

Understanding the Local Power Structure in Rural Bangladesh

DAVID LEWIS AND ABUL HOSSAIN



This study of the rural power structure presents new qualitative data to analyse the changing formal and informal institutions which govern people's lives in one area of rural Bangladesh. The research explores the ways in which disadvantaged individuals and groups seek to increase their influence and further their economic and social goals. It documents the barriers and challenges that people living in poverty face, and explores the current limits to these local change processes.



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Foreword by Sida

Sida is pleased to present this study, which forms part of Sida's ongoing efforts to develop methods and uses for power analyses. The study helps highlight the importance of carrying out analyses of formal and informal political, social and economic power structures and power relations as a way of boosting our understanding of the opportunities and challenges encountered by women and men living in poverty when they try to shape and improve their lives. The study identifies the main barriers and challenges that they face; it indicates areas in which pro-poor change is taking place at local level, and explores the current limitations of these local change processes. In this way, it aims to complement conventional macro-level power analyses.

The Embassy of Sweden in Bangladesh and Sida HQ in Stockholm initiated this study with the aim of providing Sida with in-depth stakeholder analysis for a planned local governance programme. The study's findings and conclusions, however, were so interesting that the study soon gained wider application and relevance for Sida and the Embassy. Over the years, it has strengthened the Embassy's policy dialogue in Bangladesh and, as the first analysis focusing on the local level, it has contributed to methodological development of power analysis at Sida HQ. Finally, it provided valuable input with regards to shaping the direction of the new Swedish Country Cooperation Strategy with Bangladesh 2008–2012. Other major donors such as the World Bank and UNDP have also benefited greatly from the study while developing their major local governance programme in Bangladesh.

Although the study focuses on Bangladesh, the findings and conclusions are also relevant for other countries where local structures are characterised by profound inequalities, strong patron-client relationships and a high risk of elite capture of external resources. The study demonstrates that local power structures and power relations are less rigid and more complex than is commonly perceived, and that geographical location plays an important role. The study also shows that it is possible to boost the positive impact of development initiatives for women and men living in poverty by intentionally increasing their opportunities and improving their scope for negotiation in relation to civil society and local formal and informal institutions. In sum, the study provides valuable insights into what factors help deliver more effective results for people living in poverty.

We hope this study continues to be a useful resource in Bangladesh and that it will inspire power analysis in other countries, and we hope that many more of these analyses will be conducted in the future. We also hope that it will function as a tool for better inclusion of poor people's perspectives on development, something that is key to the reduction of poverty and inequalities around the world.

Stockholm, November 2008



Jan Bjerninger

Director, Department for Long-term Programme Cooperation



Olof Sandkull

Development Analyst

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Executive Summary

Development policy requires a detailed understanding of the ways that power operates at the local level. This study reports on fieldwork undertaken in three contrasting villages of Greater Faridpur District and presents a mainly qualitative analysis of the changing formal and informal institutions which govern people's lives. It combines a synthesis of background literature with new village level data and individual level case studies to illustrate the ways in which disadvantaged individuals and groups in Bangladesh are seeking to use existing structures and relationships of power to increase their influence and further their economic and social goals. The research aimed to answer the following two questions: (i) what does the local power structure look like in rural Bangladesh, and (ii) is it changing in ways that enable people living in poverty to make stronger claims on rights and entitlements? It documents the barriers and challenges that people living in poverty face, and explores the current limits to these local change processes. The study aims to complement more conventional macro-level analyses of power undertaken at country level, and seeks to contribute to the development of an approach for undertaking further work in this somewhat neglected area.

Chapter one sets the scene, with a synthesis of key background literature. The rural power structure is clearly a complex topic of study, which generates a set of difficult theoretical questions about the characterisation of power and the ways it operates, which are briefly discussed. Much of the development literature in Bangladesh on the workings of the power structure, itself a somewhat vague term, has tended to approach the analysis of the power structure from one of three main angles or 'lenses': *governance*, *informality*, and *empowerment*. On one level, the power structure can be understood in terms of a set of formal governance institutions which operate at central and local levels, including central and local administrative authorities, elected political bodies and the forces of law and order. Research has been undertaken on the ways these institutions operate, and on the challenges of improving their effectiveness, around such key themes as decentralisation, democracy-building and administrative reform. A second set of literature has focused on the role of informal relationships within the power structure, such the importance of patron-client relationships and social networks and hierarchies which constrain and facilitate people's lives and livelihoods, and may contribute to high levels of corruption. The non-governmental organisation BRAC's influential study of 'the

net' was a milestone in this characterization of the local power structure. A third area of research literature has focused on ideas about grassroots empowerment, often linked to community organising, gender, civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This is an approach which focuses on how to increase the power of excluded people within formal and informal governance structures and processes to demand better accountability and services, and through the tactic of identifying potential change opportunities within unfolding processes.

The broader roots of Bangladesh's long-standing and well-documented political and governance problems are also briefly sketched out. Formal administrative institutions lack autonomy, since they are dominated by a relatively narrow elite, using authority for personal ends and subject to only weak control by elected governments. Nor are such structures well institutionalised, given the long history of pre- and post-colonial authoritarianism traditions. Despite its many political parties, Bangladesh suffers from a lack of political pluralism, relatively localised and dispersed political organisations and an elite which has built strong political connections with the international aid industry on which Bangladesh remains highly dependent. The two main political parties have largely failed to cooperate constructively in policy debate, and the role of *mustaan* culture of criminality and extortion is pervasive and restricting.

Chapter two moves to a description of the complexity and flux found in the system of local administrative institutions. There are considerable tensions between levels, and between administrators on the one hand and political actors on the other. Running through the whole system, there is a basic 'fault line', between administrators appointed by central government to district and sub-district levels, and the elected officials of the union council (*union parishad*). At the same time, the system is overlaid with a complex web of informal relationships between power-holders. Nevertheless, the data suggests that there are spaces in which attempts at progressive pro-poor change are being explored, sometimes through grassroots struggles for the recognition and operationalisation of 'rights', and other times through negotiations between elite and non-elite groups. Our study indicated that such cooperation is more frequent than some earlier 'structuralist' conceptualisations of the power structure tend to allow for. For example, we found examples of positive outcomes from informal relationships between some local authorities and NGOs.

Chapter three moves on to consider political institutions. The evidence suggests a system in which local politics revolves around two inter-related dimensions: (i) the efforts of elected MPs to dispense patronage and build and maintain their vote banks on the one hand, (ii) attempts by local union

(lowest level of local government) chairmen to negotiate within an increasingly complex environment to try to secure resources for their constituencies and locales. This is often based on a flexible strategy in which chairman and other union council (*union parishad*) members seek to negotiate with political parties, patrons, MPs, local UP and international NGOs and a range of sub-district (*upazila*) public servants. Our data suggests that it is becoming more normal – at least in the three locations that we studied – for the general allocation of public resources, as well as those intended to be targeted to particular sections of the population, to be influenced by wider political interests, as well as by local relations of patronage.

In Chapter four, the judicial institutions are described and analysed. Access to justice for most citizens in rural Bangladesh remains very difficult or, in many cases impossible, either from formal judicial institutions such as the village courts, or from less formal ones such as the traditional mechanism for village dispute settlement, the *shalish*. Yet some of these institutions, such as the *shalish*, are far from fixed and some of our data indicates potential for positive change. A diverse range of practices and outcomes suggests that openings or spaces for improving the outcomes for people who are living in poverty may be possible. However, even when favourable judgements are obtained, the data suggests that it is very difficult to sustain gains without broader support within the local power structure.

In Chapter five, we turn to ‘civil society’, briefly noting some of the literature and then reviewing field data relating to formal civil society activity. We look at the activities of the many development NGOs which dominate our study area, but we also consider other civil society actors such as the business association, voluntary groups and grassroots organisations. Civil society groups have potentially important roles as union level politics and administration becomes more institutionalised, both as partners providing complementary services and as organisers and watchdogs to ensure better local accountability, transparency and democracy. Rather than duplicating structures as in the past, some NGOs have begun to move towards a more sustainable approach which tries instead to renegotiate and influence existing institutions, combining demand and supply pressures. NGO interventions in Bangladesh may have many positive outcomes, but it is their political dimension – particularly in relation to clientelism and its local and national networks – which requires more detailed scrutiny if we are to explain, and build upon, cases of NGO-led development success. Our data takes us a little further in uncovering the ways in which NGOs do not necessarily constitute autonomous, benign development actors as some civil society advocates would sometime have us think

– but nor do they simply reproduce elite interests and maintain inequalities, even when they are elite-driven. Instead, there are spaces for action, linked to specific local circumstances, which occasionally open up, in which the interests of poor people can sometimes be negotiated and advanced.

Chapter six examines informal civil society institutions, which in many ways form the heart of the local power structure, even though these are relatively difficult to identify and analyse. Our data suggests that they are diverse and more importantly perhaps, are not fixed. Some elements of this change, such as the ways in which traditional modes of authority are becoming politicised by the increased penetration of the national political parties and their networks, may have negative implications for the poor. However, there are others, such as the efforts by NGOs and others to increase the accountability of dispute settlement through new forms of informal village dispute settlement mechanisms (*shalish*), which have promising outcomes for pro-poor change. The data on informal civil society also highlights the complex ways in which local institutions interact with the formal structures of local government to produce the governance frameworks in which rural people go about their daily lives.

Chapter seven reviews and compares field data between the three locations, and finds that while the general outline of institutions set out in Figure 1 and Annex 1 are common to each area, different local conditions often apply. This means that a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not apply within diverse conditions and processes of change within the local power structure in each area. For example, the interplay of formal and informal political processes at the union level, the changing role and composition of traditional social institutions such as the *shalish* dispute settlement mechanism, the types, roles and perceptions of non-governmental actors, and the local economic dimensions of change each interact to produce different types of outcomes. As a result we need to identify the ways opportunities may be critically shaped by local individuals, networks and histories, while simultaneously played out against broader power relations set by the state and international donors. Attempts to by outsiders to shape change processes therefore need to recognise and build upon the ‘micro-foundations’ established across different settings and the potential outcomes which these may generate. Social change in rural Bangladesh unfolds in non-linear and multi-directional ways.

While all three villages are subject to common processes of change such as greater politicisation, extensive NGO involvement, and growing livelihood differentiation there are different local outcomes. For example, in the second village, ‘the net’ still existed but had become quite weak, so

that is was possible for targeted external resources (such as NGO credit and public flood relief) to be provided to both rich and poor villagers alike. By contrast, in our first and third villages, ‘the net’ had been replaced by a more flexible ‘politics of reputation’, in which local leaders have become engaged in a constant and ongoing attempt to build alliances and broker relationships.

Many people who live in poverty in rural Bangladesh still have little faith that local institutions will provide the means to secure rights or justice, but our study found some evidence that those with power can sometimes respond positively to negotiation and pressure from civil society around creating potential win-win outcomes which can benefit both poor and non-poor people. For example, we found that a union chairman may cooperate with an NGO which is seeking to strengthen land rights for the poor if it helps to build a stronger political support base for him. Similarly, when previously excluded people, such as landless women, campaign to take up positions within governance institutions such as the union or the *shalish*, either on the basis of bottom-up or top-down pressures, small areas of opportunity and policy ‘space’ are sometimes opened up. The challenge for the future is to combine understanding of this complex ‘micro-politics’ of local change with support for the strengthening of broader economic and political pro-poor change at the district and national levels.

The main insights for practice from the study are four-fold: (i) the need when designing and implementing interventions to recognise, allow for and if possible build upon, local institutional difference and diversity; (ii) the importance of seeking opportunities for the identification and negotiation of win-win coalitions with elites if sustainable pro-poor change is to be secured; (iii) the need for careful support to NGOs and civil society alongside broader institutional support to local and central government; (iv) a recognition of the importance of economic development as a necessary foundation for sustainable governance reform and community organising/empowerment.

Introduction

CHAPTER 1

1.1 The Setting: Bangladesh

Bangladesh is an environmentally vulnerable, low income country that is situated in one of the world's largest deltas, into which flow the Ganges, Brahmaputra and the Meghna rivers. Land is mostly low and flat, making most areas prone to flooding every year, though giving the land high levels of fertility. There is a population of 150 million and average GDP per capita of \$2,053, an average life expectancy of 63 years, and adult literacy of just under 50%. 75% of the population live in rural areas, and there is a 2% annual population growth rate. About three quarters of export earnings are derived from the ready-made garment industry, and two thirds of the population are engaged in farming activities.

Bangladesh has tended to be regarded since its birth in 1971 – when it separated from Pakistan after a bloody liberation war – as one of the quintessential developing countries, characterised by mass poverty and frequent natural disasters, but recent years have seen quite impressive progress in many important areas. The country has witnessed an average 5% growth of GDP since 1990 driven by increasing agricultural production, exports, and foreign investment. There has been a decline in poverty and there is good progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (Devine 2008).

After its liberation in 1971, Bangladesh was ruled by the founding father of the country Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, until his increasingly authoritarian government was brought to a close by his assassination by army conspirators in 1975. General Ziaur Rahman became the military ruler of Bangladesh until his assassination in 1981, after which another military government took power led by General HM Ershad. Ershad ruled until a combination of longstanding popular opposition movement and,

some have argued, donor pressure, finally forced him to resign in 1990.

From 1991 onwards, Bangladesh entered a period of parliamentary democracy, in which regular national elections were managed using a system which involved the installation of a temporary three month neutral Caretaker Government. Three governments were elected in this way until the military intervened once again in 2007. The two main political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), while successfully alternating in power during this democratic period, had nevertheless maintained a highly conflictive relationship which has so far failed to institutionalise a parliamentary form of government, and led to regular periods of enforced strikes and instability.¹

Bangladesh has received consistently high levels of international aid, which has often led to its characterisation as a classic case of aid dependence. In the 1970s, the government of Bangladesh's drift away from its initial founding principle of socialism towards pro-market growth policies was in large part the outcome of donor pressure, and aid levels per capita rose consistently until the early 1990s. While it has been clear that 'significant changes to the policy agenda are unlikely unless promoted by aid', not all the donors are the same. Some, like members of the so-called 'like-minded group', 'consistently push for more radical policies than governments have been willing or able to deliver' (Hossain 2005: p.13–14). The rights-based approach to development has been an example of this, aiming to link poverty reduction to citizenship, laws and accountability, and drawing attention to the rights of women, and of religious and ethnic minorities.

