup>34</sup> further point out, the rigidity of civil service rules and practices makes opportunities for ‘lateral entry’ by outsiders from the third sector into the bureaucracy more or less impossible.

At the same time, longstanding tensions between the governmental and non-governmental sectors has made it controversial for those within NGOs to be seen to associate too openly with government, and *vice versa*. It is far more likely that certain types of people will move in the other direction: from government to NGOs. Where individuals undertake such a move, it is usually due to an opportunity for unpaid leave (‘lien’) in a well-resourced international NGO (or a specialised local third sector organisation), a post-retirement job in which a lifetime of government may equip them for useful ‘bridging’ work within an NGO, as part of an early career shift when an individual finds that he or she does not like the public sector working culture and decides to change direction, or finally where NGO work is simply found to fit better with a person’s basic ideas or values. All this points to distinctive forms of boundary-crossing in the Bangladesh context. We can term this ‘consecutive’ boundary crossing, in which an individual makes a work place transition from the governmental into the non-governmental sector.

Working relationships between government and NGOs have tended to be built, at both local and central levels, as much through individuals and personal relationships as through formal arrangements. We can also therefore identify another type of ‘extensive’ boundary crossing. This can be understood as activity that takes place across the boundary in the form of personal relationships and other informal linkages.<sup>35</sup> Such linkages may of course be part of a ‘consecutive’ shift, as in the case of a retired official who takes up a job in an NGO and then uses professional networks to diffuse problems and otherwise manage the relationship ‘behind the scenes’. Or they may exist in the form of individual or kin-based livelihood strategies that span both sectors, as in the example given below of someone building a political career in part on synergies generated within activities in both governmental and non-governmental spheres. In Bangladesh,

<sup>33</sup> Khan, Mushtaque H. (2000). ‘Class, clientelism and communal politics in contemporary Bangladesh’. In *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*, edited by K.N. Panikkar, T.J. Byres and U. Patnaik, New Delhi: Tulika.

<sup>34</sup> Zafrullah *et al.* (2001), ‘The Civil Service System of Bangladesh’.

<sup>35</sup> This is similar to the idea of ‘boundary spanning’ used by organizational theorists.

the existence of such ‘cross-over by proxy’ (in the form of families whose relationships often transcend sectors, involvement with boards, and horizontal links of various kinds) plays an important role in the structuring of relationships between government and third sector. These extensive forms of boundary spanning are important, but are usually less visible than the consecutive forms.

### **Ethnographic sketches**

This section presents ‘ethnographic sketches’ of a small selection of the 20 boundary crossers who were interviewed as part of the research.<sup>36</sup> The life history interviews collected were in most cases long and detailed, raising some difficult challenges in terms of how to best present the material. The approach taken in summarizing these life-work histories provides a flavour of these distinctive individuals. The names that are used are pseudonyms in reflection of the fact that the interviews were conducted confidentially and the titles of particular organisations have also been concealed.

Adil is in his late thirties and is from a rural, lower middle class background in a district in the south of the country. He is philosophical and reflective during our interview, and talks about the importance of his internal dialogue that sought to reconcile his desire for a professional well-structured and well-compensated career with a desire to serve the disadvantaged people of his country. Under pressure from his father, who wanted him to become a magistrate, he entered the competition for the kind of public service job ‘that is highly valued, even honoured’ within a rural community. He spent a period working as a trainer within a government project (where he was able to experience the culture of a government office at first hand) while waiting to take the civil service examinations, a process that can take up to two years to complete. He became aware of the work of an international NGO and started to compare the differences in organisational culture and environment.

Adil explained that while he knew that a government job was more secure, the system in the public sector meant that career growth

<sup>36</sup> I have borrowed this approach to the concise presentation of ethnographic data from Fuller, C.J. and Narasimhan, Haripriya. (2007). ‘Information technology professionals and the new-rich middle class in Chennai (Madras)’. *Modern Asian Studies* **41**, 1: 121–150.

was rarely based on performance or expertise, but instead on time-bound criteria. ‘As long as you stay in the job’, he explained, ‘you will end up getting a promotion’. Since the government project where he worked at that time was closing, he still needed to look for another job and began to explore what different types of organisation might fit his career aspirations and what he calls his ‘individual thinking’. A chance meeting with some NGO staff, combined with his recollections of being impressed with an international NGO in the area where he grew up, persuaded him to find a job with this organisation, and an opportunity to work here came up. This is where he now works, and he feels that it is a job that allows him to ‘grow and contribute’.