Gender inequality has long been a key policy issue in Bangladesh. Women's rural labour is central to agriculture, particularly in post-harvest processing, but women have remained largely excluded from formal labour markets. Women have also been able to supplement household income through work in wealthier households thereby preserving *pardah*² norms. Since the 1980s, female migration has grown steadily, particularly in relation to the extensive large-scale export garment sector. This has contributed to women's increased presence in the labour force, in both small-scale industries, and in the garment sector, also contributing to a major shift in women's economic and social position.

¹ The Awami League is headed by Sheikh Hasina Wajid, the daughter of Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib). The Bangladesh National Party is led by Khaleda Zia, the widow of General Ziaur Rahman, who gained power and ruled Bangladesh after the coup which killed SR in 1975, and was subsequently assassinated in 1981. Since 1991, there have been one Awami League (1996–2001) and two Bangladesh National Party elected governments (1991–1996, 2001–2006).

² *Pardah* is a word literally meaning "curtain", referring to female seclusion.

Such change has challenged social norms, fundamentally altered the nature of previously male-dominated urban public space through women's visible presence. At the same time, previously rare phenomena of dowry inflation, dowry deaths³ and acid-throwing attacks on women have grown to become significant social problems since the 1980s. No straightforward causal link can be assumed between these trends (Siddiqi 1998). Our data suggests that while these problems continue to undermine women's rights, and there is great diversity in different areas of the country, there are also many indications that many areas of positive change for women are also gradually opening up at the local level.

Another area which has attracted considerable attention is that of Bangladesh's non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector, engaged mostly in microfinance and income generation activities, alongside some radical community organising work and policy advocacy (Lewis 2004). Aid to NGOs increased steadily from the 1980s onwards. By the 1990s, NGOs had become successful in, for example, increasing women's access to resources through a range of small-scale income generating activities which included poultry, aquaculture and handicrafts that have been 'critically important in recasting rural gender relations and expanding opportunities for women' (Feldman 2001, p.233).

Bangladesh's recent economic progress can be seen in stark contrast to developments in administration, governance and politics, many of which have been strikingly unfavourable. Despite the fall of the military regime of General Ershad in 1991 which ushered in a decade and a half of democratic government, by the time of our fieldwork in 2004, there was widespread public and international donor concern at the high levels of corruption, frequent public disorder and an inability of the main political parties to function effectively, inside or outside government. For international donors, it seemed that by the 1990s, Bangladesh's problems were becoming increasingly defined as 'governance'-related – a donor euphemism for political – rather than as technical or resource-based in origin.

The roots of Bangladesh's long-standing governance problems are usefully set out by Moore (2002). Firstly, at the level of formal administration, there is only a weak level of autonomy. Most government and public institutions are dominated by a single relatively narrow national elite, which deploys its authority for personal ends rather than being subject to control by elected governments, with very little separation of formal gov-

³ Dowry is a gift payment demanded by husband's family from bride's family at time of marriage. The term 'dowry inflation' is often used in connection with rapid increases in dowry demands. The term 'dowry deaths' refers both to fatal attacks on women in cases when a dowry demand is not met, and to suicides by women as a result of harassment.

ernance structures from wider society. Secondly, there is a low level of *institutionalisation* of Bangladesh's governance structures, as a result of an authoritarian inheritance from the colonial period, in which processes of state creation in 1947 and 1971 has left the main political and governance institutions grafted on, rather than firmly rooted.

Despite its many political parties, Bangladesh suffers from a lack of political pluralism. The forms of rural political organisation which exist tend to be relatively atomised and localised. For example, Bangladesh lacks the broad-based farmer's movements found in the Philippines, or the caste-based political organisations which have long been part of organisational landscapes in India.

During the Liberation war, Bangladesh had lost much of its small governing elite, which was deliberately targeted by the Pakistan army. The relatively large numbers of non-Bengali senior administrators had also returned to Pakistan. The post-1971 Bangladeshi elite which emerged built strong political connections with the international aid industry rather than generating resources locally, and international aid institutions remain dominant players in Bangladesh's governance.

This external dependence has also contributed to the continuing lack of institutionalization and pluralism. The two main political parties, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) have often found themselves unable to cooperate constructively in policy debate. Finally, the state has found penetration of wider society and institutions difficult due to the physical environment and low rural productivity, ultimately leaving few incentives for the state to impose its authority.

The presence of *mustaans* – the term for local strongmen or mafia – is another distinctive feature of the power structure in Bangladesh. These individuals play three main inter-related roles within local society: first, they form part of the structure of the political parties, often overlapping for example with village political leaders; second, they are active within the organisations and networks of organised crime, in which their own business interests and those of local politicians often become blurred since they use their power and influence to promote and support the careers of activists and politicians; and third, they act as intermediaries or brokers in gate-keeping roles around access to services such as health and education, police and security, and economic facilities such as market-places, land and water resources (Devine 2008).

In 2006, the non-governmental organisation BRAC's *State of Governance Report* provided a valuable updating of the overall picture and highlighted four main problems: the penetration of partisan politics into virtually every corner of public life, the weakness of overall public accountability mecha-

nisms (although with a recognition that informal public pressure for reform is growing), the continuing problem that most of the demand for reform remains externally generated by international donors, and finally, that there remains a lack of objective public knowledge about governance issues.

On 11 January 2007, a state of emergency was imposed on a country which had reached what Devine (2008) describes as ‘the brink of social and political collapse’. The confrontational and dysfunctional party politics, which had characterised Bangladesh since the Ershad (General Ershad see p. 14) period, finally ground to a halt. The military’s intervention was to the evident satisfaction of many ordinary people whose everyday needs as citizens had been largely ignored, or worse still, actively blighted, by the realities of power and politics at both national and local levels.

The provisional Caretaker Government (CTG) put in place after the army’s intervention brought growing levels of street violence to an end, raised hopes that corruption and instability would be tackled, and attracted support from many of the international donors. Yet the situation, initially greeted with a cautious measure of enthusiasm across both the national and international communities, soon began to raise concerns about human rights and democracy. The CTG banned political party activities and restricted freedom of association under its Emergency Power Rules, and the damage caused by two floods, a major cyclone and a crisis promoted by massive increase in food prices, has led to a profound sense of unease across the country.⁴

Yet there have been some positive outcomes too under the new regime. According to information we have subsequently gathered from follow-up conversations with key informants from the study areas during this period, there has been since November 2007 a marked reduction of political and criminal interference in issues of local governance such as the allocation of relief resources (such as food-for-work and test relief) and in the tendering process for market licenses and local construction projects.

1.2 Background to the Study

The framing of development policy and the design of interventions in support of poverty reduction is not just a technical exercise, but also needs to be set within a detailed understanding of the ways that structures and processes of power operate, and how these affect people’s lives. The origins of this study lie in a decision by the Embassy of Sweden in Bangladesh, together with Sida headquarters in Stockholm, to support new re-

⁴ See the ‘Restoring Democracy in Bangladesh’ report, by the International Crisis Group, for a detailed critical overview of this period (ICG 2008).

Figure 1: An outline of key institutions in Bangladesh

Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' civil society	'Informal' civil society/ social norms
Secretariat (36 Ministries and 17 Divisions)	300 member Parliament elected directly by constituents, plus 45 (recently updated from 30) women members selected by MPs Bilateral and multilateral international donors – governance and conditionality Political parties	High Court	Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) National NGOs (e.g. BRAC) Federation of NGOs of Bangladesh (FNB) Chambers of Commerce, e.g. Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) Journalist associations (print and electronics)	Elites and their formal and informal relationships (e.g. positions of power in government, civil society, business plus patronage and kin networks) Social norms e.g. gender relations
Departments (254) and Directorates, boards (173) with civil service of 950,000 staff				
Divisions (6)	Political party organisation and networks	District courts with magistrates and judges (including civil and criminal courts)	District level FNB chapters Regional NGOs (e.g. Samata) and their groups	

Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' civil society	'Informal' civil society/ social norms
Sub-district (<i>Upazila</i>) (460) Municipalities (309) Line ministry officials Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Sub-District Coordination Officer Development Coordination Committee (UDCC)	Local political party offices Upazila (sub-district) Committees of national political parties	Formal land dispute court (Assistant Commissioner (AC) land) Police station	Field offices of national NGOs Local NGOs	
Unions (4498) Union committees for school- market, law and order, etc	Union <i>Parrishad</i> (council) with directly elected chairman, 9 general seats, plus 3 specially reserved for women Union branches of national political parties	Village courts (rarely used or effective) Arbitration councils (Assistant Commissioner (AC))	Business associations User cooperatives	
Villages (87,000)	<i>Gram sarkar</i> village government actually at 'ward' level, with 9 wards per union The system was discontinued in 2007 Community police at ward level Political party activists		Village development and welfare associations NGO-formed grassroots groups	Patrilineal clan (<i>gusti</i>) Samaj (social groupings) Informal leadership Mosque/temple committees Shalish (informal courts) Philanthropic activity Occasional local <i>ghierao</i> * movements Social movements

* Spontaneous collective attempt to gain redress through protesting outside a government office

search which would describe and analyse rural power structures and relations at the local level. The research aimed to answer the following two questions: (i) what does the local power structure look like in rural Bangladesh, and (ii) do the ways that it is changing enable people living in poverty to make stronger claims on their rights and entitlements?

The full range of institutions which make up the power structure, from the local village to national level, are set out in Figure 1. The report follows the five main categories depicted in Figure 1 of administration, political institutions, judiciary, formal civil society and informal civil society – i.e. the main formal and informal institutions that give shape to the power structure from national down to local levels. The focus of the study is at the local level, but we will also consider the ways local structures and process are increasingly inter-linked more widely.

1.3 Design, Methodology and Key Terms

The present study seeks to contribute to existing knowledge and research by presenting and analysing new empirical data from one part of the country which highlights the ways in which disadvantaged individuals and groups in Bangladesh seek to use existing but changing structures and relationships of power to increase their influence and further their economic and social goals. It documents the main barriers and challenges that they face, and explores the current limits to local change processes. In this way, it aims to complement more conventional macro-level analyses of power which are undertaken at country level, and seeks to contribute to the development of a potential model for undertaking further work in this somewhat neglected area in Bangladesh. The broader questions of Bangladesh's politics and governance require an engagement with an extensive literature which lies beyond the scope of the present study. The rural power structure is a complex topic of study, and leads to a set of difficult theoretical questions which will no doubt be debated for a long time to come.

The study combines a synthesis of background literature with a set of specially-collected qualitative field data. The first phase was a literature review which aimed to summarise the state of existing knowledge and identify knowledge gaps which could be followed up with fieldwork. The literature review drew on a selection of published and unpublished sources to provide up to date description and research findings. This was followed by a one month phase of field-level research during August and September 2004, followed by a period of further analysis and follow up.

In this study, we have necessarily engaged with a wide range of local institutions which are best expressed by their Bengali names – such as the

shalish informal court system, (see e.g. 4.3 The Shalish in Action) or the idea of the *samaj* local religious community or brotherhood which helps to structure local village social organisation – which often have no simple or straightforward English translation. One also encounters some specialised usages of English words such as ‘union’, which in Bangladesh refers to the lowest level of local government. In order to increase the readability of the study, particularly for non-specialists, we have tried to keep our use of such Bengali and specialised English terms to a minimum. For example, it is relatively easy to replace the word *upazila* with ‘sub-district’, and *parishad* with ‘council’, and this has been done throughout. However, there are some words, such as *shalish* and *samaj*, which we feel should be retained, because they cannot be easily or precisely rendered in English. Bangladesh is also a society where the use of acronyms, particularly in relation to government agencies, is very commonly used, both at official levels and by people in everyday speech. Again, we have tried to keep our use of acronyms to a minimum, but in cases where we feel they are necessary they have been retained. Readers are referred to the ‘Acronyms’ and ‘Glossary’ sections at the end of this report for guidance.

The main issues for research and analysis from the original terms of reference for the study included the following: (i) describing power structures and relations at the local level (e.g. formal institutions, informal patron-client ties and norms); (ii) understanding the ways different categories of local people conceptualise and perceive the exercise of social, economic and political power; (iii) analysing the relationship between formal political institutions, such as the local union council, and village institutions such as the *shalish*, the *samaj*, the mosque and the patrilineal clan; (iv) tracing the outward linkages between unions and sub-district and beyond; (v) exploring the ways in which local resources (e.g. taxes, market place fees, etc) and external resources (e.g. annual development budgets) are allocated; (vi) documenting the range of informal practices such as the so-called *mustaan* (strong-man) culture that links politics and organised crime; and (vii) assessing the roles of civil society and private sector actors in these processes.

The fieldwork was undertaken in the Greater Faridpur District (see Map, p. 108) of central Bangladesh. The field team deployed a range of qualitative research methods in order to engage with a representative group of local people that included both those who occupy significant positions within local power structures, and ordinary people living in poverty who must engage with the elements of the power structure in the course of their daily lives. Three contrasting fieldwork sites were located for the study: the first village, a well-connected one with relatively good

infrastructure, diversified agriculture, and a more dynamic economy with a thriving *bazaar*; the second village, a remote, flood-prone village located in a *char* area (river land) with poor infrastructure; and the third village, in a peri-urban setting, a few miles from Faridpur town. The names of our informants and study locations have been disguised, in order to protect the identities of those involved in the study, especially given the sensitive nature of some of the data which was discussed during the research.

In each of the three locations, following a preliminary mapping exercise and semi-structured interviews with key informants, four discussion groups were convened that were disaggregated by gender and wealth – ‘better-off’ men, ‘better-off’ women, men from households who were living in poverty, and women from similar households. While necessarily approximate, these social categorisations are ones with which, within the context of rural Bangladesh, many local people identify. Trusted local government officials and NGO fieldworkers also assisted the teams with this identification process. The data from these twelve focus groups was then supplemented with semi-structured interviews with local formal and informal leaders and officials, in order to construct short illustrative case studies – of people’s encounters with or perspectives on power – highlighting aspects of the way the local power structure operated in each of the three areas. A selection of these case studies are presented as case examples throughout the text within the boxes.

The experience of doing the fieldwork was generally positive, though the research teams and local people faced many difficulties arising from serious flooding in the area at the time. Abul Hossain’s prior knowledge of the study area was an enormous advantage in terms of identifying local individuals and organisations, and in building the trust necessary for work of this kind. Useful data collection was generated through the focus group discussions, despite the wide-ranging agendas which were identified for discussion. It was sometimes difficult to ensure that the groups were effectively disaggregated between less well-off and more well-off categories due to the limited time and information available, but disaggregation by gender provided a valuable means to ensure that women’s voices were heard.

1.4 Theorising the Local Power Structure in Rural Bangladesh

The first stage of the study, as we have seen, was a review of the literature – both up-to-date studies and reports which reveal details of what is currently happening in Bangladesh, as well as older but still relevant work, including theoretical work on power and elites. The latter in particular can all too easily be overlooked in the ‘perpetual present’ of development policy

work (Lewis 2008). The next two sections summarise some of the general themes arising from this literature review. Other findings from the literature review have been threaded through the rest of the chapters which follow.

The dominant view of agrarian relations in Bangladesh is one which has viewed local elites as obstacles to progress with poverty reduction, exercising power through control of land and tenancy relationships, the ‘capture’ of external development resources provided by government, and the creation and maintenance of patronage networks for personal gain (Rahman, 1981; Boyce, 1987).⁵ This perspective was exemplified by the oft-quoted study of *The Net: Power Structure in Ten Villages* (BRAC, 1983: 1–2) which found that:

... resources were not reaching the poor and landless but instead were being controlled and enjoyed by a small number of powerful men, who had developed good connections with the local government officers ... a small group seemed to have obtained a very disproportionate share of power. At the same time, the landless people with whom we were working frequently caught up helpless in the meshes of this invisible network which they only partially understood, had a very small amount of power indeed.

This perspective resonated strongly with the agrarian structuralist tradition in Bangladesh that was shaped by influential researchers such as Arens and Van Beurden (1977), Jahangir (1982) and Hartman and Boyce (1983). Each of these accounts portrayed the rural poor as caught to varying degrees within powerful and largely inflexible structural constraints in the village context. While recognising the obvious importance of such constraints, such as highly inequitable landholding patterns and pervasive patron-client relationships, other researchers began to question – to varying degrees – the level of structural rigidity implied by the ‘net’ analysis.

For example, Wood (1999) made the case that an ‘agricultural reform’ was occurring in parts of the countryside. Instead of relying solely on land-based agricultural production, some rural actors were beginning to use a wider range of non-traditional livelihoods strategies based on new opportunities created by the introduction of technologies such as shallow tube-well irrigation to begin to renegotiate structural constraints. Khan’s (1989) rural field data led him to question the assumption that the rich peasant or landlord class simply ‘captured’ rural institutions such as

⁵ Patronage in the context of South Asia was usefully defined by Breman (1974: 18) from his work in Gujarat in terms of ‘a pattern of relationships in which members of hierarchically arranged groups possess mutually recognised, not explicitly stipulated rights and obligations involving mutual aid and preferential treatment. The bond between patron and client is personal, and is contracted and continued by mutual agreement for an indeterminate time’.

agricultural co-operatives. Lewis (1991), following from Wood's analysis, used an actor-oriented approach to analyse the ways that new technologies often opened up new rural roles and transactions into which less powerful actors moved, sometimes weakening the land-based power base of traditional rural elites. Such accounts suggested that 'conflict and capture' issues were becoming overtaken by patterns of broader agrarian change (Wood 1999), or in some cases were being over-emphasised for ideological reasons (Palmer-Jones, 1999).

What can now be generally agreed is that the local power structure, though pervasive, is far from static. Land ownership alone is no longer the main determinant of rural power (Lewis 1991; Wood 1999). Bode's (2002) study reveals more of the changing composition of rural elites that has taken place from the 1980s onwards, as new rural wealth accumulation based on the privatised introduction of new agricultural technologies has taken root, bringing new non-traditional rural business households into the local power structure at village level. Both new and older elites are exploring new and diversified strategies of livelihood expansion and consolidation, including diversified economic activities, involvement in party political networks, engagement in forms of philanthropy and 'civil society' action, and setting up NGOs.

It is also becoming clear that some of these earlier accounts gave insufficient attention to relations of coexistence and cooperation, or to types of market transactions that may create opportunities for development interventions that could produce constructive outcomes for both rich and poor. Hossain (2004:1) suggests that in some cases '... village elites can be engaged to provide an "enabling environment" for the ultra-poor, and indeed, to promote their development' and that there is a need to understand better 'the conditions under which solidarity with the poor becomes possible'. For example, the non-governmental organisation BRAC has found more recently that some sections of village elites may be willing to undertake joint work with an outside NGO to improve village water and sanitation, with direct benefits for the very poor, simply from a sense of public duty.⁶

Blair's (2003: 1) analysis of experiences with support to civil society and pro-poor initiatives in Bangladesh similarly suggests that 'forging coalitions with non-poor groups to press for more broad-based agendas' can help to build local capacities for change more effectively than some of the more confrontational strategies. These types of non-governmental or civil

⁶ Imran Matin and Naomi Hossain, BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, personal communication.

society activity may also bring potentially significant outcomes in terms of gender equality. According to Kabeer (1994:229)

Grassroots nongovernmental organizations tend to be less rule-governed [than official agencies] and their face-to-face interactions with their constituencies have given them both a greater advantage in promoting innovative strategies and less scope for sidestepping the issue of women's subordination.

Such work suggests that while elites remain powerful and dominant, there may still be some unexplored 'room for manoeuvre' within the local power structure and its relationships for agencies seeking to make pro-poor interventions.

1.5 Approaches to Analysing Power and Elites

Much of the development literature in Bangladesh on the workings of the power structure, itself a somewhat vague term, has tended to approach the analysis of the power structure from one of three main angles or 'lenses': *governance, informality, and empowerment*. On one level, the power structure can be understood in terms of a set of formal institutions of governance which operate at central and local levels, including central and local administrative authorities, elected political bodies and the forces of law and order. Much useful research has therefore been undertaken on the ways these institutions operate, and on the challenges of improving their effectiveness. Key themes have included decentralisation, democracy-building and administrative reform (e.g. Siddiqi 2000). A second loose set of literature has focused on the role of informal relationships within the power structure, such the importance of patron-client relationships and social networks and hierarchies which constrain and facilitate people's lives and livelihoods, and contribute to corruption. Kochanek (2003), for example, writes of the importance of understanding Bangladesh's 'informal political process' which has failed to secure people's equality of access to the main political institutions. BRAC's (1983) study of 'the net' was a milestone in characterising the informal exclusionary processes operating within the power structure at the local village level. Finally, a third area of development literature has focused on the idea of 'empowerment', often linked to themes of community organising, gender, civil society and NGOs (Wood 1992). This is an approach which focuses on how to increase the power of excluded people within formal and informal governance structures and processes, through organised pressure and through the tactical identification of opportunities and 'spaces' (cf McGee 2004) within unfolding processes.

Each of these three approaches is important for an analysis of the local power structure in Bangladesh, and in this study we draw in a synthetic way on them all. Before we move into a more detailed empirical description and analysis of the specifics of the power structure, it is first useful to reflect briefly on the concept of power itself. While it is possible to identify and analyse the workings of a range of institutions through which power is exercised in a given society, and to examine the ways different factors constrain or facilitate individual made by particular social actors, 'power' itself remains a difficult and abstract concept which is constantly debated by social theorists.

The key text in the sociology of power is that of Lukes' (2005), who understands power as the ability of its holders to exact compliance or obedience of other individuals to their will. For example, the legitimate power of officials is derived from their formal position in a hierarchy, while the informal power of *mustaans* in Bangladesh derives from their connections with other powerful actors backed up by the threat of physical violence. But many social theorists also draw attention to the ways power operates through less obvious routes. For example, we also know that power is exercised in a range of non-rational, informal ways by officials who do not play by the rules, but act in their own self-interest, manipulate information or influence decision-making through informal means. We find many cases of 'flexible' or 'negotiated' power within organisations, since hierarchies may only form loose organising devices with little absolute power, leaving managers with a capacity to question, negotiate and apply discretion when making decisions (Miller et al, 1999).

Officials also act within wider traditions and cultures, such that 'bureaucratic institutions are weighed down by their own histories, by the legacy of rules, practices and ideologies they have inherited from the past' (Kabeer, 1994:229). This links with another useful set of theoretical ideas, in the form of Foucault's (1980) work on the multi-dimensional and strategic nature of power. He draws attention to the ways in which power is exercised and embodied within the constant processes of discipline and persuasion that maintain the positioning of those with and without power. This pervasive view of power is useful in that it shows the ways in which people living in poverty may at times be reluctant to take action because they internalize a sense of powerlessness, identifying with their assigned place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But it is perhaps less useful in providing clues to the development of strategies which can challenge prevailing structures. Nevertheless, power in Bangladesh can be seen as 'more fluid, more pervasive and socially embedded than the conventional focus on individual decision making would suggest' (Kabeer, 1994: 229). For

example, it can be found within both men's attempts to mobilise resources to promote their own and gender interests, and in their devising 'rules of the game' which disguise inequality and self-interest.

Lukes also distinguishes the 'power to' – liberal forms of decision making in which there is observable conflict and power is the ability of some actors to prevail in decision making against other actors, from the 'power over' – the idea that power also operates through the capacity of some actors to exclude certain issues from decision making altogether, thereby benefiting some groups. This idea of 'invisible' or hidden power argues that power can operate through indirect and subtle ways in which, for example, certain courses of action are prevented from ever being placed on the agenda. In this 'third dimension' of power is the idea that some conflict of interests are systematically excluded from the consciousness of those involved – such as an account of social reality in which inequality is down-played or attributed to fate. Institutions may operate to ensure that conflicts within the social order do not surface, and people may purposefully limit their world view to reduce the risks of conflict.

This distinction has been important within the emergence of theories of 'empowerment' within community development. For example, Rowlands (1996) uses it to separate out the kind of power which allows one person or group to dominate another, from the type of power which allows a person or group to challenge and change their situation. Such ideas also resonate with Gramsci's (1988) ideas about power as a totalizing 'hegemonic' force which makes it possible for agencies of the state and/or elites to maintain their dominant positions through forms of institutional power, thereby repressing citizens who may hold alternative or contradictory opinions about state actions. This view is particularly useful for analysing forms of collective action or resistance which emerge within 'civil society' and social movements. Some Bangladeshi NGOs such as *Nijera Kori* and *Samata*, which seek to organise and mobilise people living in poverty in support of better accessing their rights (in contrast to other NGOs more concerned with service delivery roles), can be seen to create radical 'spaces' in which some elements of this hegemony is contested.⁷

Ideas about development and 'empowerment', particularly in relation to women's rights, or those of the landless, are highly relevant in the discussion about how agencies, groups and individuals can bring about changes to the status quo, or face resistance to such changes. While some writers on rural communities and village life have emphasised notions of

⁷ Scott's (1985) ideas about 'the weapons of the weak' draws on a Gramscian perspective to show how even those with little formal power can still sometimes resist in small ways.

community, solidarity and harmony, the concept of power has led others to emphasis social inequality and disharmony, for example in relation to the gendered exercise of power within institutions.

Such approaches to power take us well beyond the rigid structuralism of the accounts cited earlier, to encompass ideas about actor agency, both in terms of the constraints they face in taking action, as well as the resources which make it possible to take advantage of opportunities and ‘spaces’ with the changing structures and processes.

Also relevant to the study is the concept of ‘elites’. Bottomore (1964: 14) defines elites as ‘functional, mainly occupational, groups which have high status (for whatever reason) in a society’. As Devine (2008) argues, Bangladesh is a society in which local governance and decision-making processes have been increasingly captured by ‘unelected elites’ and violent *mustaan* criminal elements who between them exert a wide range of controls over ordinary people’s lives. Wright Mills (1956) coined the term ‘power elite’ to denote people at the top of the major institutional hierarchies of a society, whose shared interests lead them to form an overlapping clique influencing major decisions. In this way, an elite constructs and maintains a hierarchical power structure based on asset ownership and social stratification which enables it to make decisions which transcend ordinary social environments to affect the lives of people, including those with whom they do not have any direct contact. This power structure, as we shall see, extends from elite control of central or national level institutions right down to the village or neighbourhood levels. It also encompasses the range of individuals who seek to ‘broker’ elite relationships and resources across wider society (Lewis 1991; Mosse and Lewis 2006).

The present study draws, where appropriate, upon each of these inter-related views of power, includes both formal and informal institutions and processes within the description and analysis of the local power structure. For example, we examined the ways in which the *shalish* local informal court system is used to resolve disputes, its changing membership and the ways that certain kinds of issues, such as gender violence, may or may not find their way onto the agenda of the *shalish*. Another important arena of the power structure lies within the local union council (*union parishad*), and we look for example at the ways in which the various union-level standing committees operate in theory and in practice (*union* is the lowest level of local government). We also discuss the ways in which some NGOs are contributing to the strengthening of women’s voice and power, such as the case of *Samata’s Local Women’s Action Committees* which have been established to challenge violence against women.

While we emphasise the importance of both formal and informal institutions, we also need to remember that such distinctions can be complex in practice, since all formal institutions are characterised by a range of informal practices. For example, the formal worlds of ‘rational’ public administrative rules and procedures in local government structures, as well as donor’s ideas and policies in relation to development intervention, are both greatly at odds with the messy realities of local communities and front-line field staff (Hilhorst 2003). Formal institutions which operate informally are an important feature of any society, but this is particularly apparent in Bangladesh, with both negative and, as we will show, perhaps also some positive outcomes. As Meagher (2008) argues, the distinction between formal and informal is increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly in societies where the overall context of liberalization and deregulation has created an increasing intertwining between ‘official’ and informal institutions and economies. It therefore becomes useful to ‘reconnect’ the analysis of social networks and informality with understandings of the state.

Administrative Institutions

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Introduction

Successive regimes in Bangladesh have attempted to implement their own decentralisation initiatives over the years, leaving a trail of half-formed institutions with uncertain roles – each of which can be traced back to a particular historical moment, as with the unions, which were established under the British colonial era, or the sub-district council (*Upazila parishad*) set up by General Ershad during the 1980s. Despite this, Bangladesh remains today a heavily centralised country.

The main administrative institutions which exist at the formal level in rural Bangladesh are set out in the first column of Figure 1. In each of Bangladesh's 64 Districts, a District Commissioner (DC) co-ordinates overall development activities via 460 sub-districts, known locally as *upazilas*. The lowest rung of local government is the union, each of which has an elected council. At various times an effort has also been made to establish elected bodies at village level, known as the *gram sarkar*, but as we shall see, these attempts have generally amounted to very little. This chapter describes each of these levels in turn, drawing on a range of research literature, before moving on to present insights from the study which offer a glimpse of some of the key formal and informal interactions which characterise this area of the local power structure.

2.2 Union Level

The union council (*union parishad*) (UP) has as we have seen existed as a local institution since the British colonial period and currently has thirteen members, including three seats which are specifically reserved for women. In the past decade, the union has become the key focal point of

local government.