Adil talked about having undertaken a conscious period of research and experimentation around thinking about his choice of career options while waiting for the results of his civil service examinations, in which he weighed up the pros and cons of governmental and non-governmental workplaces. Adil explained how he tried to find a setting that fitted with his own values, ideas and professional aspirations while also feeling a strong desire to serve the poor of his country. Instrumental in helping him make what turned out to be a difficult choice was a senior colleague in the NGO who had challenged him, when he had found out that he had passed the civil service examinations and was planning to move from the NGO into a public service career, to give some thought to his own ‘career vision’ and not simply respond to the persuasion of family and friends on such an important decision in order to make a ‘mature decision’ that would avoid injustice to himself and the Bangladesh people. Looking back on this period of turmoil almost a decade later, Adil has no regrets about his decision, and has kept in touch with former classmates who joined the administrative service and have risen to the level of sub-District executive chiefs—a post he compares unfavourably with the responsibility and authority that he now holds, and he considers that the position he holds gives him a rewarding career that also allows him to ‘attend to the lives of poor and vulnerable people’, and he makes a very clear break with both the expectations of his father’s generation, and those of his peers and describes himself as a ‘non-traditional’ type of person.

Hamid is of a similar age and background, and his story provides an interesting contrast in that he too had worked with an NGO for a year while waiting for his civil service examinations, but unlike Adil, decided to go into the public sector to try to take part in challenging and changing its culture. Fifteen years ago, he had taken up a post

in one of the Departments that at the time was led by a charismatic public sector reformer who had set about using international donor support for public sector reform to create a more positive and creative working environment than that found in most parts of the public sector. Part of this strategy, Hamid explained, was the unconventional way in which the time-serving method of promotion was replaced by one that was more merit-based. Having spent a year working within an international NGO doing relief work around the country with a high degree of responsibility, Hamid quickly caught the eye of his new boss and was soon promoted under the progressive leadership regime, which also favoured more participatory ways of working than is the norm in most government offices. The reasons for this distinctive organizational change included access to relatively high levels of resources that this office obtained through its contract work with donor-funded projects, and its charismatic and unconventional Chief.

While there are differences in work-culture that emerge from the life-work histories, it is clear that under certain circumstances boundary-crossers may be able to contribute to positive organizational change. Hamid describes how he had made a strong impression with the NGO while he had been there, and had then also quickly risen to a senior position in the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) and become part of the new organisational culture that was emerging. He explained that his credentials earned from NGO work, which also involved working with international colleagues quickly became an asset. Within a few weeks of joining, he had found himself at a conference and a range of influential organisations had been present. He described how his previous experience gave him both the skills and the confidence to contribute widely to the discussion which was chaired by his boss. After the workshop, in the evening, he was asked whether he would be interested in a new post of Staff Officer who would assist the Departmental Chief. Yet these reforms were never properly institutionalized, and Hamid's account also tells of the way in which once the progressive Chief retired, the Department began to revert to its earlier norms, and the quality of Hamid's work experience began to deteriorate. Looking for an alternative post after more than ten years in government service, he eventually joined a project of the United Nations, which is where he is today. Despite his earlier commitment to public sector work and a new spirit of reform, he now says that he is more comfortable working in an international agency, where he is also better compensated, than in the public sector and he has now resigned his government job.

Moving now to an informant in his late sixties, Atiur is a senior civil servant with a long and very illustrious 33-year government career. When he retired in 2000 (the government retirement age is 57), he moved into a leadership position within one of Bangladesh's main NGOs, an organisation he had come into contact with towards the end of his government service when he was responsible for managing large infrastructural project that had involved NGOs in the resettlement of local residents. He was initially taken aback at some of the differences in working cultures in the NGO compared with government, finding for example that it took time to get used to the way in which decisions could be taken on the basis of conversations rather than by adhering to the meticulous record-keeping required by government rules. Nevertheless, he got used to it and found it relatively easy to adjust to the differences. He talked about the skills that he believes he brings to the organisation, which is one of adaptability, but also explained that, like many NGOs recruiting former government people, part of his job is 'sorting out things' between the NGO and the government, where he can draw upon his exceptional range of high level contacts with former colleagues.