During the 1980s, General Ershad had favoured the sub-district (*upazila*) as the crucial level of local government through which he had attempted to build and consolidate a rural power base, through dispensation of central resources to his appointees in the sub-districts. Two sets of elections were held to newly-formed sub-district council in 1985 and in 1990, but after Ershad's removal from power soon afterwards, the principle of the elected sub-district council was abandoned by subsequent democratic governments. In recognition of the new role envisaged for union level activities, a programme of building union headquarter 'complexes' was initiated by the Awami League (AL) government in the late 1990s, in order to house a small number of government technical experts to manage its development work (Blair 2005). This programme remains incomplete.

The most recent set of union elections took place in 2003, and brought some changes to the rural power structure. Just under half (42%) of chairmen elected were found to be new faces, almost all were party-affiliated, and most were aged between 41–50. A total of 22 women union chairpersons were elected, which was a small increase over the 20 women that were elected in 1997 (PPRC 2003a). The union chairmen are not formally elected on party lists, but they are nevertheless normally informally affiliated with one or other of the main political parties. There has long been a relatively high turnover of elected officials at the local level, perhaps suggesting that voters can to a degree discipline unpopular leaders, as Crook and Manor (1998) showed in their study of the 1990 sub-district chairman elections.

Through its twelve formal committees, the union has responsibilities for implementing a range of centrally-funded development projects – such as road building and maintenance, relief services, rural development, education, law and order, local roads and market revenue collection and allocation (Bode 2002). However, in practice many of these committees may not be convened or may be non-operational (Hobley, 2003). The process for approval of projects is highly bureaucratic, and requires the union chairman or another member to apply with details of a proposed project to the office of the Sub-District Coordination Officer at sub-district level. An application then triggers a visit to the union from a sub-district Project Implementation Officer, who comes to the locality to undertake a survey. If this stage is successful, then a project form is submitted to a Project Implementation Committee.

One of the most important committees at union level is the *bazaar* committee, which is a focal point for connecting with trading and business

activities and, therefore, economic power and local revenue generation. The committee is formed each year and includes the union council chairman and secretary along with local businessmen, school and mosque representatives. It oversees toll collection, resolves disputes among shopkeepers in the market-place and allocates revenue for local development. Bode and Howes (2002) reported in relation to bazaar committees general lack of skills, a low awareness of prescribed roles among its officers, and a limited public understanding about its role.

Several government, NGO and donor initiatives have therefore focused on the challenges of strengthening the union council (*union parishad*) and its committees. For example, the Local Capacity Development Initiative (LCDI) pilot project in Greater Faridpur made considerable progress using a combination of on the one hand, demand creation and awareness-raising among local citizens, and on the other, the direct provision to unions of funds for development schemes. This was found to have helped to build a clearer roles, generated higher levels of respect for the institution, and improved transparency in relation union-level decision-making and implementation processes (Langbakk and Ahmed 2003).

The UPS *Working to Achieve Real Development* (UPWARD) project organised by the NGO CARE, has attempted to strengthen union councils, using a combination of awareness raising, training, workshops, exposure visits, social mapping and participatory development planning methods (Khan and Khan 2001). Finally, an Asian Development Bank initiative undertaken in partnership with the local NGO BRAC has focused on strengthening women's participation in the union councils through the training of female members on their roles and responsibilities. It has reported progress in empowering women representatives who had reportedly previously found themselves 'a bit lost' on the council, so that they now conduct regular ward meetings, appoint local community leaders and lead local discussions on such issues as hygiene education, the need for new latrines, legal action on violence against women and local road maintenance.⁸

2.3 Village Level Government (*Gram Sarkar*)

During the late 1970s, when General Ziaur Rahman's military government was in power, so-called *gram sarkar* 'village government' system had been conceived, but only weakly implemented. As Zarina Khan (2001: 117) has explained

⁸ http://www.adb.org/documents/periodicals/ADB_Review/2004/vol36 (accessed 14/01/2005).

Headed by a Gram Pradhan (village head), the GS was composed of elected members representing farmers, landless labourers, artisans, freedom fighters, women and youths. GS was given the responsibility for looking after agriculture, health, family planning, law and order, etc. But having no revenues of its own GS failed to discharge most of its functions. Besides, GS was heavily used by the Zia regime for partisan political purposes ... Yet Gram Sarkar was the first attempt not only to challenge the solidarity of the landed elite but could also be considered a step towards integrating the disadvantaged groups in the process of local governance.

After the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government was elected for its second term of office, Khaleda Zia decided to reintroduce *gram sarkar* in 2003 at the ward level.⁹

The reintroduced village government, *gram sarkar* was envisaged as a kind of ‘support organisation’ for the union council. Each village government had thirteen members, who were decided upon at a ward meeting based on consensus and consultation. Members were supposed to reflect ten social categories, to include at least three women, plus the relevant union chairman and a woman union council member advisor, and were appointed for a term of five years. The appointment of the members was supervised by the UNO. Once again, the village government itself had no fund-raising powers, but limited resources were received from the union and it was free to accept monies from other sources.

A study by PPRC (2003b) found the village government to be composed on average of a quarter farmers, a fifth businessmen, 18% women and 8% labourers and headed by ex-officio union council members. Over 60% of the members had a Bangladesh National Party (BNP) affiliation, 14% Awami League (AL) and 14% none at all. The system was largely boycotted by those villages strongly associated with the Awami League. There was an average of only 13% voter turnout in each constituency, and it was found that there was a general lack of understanding in the community about what the village government was for, and a corresponding lack of public engagement with the new system. In 2007, the Care-taker Government, CTG decided to once again abolish the *gram sarkar* village government.

2.4 Sub-district Level (Upazila)

A very wide administrative gulf exists between parliament and the local unions, since there are no intermediary elected representatives or bodies

⁹ Each union has nine wards.

in-between. This leaves the sub-district (*upazila*) and the district tiers with very weak levels of public accountability.¹⁰

The sub-district had been established in 1982, after General Ershad seized power in a military coup and sought to build political allies in the rural areas (Crook and Manor 1998). It was provided with an elected council and given revenue-raising powers, but as we have seen, these sub-district councils (*Upazila parishad*) were then abolished in 1991 once military rule was ended and the first Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government elected. In the new post-authoritarian democratic Bangladesh, sub-districts were viewed as bodies which had been fatally compromised by their association with military rule, and this particular experiment in decentralisation was put on ice.

At the time of the fieldwork, the sub-districts therefore existed as administrative units only, lacking any representative councils. Nevertheless, they continue to play an important role in the local allocation of resources. The sub-districts derive a substantial portion of their revenue from a 'block grant' which received from the central government's Annual Development Programme (ADP). The block grant allocation is made centrally by the Programme Division of Bangladesh's Planning Commission, within the framework of a Three Year Rolling Investment Programme (TYRIP) and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which has now replaced the national Five Year Plan. Sub-districts also attract central resources via a range of 'special' projects which can be brought in from the main line ministries, usually as a result of a member of parliament's (MP) lobbying and influence. The sub-districts also have access to a third source of funds through locally-generated revenue in the form of lease payments from local market places (*bazaars* and *hats*).

Our data was collected at a time when the rules governing the Annual Development Programme were under revision. Until 2003–4, there were five headings for ADP expenditure: agriculture, infrastructure, education, communications and health. A revised manual prepared by the LGRDC during 2004–2005 set out ten development headings under the 'block grant' system: agriculture and irrigation, fisheries and livestock, small industries, communications, public health, housing, child health and social welfare, culture and sports, education, and miscellaneous.¹¹ According to the new manual, there can now be up to 13 development schemes per

¹⁰ An additional problem is that of a very low level of morale which increasingly characterises public servants across the whole public sector, as a result of both the increased public criticism they receive and the relative decline of their salaries against those in the private sector (BRAC 2006).

¹¹ *Upazila Parishad Umman Tahabil Babohar – Nirdeśika*, Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD) Ministry, dated August 10th, 2004.

union and for each scheme the highest budget limit was increased to Tk75,000.

A sub-district (*Upazila*) Development Coordination Committee (UDCC) allocates resources to the unions, bringing together the local union council chairmen and three women council members, along with the various sub-district level line ministry officials and with the Sub-District Coordination Officer (UNO) as committee secretary.¹² The local MP plays an advisory role. The position of chair of the UDCC is rotated at each monthly meeting among the various union council chairmen within the sub-district. Hobley (2003) reports that this process of constantly shifting leadership usually leads to a lack of continuity and ‘follow through’ within UDCC business. At the same time, it leaves the UDCC open to influence from the MP making the UDCC a critical focal point in relation to key relationships in the local power structure over resource allocation (see Box 3.2 below).

The operation of the UDCC is therefore a prime example of the importance of informal relationships within formal institutions, and offers a useful insight into the operation of the power structure. The key to the link between the union leadership and the sub-district tends to be informal and personal rather than formal and accountable, as Bode and Howes (2002) report

UP Chairmen sit on the ... UDCC ... and are able to use this and more informal contacts to lobby for resources, but their formal connections with the sub-district (upazila) administration are quite limited and their overall influence over its deliberations only slight. (p. v).

Since undertaking the fieldwork, the system has continued to change, and in ways which may conceivably ‘free up’ certain elements of these processes. Press reports in January 2005 stated that central government had decided to begin allocating block grants directly to the unions, in order to bypass the sub-districts. In 2007, the CTG moved to abolish the MP advisory role in the UDCC through its Committee for Strengthening and Accelerating Local Government (CSALG), which was approved by the Cabinet in 2008. CSALG has recommended a major reform of the sub-district system, now formalized through a Presidential order. This new structure will consist of a Chair, plus a male and female Deputy Chair. All three positions are to be directly elected. Local union council (*union parishad*) chairmen and various government officials will be members of these new-style sub-district councils (*Upazila parishads*).

¹² The presence of women members on the UDCC is still relatively unusual. We only found it operating as an apparently informal arrangement which was put in place in our peri-urban village.

2.5 District Level

Districts have a only supervisory role in union level development initiatives. A Deputy Director of Local Government (DDLG), appointed by the LGRDC, has the power to inspect all aspects of union operations, to maintain a liaison with union councils and to scrutinise their budgets.¹³ The DDLG also organises a District Development Coordination Committee (DDCC), over which the minister in charge of the district generally presides. If the minister is unable to attend the DDCC meeting, then it is chaired by the District Commissioner (DC). According to Hobley (2003), as with the UDCC, there is in practice no formal mechanism for the District Commissioner (DC) to coordinate district-level development activities effectively. Instead, the District Commissioner (DC) simply relies on his ability to influence line departments informally.

The District Commissioner (DC) is responsible for recruiting union level staff and approving all union council projects. The district is ‘the crucial building block of centralised control by the government’, since all local government is tightly supervised and controlled by the District Commissioner (DC), and this form of decentralisation is therefore best seen as ‘partial deconcentration’ (Hobley, 2003, p.12). Central government retains overall control over decision-making, but allows some responsibilities for implementation and limited decision making to take place at the union level:

In particular the absence of fiscal decentralisation ensures that locally responsive service delivery becomes extremely difficult to achieve (p. 12).

Another complicating factor within the process is the influence of the donors. A Development Assistance Committee (DAC) review of decentralisation and governance experiences concluded that the difficult relationship between donors and central government has often impeded Bangladesh’s progress with decentralisation at the local level (OECD 2004). The review found that support from central government is often not properly secured, and that donor coordination and lesson learning across decentralisation portfolios is not adequate. Overall sustainability of decentralised governance is impeded by the lack of incentives and capacity for local government to generate revenue effectively.

¹³ Until recently, DDLGs were known as Assistant Director of Local Government (ADLG). The new term reflects an upgrading of the post.

Considerable tension was therefore found to exist between officials and elected representatives. As we have seen, MPs have only an advisory role on the UDCC but were nevertheless required to sign off on central development funds for all projects. Along with their national political party activists they have been able to exercise considerable levels of informal power in pursuit of their local interests in term of maintaining local 'vote banks'.

Since the installation of the Caretaker Government discussions with several of our key informants have indicated that political interference by MPs, party activists and *mustaans* has all but disappeared, but that there are fears that it would quickly return if there is a return to old-style confrontational democratic politics after the elections which are planned for December 2008.

2.6 A Glimpse of the System in Practice

If we move to examine the way the system works in practice, we immediately find that there are two sets of problems which characterise the operation of the administrative institutions at local level. The first is the problem of a lack of role clarity, partly as a consequence of frequent change and reorganisation. The second is the problem of interwoven formal and informal roles, creating a complex political and highly personalised system.

The effectiveness of the union councils (*union parishads*) is compromised by the fact that many members have little knowledge of their roles and responsibilities, or of the rights of local citizens, and therefore fail to perform their functions very effectively. The voices of the female members of the union council and its various committees tend to be particularly marginalised (Bode 2002). Conversely, many of the ordinary people we spoke to locally seemed to have only a very low level of understanding of the role of the union council, and very few expectations of it.

While there are rules designed to allocate central resources according to the differing needs of specific unions, in practice these are often fudged and resources are simply divided up. A key informant interview with one of the union chairman in the study area provided us with a detailed case example of the ways in which the workings of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) need to be understood at both formal and informal levels (Box 2.1). Furthermore, low level corruption at the sub-district reduces the amount of resources which reach the unions, under a range of semi-official and informal compulsory charges made which union chairmen are unable to challenge.

Box 2.1: The union chairman and the Annual Development Programme: tensions with the sub-district (*upazila*)

The chairman explained the two types of development project that take place under the Annual Development Programme (ADP) for local infrastructure development, both general and special projects. The ADP allocations from central funds are provided from Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives, (LGRDC) to each sub-district (*upazila*), and are then supposed to be distributed among each of the unions at the monthly meeting of the Upazila Development Coordination Committee (UDCC) according to strict allocation criteria. These rules specify an allocation according to the relative needs, land area and population size of each union. In practice, these criteria are not used, and a simple division of the cash is made so that each receives a similar amount (Tk3 lakh; about £3000). There is also a problem in that the sub-district tends to 'rake off' a proportion of this money in the form of informal charges. The chairman explained: *'There is provision for the UNO to take 16% of the Annual Development Programme for both the general and the special projects and we chairman, though we do not like it, have no choice but to give our consent'*. The purposes of this 16% cut were stated as (i) 10% for an annual 'champion chairman award', (ii) 5% for the *Upazila* Establishment Department and (iii) 1% for a contingency fund for unexpected disasters. The chairman's view is that this 16% charge is quite unnecessary, and represents nothing more than the 'formalization of a bribery system' for the benefit of the sub-district (*upazila*) administration. Nor is the union chairmen very impressed with the recently-revised rules for the Annual Development Programme block grant system. He said that he doubted whether the allocations under the ten headings would be carried out according to the rules, and said that it would not therefore be possible to make allocations to locally-appropriate schemes.