Like other long-term public servants, Atiur has robust views on what he sees as the decline in quality of incoming civil servants during the past three decades. Several interviewees with long public service careers remarked on the difference between the way that life in government was regarded during the 1960s and 1970s in well-off families, and the less positive views prevalent in the early twenty-first century. He talked of a system where work is dull routine, promotion is slow, salaries low and where the likelihood of encountering corrupt practices now raises difficult ethical issues. Atiur's own children have not chosen to follow their father's career path. His disappointment is not with them, but with the changing environment of public sector work. He spoke of his sadness that he could not in good faith encourage his own children to follow this career path. He feels that circumstances have changed such that it has become 'difficult to work [to] one's conscience in the government' and his therefore happy with his childrens' decision. He explained that if things hadn't deteriorated so much, then he would have been happy to see at least one of them going into government service, but that things have now become very bad. He suggests that political interference has 'completely destroyed the fibre' of government procedures. Such views suggest that there may be a decline in the quality of young people who are attracted to work in government.

The majority of people cross from government into the NGO sector as a form of escape—from low pay, uninspiring conditions or as a retirement activity. But there are also people who move from non-governmental work into the public sector. One motivation for this is the decision to gain hands-on experience through NGO work before taking that experience into a public service role. Suraiya is one such person, an idealistic human rights lawyer in her late twenties who worked for several years with civil society groups (both as a student volunteer and later after leaving university in a professional job) before becoming a magistrate within the public judicial system. Suraiya's experience of student activism and subsequent work experience within the human rights NGO sector has in her view provided a valuable set of training and experience that has then helped inform her subsequent public sector career. Working with a small civil society group as a university student was a formative career experience for subsequent work within the public law system. She talked about how she had helped to found a student law group that organized public seminars and produced a range of publications and that 'it gave me confidence'.

Like many of the informants working in more 'radical' areas of the NGO sector, Suraiya comes from a middle class activist family with a history of 'left' student politics. Her uncle had been a freedom fighter (fighting the Pakistan army in 1971) and later a senior figure in the Communist Party. Engaged in acquiring expertise to become a human rights lawyer, this ideological focus was an important foundation for future work. It also contributed to her 'turning away' from formal political parties into what is sometimes called the 'non-traditional' politics of civil society activism, since she found student party politics unduly constraining. She spoke of how her work in the student organization had led her to build contacts more widely within the human rights field, and she later worked with some of these groups before moving into public sector work.

Rina's experience of cross-over is of a different kind, since she has not 'crossed over' in a literal sense, but instead has been active in both sectors simultaneously. A married woman in her early fifties, her family is typical of the local district level landowning elite, and has diversified its base from agriculture into a range of other well-placed positions during the last generation. She has a sister who is now a Joint Secretary, a brother who is a lawyer and another who is a high school teacher. Rina is a career politician who has been an activist and member of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) since she was a

student. Rina has combined a career of working in NGOs (eventually setting up her own NGO in her home area) with a lifetime of political activism with the BNP. From a middle class rural background, she has become firmly entrenched in the BNP political machinery, her talents having first been recognized by President Zia, the military ruler who was in power between 1975 and 1982. She was an MP between 2001 and 2006 on the basis of having built enough support within the party to gain one of the 30 seats reserved for women. We met in her apartment in the Sangsad Bhaban parliament building, part of her entitlement as a member of parliament. At the same time she has balanced her political work with a career in NGO work, initially with several international organizations and later establishing her own.

Rina's story is strongly suggestive of the ways in which the local world of NGO activities can interface with the wider world of politics and patronage. She said that it had been tough to combine politics during her weekends and her busy NGO work, but that it has helped her to build good relationships with people in her local community. She was eventually elected President of the BNP's National Women's Block for her District. Rina's own organisation is an NGO that undertakes a range of government-sponsored welfare work with women, such as distributing food to the poor as relief, or gifting saris to women at the *eid* holiday time, sponsors low-income households to send their children to school, and provides tube-wells in villages to improve facilities for safe drinking water. She has also used the NGO to organize pressure on the local elected Union Chairman who had received project money intended to improve sanitation in the area, but who had used the money for other purposes. By showing her skills as a community worker and local patron, she was able to consolidate support within local BNP supporter groups and ultimately to further her own political career. At the next election, she says, she aims to get herself elected as an MP through the conventional electoral route. She too is very critical of the ways that both NGOs and government servants are failing the country, saying that many NGOs are simply there to create jobs and make money, while 'our government officers do not think they are the servants of the people, they think they are the masters of the people'. By straddling the worlds of the governmental and the non-governmental, Rina's narrative helps to challenge the formal presentation of the ideas of state and civil society as separate that is common in donor and government accounts of Bangladesh's institutional landscape.

### **Motivations for sector boundary crossing in Bangladesh**

Four different sets of motivations contribute to the phenomenon of ‘consecutive’ forms of boundary crossing. The first is income. Boundary-crossing takes place when relatively poorly-paid public officials opt to move out on ‘lien’ unpaid leave for up to five years into better-resourced development organisations, including NGOs, sometimes undertaking consultancy work where they can legitimately earn more. Such a move may often be tied to lifecycle pressures, such as when children are at college age. The second is career planning and exploration. Boundary-crossing takes place when recent young graduates experiment for a few years in one sector or the other in order to try to gain useful insights and experience before making a decision about their careers (or sometimes when family pressure to go into public service is being resisted). A third is the desire to gain relevant experience, sometimes in conjunction with the second above. Boundary-crossing takes place when the third sector is seen consciously as a place to gather relevant experience before building a public sector career (for example, in the case of someone wanting to make a career in the public law system, hands-on experience with gender and human rights work in an NGO or campaigning group may provide a useful training ground). Finally, there may be the motivation to work as a bridge-builder on behalf of an organisation. Boundary-crossing may occur when a retired government official is recruited by an NGO in order to play a bridging role in the sometimes difficult relationship with government using their knowledge, contacts and networks. This is particularly useful when providing pressure to overcome the frequent delays that arise in the funding and project-approval process, or when NGO-GO relations hit a period of tension.

When it comes to ‘extensive’ forms of boundary crossing, three sets of factors are visible in the life histories, although such movements and relationships are frequently less obviously visible than the consecutive shifts. The first is the role of personal relationships, where importance is attached to affective ties based on relation by marriage, shared student activist experiences, university cohort (‘batch-mate’), former colleague, or coming from the same part of the country. The second is political patronage, where an individual may use NGO work as part of a strategy to provide resources to members of communities who may then back a person’s political career. Finally, there is kinship, with an increasing importance of NGO-related activities observed within middle-class household livelihood strategies which may include

what Hilhorst<sup>37</sup> has called ‘NGO-ing’ alongside other activities in the public and private sectors. A family may include involvement in both the government and the NGO sectors simultaneously as part of a strategy to maintain political involvements and manage resources through patron-client relationships. This can be set alongside the more familiar pattern of family-based ownership of private sector assets in the business sector.<sup>38</sup>

As well as smoothing bureaucratic problems, informal personal relationships are also found to structure operational aspects of the relationship between government and NGOs. Even before the subject of government-NGO relations and partnerships became a policy issue in the late 1980s, there were practical relationships being worked out in the field at local level. For example, this is apparent from Atiur’s life-work history. As a young Deputy Commissioner (DC) in a District South of Dhaka, he came into contact with an old university acquaintance in the field, then working as an NGO manager. As the two spent time together, Atiur became interested in his friend’s NGO work and got to know some of its staff and their work. Eventually, he arranged for an abandoned government building to be used by the NGO as a children’s hospital. A few years later, when he had risen to a more senior post in the civil service, he returned for a visit and spent a day with them whilst the NGO was attempting a self-help, small mud-road building project. He was then able to persuade the Deputy Commissioner of Development to take an interest in the project and formalize it as a local government project.

As Mosse shows in his ethnography of a development project in western India,<sup>39</sup> policy ideas do not usually correspond well with patterns of practice ‘on the ground’, but instead operate according to a different logic—one that is more concerned with stabilising coherent representations of social action and to enrolling political support. The three-sector policy model has increasingly become part of the way in which society and politics in Bangladesh have been ‘ordered’ within international discourses of ‘good governance’, making the boundary between the governmental and the non-governmental sectors into a

<sup>37</sup> Hilhorst, Dorothea. (2003). *The Real World of NGOs: Discourses, Diversity and Development*. London: Zed Books.

<sup>38</sup> Uddin, Shahzad. (2005). ‘Privatisation in Bangladesh: The emergence of ‘Family Capitalism’’. *Development and Change* **36,1**: 157-182.

<sup>39</sup> Mosse, David. (2005). *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press.

key organizing principle. The boundary is presented as being essential to the way in which donor governance models have aimed to construct synergistic partnerships between government, the market place and NGOs.<sup>40</sup> Despite their pervasiveness, such distinctions often remain oversimplified and strikingly at odds with people's perceptions of both the boundaries themselves and the types of activities that take place across them.

At the same time, once constructed, such boundaries have to be managed and, at times, policed. There have been several events in recent years that show that this has become an increasingly controversial topic. One concerns the dispute about the boundary between the business and non-governmental sectors. The increasing level of business activities undertaken by some NGOs in pursuit of reducing their external dependence has been challenged by those in the business sector who accuse NGOs of unfair competition (since they do not have to pay tax) and this has now been resolved in favour of the commercial lobby.<sup>41</sup> More relevant to the present discussion was the allegation made by the BNP government in 2002 against a small group of influential NGOs claiming that it had been politically active in supporting the opposition during the 2001 election campaign. This resulted in several NGO leaders and staff being arrested, and in the looting of some NGO field offices around the country, as well as in the marginalization of the main NGO umbrella organization and the creation of a new, more government-friendly national federation of NGOs.