The union chairman chairs all the committees. As an influential local figure, it is usually his own personal leadership style and informal relationships which most strongly condition the style and outcomes of local politics and decision-making. While the union chairman is relatively powerful locally, he must also deal with the MPs who have a far higher level of power and influence. Formally, MPs are only supposed to perform low level advisory roles at sub-district and district levels, but in practice they exercise considerable power. Union chairmen are therefore heavily constrained by MPs who may be interested in maintaining influence over their local 'vote banks', and by local officials at sub-district level through which union resources from central government departments must pass. The influence of the MP further skews resource allocation towards particular groups. Case example Box 3.2 (see Chapter 3) highlights the ways in which an MP operates within the UDCC.

The union council chairman usually makes decisions alone, or in negotiation with local officials and the MP, or with informal local leaders, rather than in consultation with the parishad members or with other local

citizens. He needs to balance both formal and informal relationships with a range of formal and informal power-holders. Informal relationships play an important role not just in the allocation of resources routinely provided from central government, but also for bringing additional resources into an area. Box 2.2 shows how informal links were productive in the peri-urban study village in securing funds for road and mosque reconstruction after they had been damaged by serious floods in 2004.

Box 2.2: Lobbying at union level for outside relief resources

After the devastating floods of summer 2004, the newly-elected Bangladesh National Party affiliated union council chairman of the peri-urban study village arranged an informal meeting with the Project Implementation Officer (PIO) of Faridpur headquarters sub-district. He decided to seek advice about whether there were opportunities available to gain some additional resources for rebuilding damaged roads and infrastructure. The chairman knew the PIO, a charismatic and well-known local character, quite well beyond his official formal capacity. The PIO explained that the amount of Annual Development Programme, test relief and *kabikha* (food for work) available from government was very limited, but he agreed to investigate possible funding sources from other government departments and from NGOs. The chairman was relatively inexperienced in relation to accessing information of this kind, but his connections with the PIO of the main administrative centre of the district, Faridpur *sadar upazila* soon gave him contacts with a range of outside NGOs. These connections were built up through his father, who had previously been union council chair and had a strong reputation. While the chairman and PIO were having their informal conversation, the PIO immediately phoned four NGO leaders to ask if they had available funds for post-flood rehabilitation work. Straight away, he was given a positive answer from the executive director of one of the NGOs, the Faridpur Development Association (FDA). It was agreed that FDA would allot some funds to the union council, and a meeting between the union council chairman and the FDA executive was quickly organised. A few days later in September, the chairman went to the FDA office and was instructed to prepare scheme proposals for four small roads and two mosques. The chairman later submitted plans for the schemes to the FDA office in Faridpur and a budget was agreed by FDA – with minor corrections – in early December 2004. By late December, the work was ongoing and was completed in early 2005.

At the same time, the informal leaders of the *samaj* control the distribution of religious charity resources such as *zakat* (Islamic duty to pay one-fortieth of one's income to the poor) as well as access to land tenure opportunities such as sharecropping or leasing, employment openings, and participation in state-funded programmes welfare. The *samaj* as an arena of patronage and charity also legitimises the participation of these informal leaders within the formal institutions of the union and its committees.

Box 2.3: The union, the sub-district and the media

More than a third of the area of the peri-urban study area union was seriously affected by floods during the fieldwork period, making it possible for us to witness negotiations between officials within the power structure at first hand. The union council chairman and members visited the flood-affected villages and distributed some relief goods, but this did little to address the extensive damage to crops and housing in the villages which had borne the brunt of the floodwater. The chairman realized that if the union could be given the status of 'severely damaged area' by central government, this would trigger more relief resources from government and NGOs. With this in mind, he called a union council meeting in late July and decided to involve the national media to attract attention to the area's problems. He invited media representatives responsible for the Faridpur region to a press conference on the pressing flood situation in his union, and personally took journalists to visit some of flood-hit villages. The result was extensive media coverage in the main local and national daily newspapers and on some key TV channels. As a direct consequence, additional relief and rehabilitation resources from central government were extended to the union. The union chairman did not stop there, but went in a personal capacity several times to speak to the Sub-District Coordination Officer (UNO) of the headquarters sub-district who directed him to the offices of some international NGOs, World Vision and Save the Children Fund (UK). The UNO phoned ahead to the NGOs and put in a word for the chairman, saying 'Have you seen the TV and newspaper coverage of the flood situation, which has attracted national coverage? Please can you help them, because government resources alone are not going to be enough to cope'. The result of the UNO and the union chairman's efforts was that both these NGOs acted to provide a handsome relief package for the flood-affected people of the union. Again, informal networks provided important support at a time of crisis and led to a positive impact.

Very little real decision-making therefore actually takes place within the formal setting of the union council meetings. As Bode (2002) argues, what we might think of as

... local level "democracy" in practice looks more like a power-sharing arrangement between informal and elected leaders.

Some union leaders have also used the media skilfully to lobby for resources, as case example Box 2.3 shows.

2.7 Conclusion

The picture presented by the data of local administrative institutions and processes suggests that there are considerable tensions between levels, and between administrators and political actors. Running through the whole system, there is a basic 'fault line', between administrators appointed by central government to district and sub-district levels, and the elected offi-

cials of the union council. At the same time, overlaid over the system is a complex web of informal relationships between power-holders and a lack of role clarity, particularly among recently-empowered poorer entrants to local decision-making bodies.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there are spaces in which progressive change is being explored, where struggles for the recognition and operationalisation of 'rights' are taking place, albeit in small and localised ways. While tensions clearly exist between local officials and elected representatives, 'this does not preclude collusion where this is in the mutual interest of the parties concerned' (Bode and Howes 2004: v). Our study indicated that such cooperation is quite frequent. For example, we found examples of positive outcomes from informal relationships between the local authorities and NGOs operating locally (case study boxes 2.2 and 2.3 above).

Political Institutions and Processes

CHAPTER 3

3.1 Introduction

We turn now to describe and analyse the political institutions and processes, set out in the second column of Figure 1 (see pp. 19–20 and Annex 1 pp. 106–107). Here we find the main political institutions in Bangladesh, from the members of the national parliament, on down to the membership of the elected bodies found at the union and village levels. As we have seen, recent efforts towards decentralisation, though incomplete, have pushed the basic unit of local government from the sub-district (*upazila*) level to that of the union, with its elected union council (*union parishad*).

The key trend found in our fieldwork – and reported in other literature – is that of increased levels of politicisation within local institutions. For example, party political networks have become important for gaining access to local level development resources, and local party activists increasingly participate in institutions such as the *shalish* courts, as we will see in Chapter 4.

While the union chairman is not formally elected on a party list, he or she is normally affiliated with one or other of the main political parties. Party allegiances do not however remain stable, but may change. The chairs must operate by balancing their allegiances with other local interests and relationships, and they may from time to time switch political parties depending on circumstances.

3.2 National Politics, MPs and Local Development

The national political parties have gradually become more involved in local politics and the power structure. In particular, the Member of Parliament, MP provides a linkage between national and local level politics, in

both informal and formal ways. MPs play an advisory role on the *Upazila* Development Coordination Committee (UDCC), and are required to sign off on central development funds for projects. They also play strong informal roles, along with their party activists in pursuing local interests through local institutions such as the union council (*union parishad*), since they are seeking to manage and maintain ‘vote banks’ at the local level.

Gathering data on the informal roles and activities of MPs in relation to local administrative structures and processes is of course very challenging. We were fortunate to secure an interview with one local MP who had been elected in the eighth national election in October 2001, and who was prepared to speak quite frankly. He had been elected on a Bangladesh National Party (BNP) ticket for one of two Rajbari constituencies and provided some detailed insights into his relationship with the Upazila Development Coordination Committee (UDCC) (which could be corroborated with interviews with other UDCC members).¹⁴ He explained to us that the local MP is responsible for providing advice to the UDCC committee members for the development of the constituency, but explained that he is often too busy to attend meetings. He is also responsible for making additional ‘special project’ allocations to particular unions with resources provided from the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and Cooperatives (LGRDC) and the Relief Ministry. The MP said he regretted that he had only attended about 30% of UDCC meetings, but he told us that he is in regular phone contact with the UNOs and some of the union chairmen on UDCC matters.

The MP also gave us his general views on local development issues. In his opinion, the quality of the local union council chairmen varies, which he says inhibits local resource utilisation and mobilisation. He also explained that sub-district staff required more training in modern administration and that an allocation of Annual Development Programme funds should be provided through to the sub-districts. Perhaps surprisingly, he also told us that it would be a good thing if women union members were included on the UDCC, since there is no female representation at present. He told us that donor-funded work in the area – such as that by Sida – was generally positive, but he wished to see the following as priorities for the future: programmes for elderly, disabled, women and children (what he termed ‘social development’), continuation of efforts to improve infrastructure, pursuing further some earlier ideas about working with local

¹⁴ As we have seen, political allegiances in Bangladesh are often shifting and opportunistic. Before standing as a Bangladesh National Party (BNP) candidate, he had been a *paushava* (municipality) chairman associated with a small left political party. Given that the BNP is considered to be to the right of the Awami League (AL), this is a large jump!

entrepreneurs, improving local market places and initiatives on rural housing.

Having understood more of the MP's world-view, it was revealing to contrast this account with that of the union chairman. For a non-Bangladesh National Party (BNP) chairman, the perspective on the MP's role is mainly one of 'interference'. In an interview with one such chairman, it was stated that:

We UP chairmen do not much like the MP's advisory role in the UDCC, because the MP uses it to influence and interfere. Here, our UNO is 'the MP's man', and he's always saying that the MP has told him this and the MP has told him that ... and all the time the MP is not even at the UDCC meeting. So the MP influences development project and allocations. The UP chairmen who are affiliated with the ruling party – or pretend to be – get more allocations.

The reality is that the union council (*union parishad*) chairmen who do not belong to the BNP or to the *Jama'at-i-Islami* party¹⁵ are excluded by the MP and the Sub-District Coordination Officer UNO, who tend to flout the formal rules about prioritising poor or remote unions in the allocation of development resources. Returning to our earlier framework of power set out by Lukes (2005), in a very real sense, we see how certain needs and priorities are simply kept off the agenda for discussion.

In the course of our interviews, local officials from the BNP also admitted that each UDCC development project supported by the MP and the UNO is usually used to generate an indirect 'rake-off' fee. This takes the form of a percentage (about 20–25%, along with 16% of VAT in the case of special projects) which is provided to the sub-district engineer and Project Implementation Officer, or to the MP's trusted party officials.

3.3 The Union and Local Politics

Evidence suggests that the influence of party politics is becoming stronger at union level (e.g. Bode 2002). The party affiliation of a union chairman can help determine the level of influence he can achieve with the local MP, which in turn has a strong bearing on the share of available resources he can bring into the union from the centre. Local party activists help mediate these relationships through the union and its activities

¹⁵ *Jama'at-i-Islami* is a religious political party, and was a coalition partner in the second Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government.

For example, in Box 3.1, there is a case example of how in the remote village setting, political interference in union level development projects led to resources being ‘skimmed off’ from a road project for the benefit of local Bangladesh National Party activists.

Box 3.1: Politics, gender and local level corruption

In the remote village area, we found that one of the women union council (*union parishad*) members was a poor woman who had been a BRAC member, and had been elected to the union as a result of her NGO activities. She was also a supporter of the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP) political party. Because of this, the local MP gave her his backing in the union elections. Once elected, the MP asked the union council (*union parishad*) chairman to give her the responsibility of managing a small road building project, with a budget of Tk49,000, funded from the Annual Development Programme. As chair of the Project Implementation Officer, it was considered customary for her to give a small token of Tk500 or so to the other committee members so that they will leave the chair alone to get on with the job. She must also provide about 15% of the budget to the UNO, engineer and other sub-district staff, and make some payments to the local MP. This is described as an informal ‘administrative charge’, and is often euphemistically referred to as ‘VAT’. However, another union council member had been very disappointed not to be awarded the project himself, and he decided to make trouble. He organised some local youth activists to persuade other members of the committee to continue making unreasonable demands for cash from her, until she was out of pocket. She ended up having to pay additional money to the chairman, local BNP youth activists and village government members. This example illustrates the process of ‘politicisation from above’ in local administration – it was the intervention of the MP brought his supporter into local administration, but it also shows some of the limits to that power, since local level tensions can still place obstacles in the way of MPs’ plans. The example also illustrates the weakness of women union council members in relation to the power to negotiate within local gender norms. She said to us: ‘*If I were a man, this would not have happened*’. Nevertheless, the road project was completed, even with all the unofficial payments which were made, because the figure needed for the work is normally inflated in the initial budget plan.

While the patronage of an MP provided a woman union member with the opportunity to organise a road building project, the involvement of the MP also created pressures from local political activists for rent seeking payments. The example also shows the way in which women union members face additional gendered barriers to effective local level governance and participation through the union structures. Yet at the same time, as Kabeer (1994) argues, ‘even those who appear to have very little power are still able to resist, to subvert and sometimes to transform the conditions of their lives’ (p. 224). It seems from this case that membership of an NGO group,

in this case BRAC, had played a role in ‘empowering’ this woman from the least powerful section of society to become involved in local politics.

Box 3.2 (drawn from our field notes) further highlights the problems around the influence of MPs in resource allocation. In this particular case, the MP interfered in the allocation of test relief rice.

Box 3.2: Member of Parliament (MPs) as ‘gate-keepers’ in the allocation of relief goods at union level

The local MP is ex-officio advisor of the Upazila Development Coordination Committee Council (UDCC) and his recommendation on the form submitted to the office of the Project Implementation Officer (PIO) usually ensures the approval of the project. The MP usually only approves projects from union council chairman with whom he is on good terms, normally those affiliated to his political party. If an Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives or relief ministry project is approved, it is then usually carried out by people who are then specially selected by the MP. If the MP is from the ruling party, then others on the UDCC opposition can do very little to prevent this favouring of the MP’s ‘people’. In Rajbari, where the MP is from the ruling party, we found that the MP usually provides the unions with a list of his own people to whom cards for *Vulnerable Group Feeding* and *Vulnerable Group Development* entitlements then have to be given. We heard of one specific case of an MP interfering in the allocation of relief. In November 2003, a total of 130 tonnes of rice intended for ‘test relief’ was allocated to Rajbari. The MP called together his party people from several neighbouring unions to plan development works in their areas, and applications were later submitted to the MP. The MP gave the applications to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) and asked him to arrange for passing them with resolutions from the union council chairmen. When the UNO raised the point at the UDCC, the chairmen who were there complained that they would only approve proposals coming from genuine union council members, not from party people. But they were pressured by the UNO to approve them on the recommendation of the MP. Chairmen of all the 14 Unions of the Rajbari headquarters sub-district were present at the meeting. Though his ‘advisory position’ in the UDCC, the MP has come to act as ‘gate-keeper’ to the union council (*union parishad*). As one disgruntled chairman put it to us: *‘It often feels like the union parishad has become the plaything of the ruling party’*.

At union level (the lowest rung of local government), two types of projects are undertaken. First are those financed by the block grants that are drawn from the allocation of Asian Development Bank (ADB) project funds. A second category is that of the highly political ‘special’ development projects, that are also administered by the union. These are secured through an MP’s efforts to lobby ministries such as Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives (LGRDC) or Ministry of Education at the central level to secure extra resources for schools, mosques, roads or other infrastructure. “The amount of these funds may be higher than

those available from the Annual Development Programme, (about £6–10,000 in the unions where the chairman is in favour with the ruling party MP) but offer practically nothing to unions where the chairman is not on good terms with the MP. These special projects often involve food for fork, cash for work or ‘test relief’ schemes.

When he was asked whether he had received of these any ‘special’ development funds through his informal connections with the local MP, one of our chairmen replied that he had secured two special projects in 2004 for renovation of a Muslim religious school (*madrasa*) building and for a culvert. This had been achieved after two BNP-affiliated union council members had lobbied the MP. “The funds were to the value of about £1,500 but a bribe of about 25% had to be given to various sub-district officials and other parties in order to get the projects. Despite this ‘success’, the chairman said he was very frustrated by the increasing levels of politicisation:

Because of interference by MPs, and the bureaucratic attitude of the UNOs, development does not take place very evenly here ... and the UDCC is highly politicised ...

It is in response to this difficult environment that some union chairmen change their political affiliations from time to time.

3.4 Formal and Informal Politics

How do formal structures relate to the informal institutions and processes which we find are prominent at the local level?

Alongside established informal institutional frameworks in Bangladesh, there appears to be a growing importance and role of formal institutions. For example, Thornton (2002) argues that whereas village and union level civil society have long been dominated by informal institutions and social norms, there are signs that the balance is shifting such that decision-making in the village is beginning to move closer to the union office, NGOs, or large local employers. Yet at the same time, many villages remain largely disconnected from wider decision-making and governance.

Our fieldwork data also suggested some of the complex ways in which informal processes also take place within formal structures at the local level. In Box 3.3, a case is recounted in which important information about an upcoming Asian Development Bank initiative for funding schools was passed informally to a union council chairman by a relative, who worked as a *peon* (office assistant) in the sub-district education office. This

information then made it possible for the chairman to use his relationship with the local MP, and his other social networks, to lobby successfully for additional outside educational investment in his union.

Box 3.3: A pro-Bangladesh National Party UP chairman successfully lobbies for local resources

A high-powered team from the Asian Development Bank Dhaka office visited Faridpur district Education Office in the middle of 2003, intending to make an assessment of priorities for building new high schools in the area. In our per-urban village, we spoke to a person who works as a *peon* (office assistant) in the District Education Office in the main sub-district complex in Faridpur, and who is also related to one of our union council chairman linked to the Bangladesh National Party (BNP). Hearing news of the mission, the *peon* quickly informed the chairman, who phoned the local MP – a cabinet minister – in Dhaka and arranged an appointment. The union chairman urged the MP to ‘get a school for his union’ from this Asian Development Bank initiative. Since the chairman supports the ruling Bangladesh National Party (BNP), he knew he had a strong chance of securing this favour. Before long, the District Commissioner (DC) of Faridpur received a call from the Minister – a call taken in front of the chairman – instructing him to provide a school in his union under the Asian Development Bank initiative, and coordinated all this with the District Education Officer (DEO) in Faridpur. The regulations required that Asian Development Bank (ADB) would give money (about £90,000) for a high school, as long as the chairman or someone else contributed 1.3 acres of land to build it on, in exchange for having the school named after donor. However, finding someone interested in providing such a large donation of land provided difficult. So the chairman and several other union council members again went to Dhaka to meet the Minister in order to request a land donation, suggesting to him that the school could be named after the MP’s mother. The Minister, also a large landowner in the area, liked this idea and finally decided to donate the land. Work on the new ‘*Bhasan Char Begum Mohan Mian Ideal High School*’ was begun in December 2004. The chairman told us he had had to go to Dhaka to meet the Minister four times, and had made eight trips to Faridpur District Office, in order to secure the new school.

The story in Box 3.3 also gives us an insight into the role of philanthropy in the maintenance and expression of relationships within the power structure. It also suggests that it plays a role in the articulation between actors in the local power structure and wider politics. A more politicised form of philanthropy may therefore be emerging in rural areas.

3.5 Conclusion

The data presented in this chapter depicts a system in which local politics revolves around two key dimensions of local politics: (i) the efforts of elected MPs to dispense patronage and build and maintain their vote banks,

and (ii) the efforts of local union chairmen to negotiate within an increasingly complex environment to secure resources for their local constituencies, based on a flexible strategy in which they try to ‘juggle’ political parties, informal patrons, MPs, local and international NGOs and a range of sub-district public servants.

Our data suggests that it is therefore becoming more normal – at least in the three locations that we studied – for the general allocation of public resources, as well as those intended to be targeted to particular sections of the population, to be influenced by wider political interests, as well as by local relations of patronage.

The Judiciary

CHAPTER 4

4.1 Introduction

Alongside the political actors discussed in Chapter 3, we also need to consider the roles played in the local power structure of the formal and informal institutions of the judiciary. From the Supreme Court in Dhaka, the judicial institutions extend outwards to district level, where there are formal courts. However, access to formal justice is expensive and regarded by many people as largely ineffective, and there is instead considerable use made of a less formal local dispute settlement system known as *shalish*. This system is simultaneously both informal, in the sense that it is traditional, and convened locally with considerable flexibility and in different forms; but it is also formal, since its functions are now recognised officially.

4.2 The Main Institutions of the Judicial System

There is a formal system of courts which stretches from the Supreme Court in Dhaka through to district-level courts and below them, village level courts (vcs). Formal courts are the main organs of the judicial structure. The judicial system consists of two categories of court – superior and subordinate. Civil and criminal cases can be processed at both levels. The subordinate courts, which function at the district level, are classified according to the types of cases they are authorized to hear. According to Bode and Howes (2002: p.xiii):

The Supreme Court continues to command widespread support, but District Courts exhibit major shortcomings and are generally held in low regard. An antiquated structure makes it difficult for the judiciary to plan effectively ... Judges have to perform many administrative

functions, and together with other factors, this contributes to serious delays, and to an ever-growing backlog of cases. Poor remuneration provides a fertile breeding ground for corrupt practices, and these, in turn, raise the cost of access to a level that is prohibitive for all but the relatively well-off.

The village courts are formed differently from other formal courts under the judicial structure. The vcs were originally established under the Village Courts Ordinance 1976 to handle relatively insignificant criminal and civil matters at the union level. The original structure of these courts consisted of the union council chairman along with four members comprising an elected council member, and a local notable – such as a village elder or a teacher – each of whom were to be nominated by the parties in dispute (see Box 4.1). They were not empowered to order imprisonment or fines, but may order the accused to pay an aggrieved party compensation of up to Tk5000. The system has rarely been effective, and by the time of our fieldwork these courts had in many cases more or less disappeared.

Since undertaking the fieldwork, it seems that the Village Court system may be set for a new lease of life. A new 2006 Village Court Law has recently been enacted which updates the earlier 1976 law and by increased the ceiling to Tk25,000, leading to some renewed activity in the Village Court system.

Box 4.1: Seeking justice in the village courts

The main objective of the Village Courts (VCs) is not to determine right or wrong and punish the wrongdoers, but to find an amicable settlement of disputes. The Village Courts consists of five members, chaired by the union council chairman. Both conflicting parties have to select four notable persons as members of the jury board, and each party selects two persons. If the chairman is unable to take part due to absence or illness, the UNO is directed by law to approve another council member to chairing the Village Court. If any conflicting party feels a ward member could be biased, they can get special permission to appoint other person from outside the union council, if necessary. In civil cases, the litigant pays Tk4 to the UP chairman, and for criminal cases Tk2 is given as an application fee. In the application, the facts of the case are briefly stated and if accepted by the UP chairman, the case is registered. If the UP chairman rejects the case, the litigant can appeal at district level to the Assistant Judge Court, within 30 days. If the chairman accepts the case, a notice is sent to the conflicting parties to attend with the jurors. If a verdict is reached with 4–1 votes then no appeal is possible, but if it is 3–1 then any party can go for appeal within 30 days. For civil cases an appeal is made to the magistrate courts, for criminal to the assistant judge courts. Why are only a very few cases ever heard in VCs? This question was discussed in depth with two union chairmen and some council members. The finding was that (i) VCs are time-consuming to convene and the procedures are difficult, so *shalish* is found to be more convenient; (ii) because of its long roots in

local society, the *shalish* is more widely socially accepted by people; (iii) the union chairmen stated that they prefer to use *shalish* in order to maintain good personal relationships with their electorate by involving a wide range of people in an inclusive *shalish* – unlike in the Village Courts, where they have a narrower range of person consulted in giving a verdict.

Alongside the Village Court system, there are also Arbitration Councils which were established by the 1961 Muslim Family Law Ordinance. The ACs are convened by the union council to resolve three specific types of family dispute – divorce, polygamy and maintenance. The structure is similar to that of the village courts – each party is invited to nominate an elected union council member and a local notable each, and the Union chairman acts as the chair of the council. In cases where the Union Complex (UC) is a non-Muslim, or if his impartiality or suitability to hear the case is challenged, another union council member is appointed in his place. While the Assistant Commissioner system continues to function, its operation and coverage is patchy.

Bangladesh has one of the lowest ratios of police officers to heads of population anywhere in the world. Police are characterised by low levels of training, education and coordination among all but the very smallest number of senior officers. There is also reported to be a high level of corruption:

... for poor people who lack the necessary resources, it is almost impossible to initiate or pursue a case. As a result, a large amount of criminal activity goes unreported, with certain powerful interests in rural society able to act with impunity in pursuing their interests at the direct expense of the weak and poor, or through protected illegal activities including smuggling and fraud. (Bode and Howes, 2002: xiii).

A new system of ‘community policing’ has recently been introduced, which has begun to function at ward and union level under the supervision of the union council chairman, or a person of good reputation appointed by the Union Complex for this purpose. New 22-person committees of concerned citizens have been established at the union level, and similar initiatives have been set up at sub-district and district levels. At ward level, the purpose of these units is to settle small-scale disputes, and to maintain a crime register which can be passed on to the police each month.

Box 4.2 offers a brief example of the difficulties of sustaining a claim for redress, in a context in which it is difficult to sustain decisions in favour of gender rights.

Box 4.2: Gendered justice and the police

One of the poor women focus group members reported an incident of armed robbery in June 2004. When Halima went to pay her electricity bill one morning at 9 am, carrying several thousand taka in cash, she met some local youths in front of the union office. She was threatened by these youths and had Tk5600 taken from her, but was apparently saved from physical attack by the intervention of the local village *chowkidar*.¹⁶ But when they went to the police station to make a statement, he did not back up her story or agree to provide police with a formal statement. As a result, she has not received justice in this case, and Halima has yet to get her money back or have the youth who took it arrested.

Despite some of the positive opportunities opening up within the changing power structure, gender discrimination remains a fundamental brake on social progress. As Box 4.2 indicates, access to justice for most rural women remains very limited, particularly in relation to formal institutions. In this example, a woman who has the victim of an armed robbery found it impossible to secure a witness statement from a witness who claimed to have saved her, implying that he may have been somehow himself involved in planning the original attack.

4.3 The *Shalish* in Action

The *shalish* remains the dominant means of adjudication for small-scale civil and criminal disputes. Common conflicts reported by key informants and community leaders included: dowry, divorce and marital problems; land and other property disputes; enmity arising from personal rivalry; family and patrilineal clan tensions; and local political disputes, of both party and non-party nature. Hossain's (2003) survey of local disputes and conflicts found that that only around 6% of them were dealt with in the Village Court. The vast majority were taken to the *shalish*, for reasons that are explained in Box 4.1 above.

The term *shalish* refers to a small-scale local council which is convened for conflict resolution, an institution which dates back to pre-British times. While it is formally recognised by the state as a mediation body, it has no legal authority in relation to criminal cases or marriage and dowry disputes. However, it is commonly used to adjudicate in community disputes and although rulings are required to be formally registered with the police station, this is not common in practice (Bode 2002). Convened by the

¹⁶ In the union council (*union parishad*s), the *chowkidar* performs two roles – tax collector by day and watchman by night.

samaj (the religious community/brotherhood), many *shalish* take place in the neighbourhood or village, but more serious cases will usually be heard at union level and may involve elected representatives and even MPs.

The *shalish* is best understood as a process rather than a formal set of rules or procedures, and as we shall see, it can take different forms. The degree to which its judgments are formalised varies, often depending on the seriousness of the dispute (Hossain 2003). A small problem between neighbours, such as one person's goat damaging another's crops, may simply be resolved with a handshake after the *shalish* has made its decision. A decision on more serious dispute – such as dowry conflict – may be formalised in a written document. Conflicts may be resolved through formal or informal means. Box 4.3 recounts how the *shalish* is changing in the peri-urban village area.

Box 4.3: The *shalish* as a changing institution

Focus group members outlined the ways in which the *shalish* system is changing. First, the traditional *shalish* system based on informal village leader involvement is becoming less common, except on a small scale within the *para*. Where there are larger *shalishes* between *paras* over land questions or more serious disputes, informal village leaders will still be involved, it will be adjudicated by a union council member. If there is a union council member from the village, that person will chair within the *shalish* rather than the traditional informal village leaders, who are not trusted as highly as before. A village *shalish* these days must include the local representative of the village government, and this person may require money. There is therefore tension between the informal village leaders and the new system. Nevertheless, the non-poor women's focus group reported positively on the improved gender outcomes from *shalish* system. For example, it was recounted that a village woman was harassed by some local boys. The woman's family was upset and were told to go to the police, but they were advised to do this by people who have a connection with the police and stand to gain. Indeed, the police took money from both the boys' and the woman's families. Then the boys went to the union council member to complain about the police. The informal village leaders became involved as intermediaries between the community and the police. It was decided to withdraw the case from the police, and settle the problem internally. A *shalish* was held and the verdict was that there was that the boy should pay compensation of Tk20,000 to the woman. The role of the union council members as intermediaries in local disputes is growing. Informal village leaders these days have less power to act alone.

It was previously the case that *sharia* Islamic religious law played some role in the *shalish*, but this is now believed to be quite rare. Awareness of secular law has increased in the past few decades, due to the higher levels of rural education, the rights awareness work undertaken by NGOs and the

increased roles and activities of local union chairmen in resolving disputes.