The implications of the 'comparative advantage' idea that underpins the three-sector policy model are that the NGOs tend to be less bureaucratic and hierarchical, more likely to reward innovation and initiative, driven by values as much as by formal rules, and are more flexible than government agencies in their response to problems and challenges.<sup>42</sup> The life-work histories of experiences of boundary crossers are useful because they allow us to investigate these issues in more depth through the eyes of individuals who have experienced both types of organization at first-hand. Differences in organizational

<sup>40</sup> Lewis, David. (2010). 'Disciplined activists, unruly brokers? Exploring the boundaries between non-governmental organisations, donors and state in Bangladesh', in *Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil Society in South Asia*, edited by David N. Gellner. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

<sup>41</sup> Sidel, Mark. (2004). 'States, markets and the nonprofit sector in South Asia...'

<sup>42</sup> Edwards, M. and Hulme, D. (eds) (1992) *Making A Difference: NGOs and Development in a Changing World*, London: Earthscan Publications; Lewis (2005).

culture between government and NGOs are experienced directly by people who move between them. Descriptions of these transitions figure strongly in the life-work histories. While generalizations about the two sectors are problematic, such distinctions still remain an important component of the way in which people in both government and NGOs define themselves and their organizations—often in opposition to each other based on caricature, rather than on accurate information.

### Conclusion

One of the main strengths of the life history method is the way it helps to make visible ‘the interconnectedness between individual narratives and understandings of wider social contexts’.<sup>43</sup> Boundaries and borders, and the conflicts and ambiguities which surrounds them, form a recurring theme in the history of Bengal, yet as Van Schendel points out, they have long been neglected by social scientists and are only now receiving closer attention.<sup>44</sup> New interest is in part a result of new concerns with neoliberal ‘processes of global restructuring’ which help to place borders and boundaries of various kinds, and the activities which take place across and around them, into sharper relief. Yet not all boundary-making takes a clearly geographical or spatial form, but instead relates to institutional life and social space. This paper has focused on the different, though related, boundary which exists between the state and the ‘non-governmental’ sector which, like Van Schendel’s ‘borderlands’, encompasses a set of important tensions around resources, citizenship and culture, and which can operate symbolically within contested historical and contemporary narratives of legitimacy and identity. The boundary maintenance work undertaken by the Bangladesh state in relation to the non-governmental sector, highlighted within the life history data, tells us more about the ways in which its legitimacy is constructed.

An analysis of the life-work histories of the boundary-crossers is therefore instructive on four main counts. First, the narratives tell

<sup>43</sup> Kothari, Uma and David Hulme. (2004). ‘Narratives, stories and tales: understanding poverty dynamics through life histories’. Global Poverty Research Group, Institute for Development Policy and Management (IDPM), University of Manchester, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Van Schendel, Willem. (2005) ‘The Bengal Borderlands. . .’.

us about perceptions of difference between the sectors, and the data therefore allows us to compare assumptions and experiences. Second, they tell us about the ways in which personal relationships have helped to construct the relationship between government and the third sector in important ways, offering new insights. Third, they help reveal more about the changing individual experiences of work, work-based identities, and the process of decision-making that goes into individual career choices. The way that judgements about, and decisions to participate in, 'public service' are made is changing. There are both governmental and non-governmental forms, and the data draws attention to the emergence of what I have termed 'non-governmental professionalism'. Fourth, they tell us about the blurred boundary that exists between the two sectors, making possible for patron-client relationships that help structure the political and economic strategies of the elite to operate across both sectors, with important implications for policy and politics.

The life-work histories of experiences of boundary crossers therefore challenge prevailing ahistorical policy-level simplifications about the government-NGO relationship characterised by comparative advantage or partnership. They open up the possibility of investigating the embeddedness of the non-governmental sector in both wider government and politics in Bangladesh, and at the same time in the micro-politics of people's personal worlds and social relationships. These informants provide accounts that allow us to see these linkages in more depth since they are constructed through the eyes of individuals who have experienced both types of organization first-hand. While both government and NGOs in Bangladesh continue to define themselves and their organizations in caricatured opposition to each other, the value of the accounts of these boundary crossers is that they offer authoritative alternative perspectives that cut across the stereotypes.