Case study Box 4.4 outlines the additional dimension of gender issues in the *shalish*, and difficulties for women in seeking justice.

Box 4.4: Gender, justice and the *shalish*

One of the women in the focus group of women living in poverty reported the following story. Saleha's father, on her marriage, had provided her new husband with 10 decimals of land as her dowry. But a portion of the land – 3 decimals – was being occupied by a local informal village leader (*matbar*) who exploited a legal loophole in the land records to hold on to the land. Saleha's family reported the matter to the chairman and to other local informal village leaders. A *shalish* was held locally and the decision was given in favour of Saleha's claim. However, the informal village leader took no notice of the decision, and began to intimidate some of Saleha's relatives to try to persuade her to drop the matter. The case was then taken to the local court and Saleha was again given the judgement in her favour. But the land occupation continued without any sign of response to the ruling by the informal village leader, who also now began to use his contacts with the local police in order to intimidate her. Finally, she had no choice but to withdraw her claim over the three decimals and lose her rights to this portion of her land. Although she had gained formal justice in her favour in both the *shalish* and the local court, she had been unable to enforce it against the interests of an established and well-connected member of the local power structure.

4.4 *Shalish* as a Changing Institution

The *shalish* is far from static and is undergoing change, but this takes different forms in different places, and it is clear that there can be both positive and negative outcomes for poor people.

In one case, in the remote village, we found that the authority of the traditional informal village leaders (*matbars*) is being challenged by the growing power of local political figures at union level, and by attempt to reintroduce the *gram sarkar*, village government system. The *shalish* is one arena in which the older power structure of the village informal village leaders may become threatened by the newer, more politicised power base which is being constructed around some of the more proactive union chairmen. Representatives from the village government may also seek roles in the *shalish*. As politically-connected unions become stronger in relation to the traditional authority of the local informal village leader, there is increasing control of the *shalish* system by the union chairmen which reduces the power of informal village leaders. This is illustrated in Box 4.3 above.

In this case of gender harassment, efforts from traditional informal village leaders to benefit from outside police involvement in the case was undermined by the decision to settle the dispute locally through the *shalish*. The fact that the woman concerned received some compensation suggests that, in some cases at least, the *shalish* does have the potential to deliver improved gender outcomes in the settlement of local disputes – at least compared with the police and formal courts.

Outcomes from the *shalish* nevertheless often do raise important concerns about equity. In another case, set out in Box 4.4, we highlight the difficulty of enforcing pro-poor outcomes in the *shalish*. While this low income woman had made considerable progress in her effort to secure justice in relation to a land and dowry dispute, and achieved a ruling in her favour in both the *shalish* and the local court, she was unable to uphold the ruling in the face of intimidation and violence by a local informal village leader, who remained powerful enough simply to ignore the decision. Here the traditional patriarchal authority of the informal village leaders remains highly resilient.

4.5 The Intertwining of Local-Level Institutions

The *shalish* is an example of the difficulty of attempting to separate out the formal and informal dimensions of the power structure. It is both an informal local institution for dispute settlement, and one which is increasingly intertwined with the activities of formal union level institutions.

Recent research offers two contrasting perspectives on the *shalish* (Guiguis 2004). Many studies have traditionally found that the *shalish* usually generates decisions which are heavily slanted in favour of the rich, but there are others, particularly in recent years, which have documented cases in which there are rulings which benefit poorer people sometimes at the expense of the better-off. Aminul Islam (2002: 99), writing in *Hands Not Land*, suggests that the *shalish* is changing and has become less dominated by the wealthy, and goes so far as to say that

Although it had a reputation for unjust treatment of the poor and for closing its door to women, the shalish has potential as a powerful instrument for local justice.

On the other hand, Bode and Howes (2002: xiii) write

Like their formal counterparts, shalish are characterised by a range of deficiencies. Bench members exhibit widespread ignorance of the law, and may decree harsh and inhumane punishment. They are also rich, powerful and male, and normally rule in favour of their

peers. Once again, there is frequent recourse to bribery. But despite these difficulties, the institution continues to be valued, providing the only forum in which poorer people in general, and women in particular, are able to present their grievances and obtain at least limited redress.

Yet our field data showed the ways in which the *shalish* system remains a popular alternative to the formal village court (vc) system because, as two union chairmen explained in detail, the formal vcs are time-consuming, bureaucratic and costly (Box 4.1). The *shalish* system allows some union council chairmen to exercise power more flexibly by combining their formal roles and their informal relationships. They can bring in a range of local people to participate in the *shalish* to suit the situation, and simultaneously maintain their public reputation as local leaders through a managed social ‘performance’.

Like the union council, the *shalish* has in recent years become the focus of efforts by some donors and NGOs to try to improve its performance (see Chapter 5 below). In areas where NGOs such as *Madaripur Legal Aid* have been working with the reform and reinvigoration of the local rights and justice in relation to the *shalish* system, there has also been some effort made to improve the performance of the village courts and the assistant commissioner police officers.

4.6 Conclusion

Access to justice for most citizens in rural Bangladesh remains very difficult or, in many cases impossible, either from formal judicial institutions such as the village courts, or from less formal ones such as the *shalish*. Yet some of these institutions, such as the *shalish*, are far from fixed and some of our data indicates potential for change. We found a diverse range of practices and outcomes which suggest that openings or spaces for improving the outcomes for people who are living in poverty may be possible. However, even when favourable judgements are obtained, our data suggests that it is very difficult to enforce or sustain without broader support within the local power structure.

Formal Civil Society

CHAPTER 5

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we reflect on the role of formal civil society actors in relation to the local power structure. Civil society is often viewed by policy analysts as having the potential to challenge parts of existing structures and relationships in support of various types of pro-poor outcomes, and our evidence drawn from recent literature and our fieldwork data supports this view. But we also find ways in which civil society plays important roles in maintaining elements of the power structure, by allowing powerful actors new means for organising their interests.

Civil society can be broadly conceived as the organised sphere of citizen activity beyond the state, the market and household. Civil society organisations are diverse, with both formal and informal types, and include business associations, self-help groups, cooperatives, religious welfare organisations, philanthropic institutions and non-governmental development organisations. Within civil society research and development debates, NGOs have tended to receive far more analytical attention than other types of civil society actors (Lewis 2004). In the context of Bangladesh, this has been particularly noticeable, since its extensive and high profile development NGO sector has attracted considerable international attention (DFID 2000). During our fieldwork, we attempted to ‘open out’ our understanding of civil society more broadly than simply the NGOs. Nevertheless, we found that many of the NGOs were playing important roles with potentially significant implications for change.

The idea of civil society became very fashionable during the 1990s among development donors. In Bangladesh, civil society – mostly in the form of NGOs – has been heavily supported by international donor community since the 1980s (Lewis 2004). Bangladeshi organisations such as

BRAC and the Grameen Bank have become internationally-recognised development success stories. Today, one finds that civil society ideas have once again faded from view within the ever changing shifts of development fashions. At the same time, while Bangladesh's NGOs have also lost some of their earlier appeal after some high profile cases of corruption and malpractice, they remain a significant force on the rural landscape.

5.2 The NGO Sector in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has one of the most extensive, highest profile and arguably most successful NGO sectors of any developing country. In addition to the public structures of administration and governance discussed earlier in the study, there exists in Bangladesh an extensive set of 'private' (though often publicly-funded by government or donors) 'civil society' actors. This sector is the result of a unique set of historical circumstances, centred on the constructive interaction between local ideas for development innovation and the high level flows of international resources which followed the liberation war of 1971 (Lewis 2004).

Alongside the local government structures and informal local institutions which we have already discussed, the strongest institutional presence in most rural areas are the development NGOs. NGO activities include relief work, provision of services (such as credit or family planning) and social mobilisation (such as promoting action over land rights for the poor). Some estimates suggest that there are more than 22,000 NGOs, active in 80% of villages and in contact with as much as 35% of Bangladesh's population (DFID 2000). Most NGOs in Bangladesh have been concerned with delivering services to the poor – mainly in the form of credit, most famously in the case of the *Grameen Bank* – but they are also active in education, agricultural services and health sectors. A smaller sub-group of radical NGOs such as *Nijera Kori* and *Samata* have focused their efforts on community organising and social mobilisation work. This has for example taken the form of seeking to enforce the rights of access to poor people to *khas* land and water-bodies, scrutinising local authorities' allocations of welfare goods such as *Vulnerable Group Feeding* (VGF) cards, and supporting gender rights. While there is some truth to the commonly-made argument that Bangladesh's NGO sector has grown less radical since its origins in the 1970s (e.g. Rahman 2006), these particular NGOs are evidence that at least some of this early spirit lives on.

Despite these positive features, the NGO sector in Bangladesh, like that in many other countries, has been subject to criticism (Siddiqi 1994, 2000). Development NGOs have been criticised for achieving relatively

low levels of impact on poverty, failing to reach the very poorest people, displaying a lack of accountability to the people they serve and to government, being self-serving and opportunistic¹⁷, overly relying on foreign aid¹⁸ and ideas, and becoming instruments of political patronage. This latter issue became a sensitive one during the period just before fieldwork took place. Some sections of the NGO community in Bangladesh went through a period political tension with the Bangladesh National Party government, after accusations that certain of the NGOs – the largest and best-known being *Proshika* – had crossed over the line of ‘non-partisan’ politics into tacit support for the Awami League during the 2001 election campaign. One consequence of this has been the sidelining of the existing NGO umbrella organisation, known as the *Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh* (ADAB). A new NGO umbrella organisation has been established, with government support, called the *Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh* (FNB). FNB has introduced a membership screening process designed to keep out those NGOs identified by the government as ‘party political’.

5.3 NGOs and ‘Social Capital’

Civil society organisations such as development NGOs can be seen as both expressions of, and contributors to, the construction of social networks and relationships of trust. Many researchers have therefore linked the concept of ‘social capital’ with civil society. Robert Putnam (1993) distinguishes two forms of social capital. The first, known as ‘bonding social capital’, is said to be a source of power by building or strengthening social solidarity, such as when an NGO establishes a grassroots group for social mobilisation purposes. The second, termed ‘bridging social capital’, is seen as being useful for building connections across different social groups and levels of power, such as when an NGO seeks to build an advocacy network in order to try to influence policy (see Narayan 1999; Woolcock and Narayan 2000). As with the civil society concept itself, social capital ideas have been criticised, partly for the loose and/or instrumental ways in which the concept is often deployed. Yet they may also help to clarify aspects of the relationships between both formal and informal civil society and the local power structure.

Most NGOs in Bangladesh have specialised in provided credit services

¹⁷ In 2008, for example, there were reports that the well-respected NGO *Samata* had been damaged by a corruption scandal involving its leadership, no doubt linked in part to its dramatic increases in its donor funding and rapid expansion in recent years.

¹⁸ Although it should be noted that some organisations, such as BRAC and *Grameen*, have successfully freed themselves of donor dependency through generating their own resources.

to the poor, which have contributed to improved self-reliance, supplemented or substituted for weak or failed public services in areas such as education and health, and built organisational capacity at the local level. Group formation work – building ‘bonding social capital’ – at the local level has been a relatively successful strategy. Where NGOs have been much weaker is in building public accountability for poor citizens through advocacy, i.e. in creating ‘bridging social capital’ (Blair 2005).

Particularly in the peri-urban village, we found an extensive history of self-help activities and rich associational life. One committee in the village dates back to 1965. Despite periods of inactivity, it has recently been active in undertaking a range of cultural and social activities such as supporting local actors, establishing a high school and building a new mosque. It earns income from a local river fishing project and uses it to support the school and to do other voluntary work. This *samity* has contributed in many ways to improve village life and raise living standards and has now become a registered NGO. There is also a village club, as well as mosque and school management committees. Another self-help committee was established in 1986 to try to resolve a local social problem. Tension had built up around a public right of way between village and town youths, over the alleged harassment of village girls by local youths. After the tensions faded, the group then became involved in literacy work, library building, drama events and cultural issues. In 2004, they received funds from the international NGO *World Vision* and registered as a formal NGO.

As we saw in Chapter 1, vertical ties of patronage tend to cross-cut solidaristic group formation within rural society. It is therefore a distinctive feature of the NGO sector in Bangladesh that NGOs do not tend to construct links with existing ‘people’s organisations’ (as they do, say, in the Philippines) since there are few such people’s organisations pre-existing in rural areas. Blair (2005) points out that the lack of organised farmer groups in rural areas (as compared say to India) is a missing element of civil society which could in theory bring benefits for the poor in rural areas if it were to emerge. The same is also true in relation to organised grassroots women’s groups, which are not common except as offshoots of formal NGOs.

Most Bangladeshi NGOs therefore attempt to build grassroots groups ‘from scratch’ under their protection and guidance, using credit delivery, awareness raising and training to build solidarity. The aim is that in time such groups will federate and become less dependent on the ‘parent’ NGO,

though in practice this still remains a far-off hope for most NGOs.¹⁹ Some NGOs, such as *Samata*, remain distinctive in that they prefer not to take what has become seen by many as the ‘mainstream route’ to group formation though credit delivery, but instead pursue a strategy of social mobilisation around land rights.

5.4 NGOs and the Local Power Structure

In one of the earliest studies of the social mobilisation strategies of the radical NGO sector in Bangladesh, Nebelung (1987: 133) concluded that such approaches were important, but found that results were limited due to the overall strength of since ‘the net’. Only ‘patchwork’ or piecemeal impacts could be created by NGO work of this kind:

It would be very difficult to corroborate the hypothesis that ‘NGOs-in-mobilization’ challenge the overall strength of the net. From time to time one may find holes in it; scattered holes that can at present be easily mended because they do not jeopardise the very existence and the unity of the net.

While it remains the case twenty years later that only a minority of Bangladesh’s NGOs pursue this type of mobilisation strategy, and that the net remains resilient in many areas, our data suggests that NGO work of this kind should not be written off.

Since the 1980s, NGOs have developed and experimented with a wider range of approaches to challenging the power structure. Guirguis (2004) has summarised three main approaches. The first is that of the radical NGO *Nijera Kori*, which has pursued a rights-based approach to mobilising the poor and promoting collective action. Its work has included supporting people to participate more powerfully in *shalish* or in some cases to set up alternative *shalish* arrangements (as yet, with inconclusive results). Second, BRAC has a programme to promote awareness of human and legal rights within its *Targeted Ultra-Poor Programme* (TUP) among both the poor and local elites in order to try to improve the functioning of these institutions of social justice. The TUP has been establishing village committees known as *Gram Shahayak Committees* as a way of enlisting local elite support for initiatives which would support TUP members through reducing vulnerability and improving access to services (Hossain 2004). Some new ground appears to have been opened up in this work since it has been

¹⁹ Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDERS) has been working on this for longer and has perhaps made more progress than most other NGOs. See Westergaard and Hossain (1999).

shown that under certain conditions local elites can be engaged in poverty reduction work, where they perceive it to be in their interest. It has also experimented with *Polli Shomaj* federations of village committees and community members to contribute to making the *shalish* act more favourably towards the interest of poorer people. But it has also faced mixed results in certain arenas, such as meeting resistance to female participation in the *shalish*. Third, the NGO *Proshika* has worked with mobilising people to gain access to local power structure, such as a strategy of supporting the election of its group members to the union council, based on the use of collective action and networks to secure votes.

As might be expected, these efforts are not always welcome among local power-holders. In Box 5.1, we illustrate some of the problems and complexities which arise from NGO work from the perspective of the union council authorities.

Box 5.1: Tensions between NGOs and the local power structure

There are a set of mixed attitudes to the work of NGOs. For some observers, NGOs represent the undesirable 'professionalisation' of an earlier spirit of voluntarism found in the villages in the form of self-help clubs. One key informant told us that he had previously been the secretary of one such small village association, which had gradually evolved into an NGO, once outside funds had become available, called the *Social Development Programme* (SDP). He now ran the SDP with his wife as their own local NGO, providing credit to villages organised into local NGO-formed grassroots groups.

The union council chairman in the well-connected village voiced a set of wide-ranging criticisms of NGOs. First, he argued that NGO credit programmes are too burdensome on poor people, because they charge excessively high interest rates. This he felt resulted in conflict and tensions between NGO members who were unable to repay and the NGO staff whose job it was to recover loans. This he argued simply led to much extra work for him in trying to sort out these disputes. A second problem in his view is the friction NGOs may create within households, by seeking to empower women. This also he said created more and more disputes which required his involvement. He also said that while NGO credit may give short-term benefits to poor people (*'Eating the juice of fried rice is better than having to starve'*), the longer term result of NGO work is an erosion of the social base of the community. Some union leaders also alleged a lack of coordination between the NGOs and a tendency to interfere in the work of the union council. However, one of the allegations about charging excessive interest rates made against NGOs by a former chairman was later followed up, and was found to refer to traditional moneylenders rather than NGOs. Two large moneylenders dominated the village and had charged interest rates of up to 240% per year.

One villager we heard about had taken a loan to the equivalent of about £300 to build a house, which had eventually cost him about £750 in repayments. He had found himself unable to pay, and the resulting harassment by loan collectors had reportedly led to his death from a stroke.

Another reason for tension between NGOs and union level authorities perhaps related to the fact that some of the NGOs also play 'watchdog' roles in relation to the authorities. *Worldvision*, for example, scrutinises union-level relief practices in order to improve transparency and promote the 'right to information', since they allege that relief goods are unfairly distributed.

In Box 5.1, the credit delivery activities of NGOs are shown to have created tensions between different sections of the local power structure – which perhaps indicates the importance of such work, though it also points to some of the limitations. On the one hand, the union chairman had become hostile to the NGOs, because he said that their credit programmes often created disputes among loan takers, and that this settling these disputes often took up too much of his time. However, when we investigated this further, many of the cases that he mentioned appeared to be the result of high interest lending by traditional moneylenders and not NGOs, suggesting that existing power holders were trying to scapegoat NGOs in order to protect their own interests.

Some of his criticism may have been because he resented the quite energetic efforts by *Worldvision* in particular to encourage their grassroots groups to scrutinise public officials in their distribution of relief resources and he suggested that the women's empowerment and credit work of NGOs was eroding social stability.

5.5 NGOs as Vehicles for Political Change – Action from Above and Below

Our research indicated that the power structure, far from rigid, is undergoing change. Despite the slow pace of this change and the conflicts which arise, there are certain opportunities for positive change for the poor. Where NGO groups are supported by economic opportunities, as in Box 5.3, evidence suggests that such mobilisation work may have a greater chance of creating sustainable pro-poor change.

Case study Box 5.2 highlights the ways in which NGO credit programmes may begin altering women's subordinate position in certain ways, but again shows that there are many contradictions and uncertainties embodied in such changes. For example, while cases are reported of women who take loans from one NGO in order to pay off a loan from another, or use credit for non-productive purposes – such as buying children's clothes – which do not allow her to repay the funds, many people do find that credit makes it possible to generate additional livelihood activities. There are also empowerment level outcomes from lending to women. While there are undoubted social tensions which emerge from

challenging established gender inequalities, and sometimes resulting conflict and counter-reaction, here is plenty of established research which points to NGO-related gains in relation to gender. Mobilisation of the poor, and of women in particular, is clearly making positive impacts in some areas of rural Bangladesh, but as Box 5.2 highlights, progress can be slow and difficult. In our fieldwork areas, we found examples of both credit programmes and wider mobilisation efforts by NGOs.

Box 5.2: NGO credit, female empowerment and local tensions

While many NGOs provide micro-credit to women, it is often their husbands who actually make use of the money. We heard about one woman whose husband had died and she then got a loan for her husband's brother to use in his business. He would give occasional benefits to her from his earnings, but she was not directly involved in his business. He eventually returned the money to her, but she had little productive use for it and so used it for buying clothes for her children. She was able to balance repayment by taking another loan from a different NGO. Such cases of taking 'overlapping' loan are quite common. In terms of strengthening women's rights, there were some evidence that NGOs' efforts sometimes generated problems in the village. One woman council member we interviewed had just returned from a *shalish* meeting. She said they had been trying to settle a dispute between a local husband and wife. The woman had been annoyed that her rickshaw-puller husband had put his mother and sister's needs before those of his own wife and children. There had been several attempts to resolve this dispute without success. The woman member felt that NGOs had made the problems worse. She said that such arguments were partly the result of the way some NGOs had been promoting gender issues in socially divisive terms, thereby encouraging disputes between men and women in the village. By contrast, she was far more positive about NGO work in the area of micro-credit provision. On the other hand, from a rights perspective, this case may be cited as evidence that NGOs are making some progress in challenging the gendered nature of the rural power structure, even if it sometimes causes more work for local union staff.

In Box 5.3, we see the ways in which civil society more broadly – in this case within the local business association – can also be a site of tensions and conflict, as traditional elites are confronted by new economically and politically powerful individuals and groups. In this example, an entrepreneur from this new group, who is considered somewhat disreputable because he is from a low status outsider group, has dubious contacts with BNP *mustaans* in a neighbouring locality, and has organised local fairs and gambling events which many consider to be immoral. He is disliked due to his business practices, but he draws power from his affiliation with the ruling party, and has tried to extend his power base through standing in the business association (*banik*) elections for formal office. He was not elected, but he is continuing

to use outside political influence and semi-criminal connections to challenge the local status quo – illustrating that ‘social capital’ can also be used to further anti-social individual aims.

Box 5.3: Elite tensions, local politics and the business association

Civil society can in some cases be seen as an arena for conflict between elites. For example, the older established traditional elite of the informal village leaders is being challenged in the well-connected village by members of a new, amoral power elite. We learned of one of the latter who had tried to gain more mainstream acceptability through seeking to join the local bank (business association), though his application was refused. A Bangladesh National Party (BNP) affiliate, he has successfully used his political base and connections with the sub-district authorities to accumulate wealth through both legitimate business and extortion. He has been known to bribe the police in order to run his businesses, some of which such as gambling, are not viewed as respectable by this older elite. Despite his broader Bangladesh National Party links, neither the local Awami League nor Bangladesh National Party people in the association get on with him, seeing him as an upstart. The tension seems to have affected the stability and confidence of the business association. Its chairman has become frustrated because of this individual's growing links with the wider Bangladesh National Party centred power structure and with local officials, all of which makes it difficult for them to control him. His brother is a BNP leader in a neighbouring sub-district with strong connections with the police and with a Minister in Dhaka. Both are regarded as semi-criminal figures in the local area, and as lower class outsiders (*kulu*). Once poor, they have managed to build a solid financial base through their various political contacts, and they now want to build their social power. The ‘social capital’ of the association has become disturbed through these outside connections. The union council chairman said *‘If the Awami League was in power, this person would never be able to act the way that he does’*. He knows as an Awami League chairman he cannot at present do much about him, without inviting and incurring trouble. While there is a measure of stability in the village, it is becoming disrupted through his ‘vertical’ alliances beyond the community. It is particularly interesting that even the local Bangladesh National Party activists do not much like this person.

One area in which advocates of the civil society idea have been criticised is for playing down realities of power within a conception of so-called autonomous or independent associations. As we have seen, this is all too apparent in the context of business associations, which cannot escape the influence of local political networks. At the same time, civil society advocates sometimes downplay the linkages which often exist between NGOs and government, either through funding relationships or via less visible networks of family or patronage. Box 5.4 sets out the story of the ways informal linkages between family and government helped in the formation, funding and evolution of a local NGO.

Box 5.4: Local NGOs and their links with government

We encountered one small local NGO which was set up in 1994 by Arif, a young graduate from a well-established village family. His two uncles are government secretaries in Dhaka, relatively well-paid and high status posts. Arif is not particularly well-educated, and his uncles suggested that he establish a local development NGO as a useful way of advancing his interests, offering to use some of their contacts and information to assist him. The NGO was to have flexible multiple objectives, including credit, education and health services and also land rights work. To help him get the NGO underway, one of his uncles, who was at that time at the Environment Ministry, was able to provide his NGO with a 'fake' project on pollution awareness to which was attached a grant of about £3000. He was required to organise a number of public meetings on pollution, even though there was no particular priority for action on pollution in the area. The NGO duly took shape, and it has been structured around his family – out of a total of seven persons who are involved in the governance of the NGO, four are from family and the others are from his network of friends. The NGO has done quite well in both services and land rights. It has established a total of 46 groups in the local area, 29 of which are male grassroots groups involved in land rights issues. The NGO is now supported by *Samata* in this work. Despite its somewhat unpromising – even corrupt – beginnings, this local NGO has nevertheless developed into a reasonably effective local organisation active in a range of sectors. It is now supported by *Samata* (see Box 5.5).

Box 5.4 illustrates the ways in which local elites have also extended their power through establishing local NGOs. Hilhorst (2003) showed through her ethnographic work in the Philippines that development NGOs have become a viable part of the livelihoods strategy of many rural elite families, a trend which is also visible in Bangladesh. This particular NGO is an organisation which has proved to be a useful vehicle for the livelihood strategy of a local well-established family, and it is now a partner organisation in the land rights work funded by *Samata*. The NGO has, perhaps surprisingly, been quite effective locally in its mobilisation work over illegally occupied *khas* land. Although the NGO was established using potentially corrupt connections with the Environment Ministry, it has proved to be a useful vehicle for building and maintaining the reputation of the family in the area, with some genuine potential gains for elements of the local poor. Hilhorst (2003) has called this strategy 'NGO-ing', and it can now be seen as an extension of more traditional patron-client relationship building in rural Bangladesh which is increasingly common among better-off rural families.

In Box 5.5, another aspect of the local NGO discussed in Box 5.4 is discussed. This relates to the linking of the NGO's work with the wider land rights campaigning of *Samata*, which has helped to secure new land

for local landless group members in the area. The case is instructive because it also tells us of the political negotiations between elites and local citizens which can sometimes lead to pro-poor action as democratic politics within some union contexts begins to deepen. In this case, a union council chairman who was willing to take risks decided that he could take action in support of local landless people as a vote-winner, and by doing so weaken the influence of his political enemies in the sub-district. Such cases may not be particularly common at the present time, but the example suggests that they are possible.

Box 5.5: Inter-elite bargaining in NGO work

In 2001, Arif's NGO became involved in the *khas* land rights network which was organised by *Samata*. Some 26 local NGOs in Rajbari District were at that time funded for salary costs and projects by *Samata*, with Arif's NGO receiving around Tk2.3 lakh; about £2300. Arif's decision to take the NGO into *khas* land action required that he first negotiate possible outcomes with the local power structure. In particular, he knew that if the chairman could easily place obstructions in the way, but if he were to be sympathetic, it would make a considerable difference to the work. He also knew that behind the illegal land occupations, there were powerful interests in the sub-district, and that he would need a strategy which would support a challenge to these interests. The local chairman was known to be generally unsympathetic to NGO credit services, but he also knew that these sub-district level elites were his political enemies, since they were supporters of the previous chairmen. An NGO land rights campaign of this kind could help him to strengthen his local support base against these sub-district interests. By backing the NGO's land work, he effectively would be attacking their interests. The result of this apparently unlikely alliance between an elite union council chairman and a radical land rights campaign run by a local NGO has been that 114 acres of *khas* land was recovered during the twelve months prior to our fieldwork. This was the result of a series of successful collective actions taking against a set of local brick business interests which were occupying this land. The next stage was to begin the legal process of registering the land with the government as *khas* land, so that it can be redistributed to the group members.

5.6 Conclusion

In this section, we have briefly noted some of the literature and reviewed field data relating to formal civil society activity. It is the activities of development NGOs which dominate our study area, but we have also considered other civil society actors such as the business association, voluntary groups and grassroots organisations.

Civil society has potentially important roles in as union level politics and administration becomes deepened, both as partners providing complementary services and as organisers and watchdogs ensuring local accountability, transparency and democracy. As part of this change, Guirguis (2004), for example identifies a trend in which some NGOs have begun to move away from the creation of alternative structures towards a more sustainable approach which tries instead to renegotiate and influence existing institutions. Blair (2005: 928) also argues against duplication and parallel structures, seeing considerable scope for civil society advocacy work at the union level, supported by donors via some mix of increasing demand through civil society mobilization and building ‘supply’ (i.e. of government services) by enhancing local government capacity to respond to such demand.

NGO interventions in Bangladesh may have many positive outcomes, but it is their political dimension – particularly in relation to clientelism and its local and national networks – which requires more detailed scrutiny if we are to explain, and build upon, cases of NGO-led development success (Devine 2006). Our data takes us a little further in uncovering the ways in which NGOs do not necessarily constitute autonomous, benign development actors as some civil society advocates would sometime have us think – but nor do they simply reproduce elite interests and maintain inequalities, even when they are elite-driven. Instead, there are spaces for action, linked to specific local circumstances, which occasionally open up, in which the interests of poor people can sometimes be negotiated and advanced.

Informal Civil Society and Social Norms

CHAPTER 6

6.1 Introduction

There is a wide range of social institutions of civil society which have a strong informal dimension, and these also form a crucial element of the overall power structure. This part of civil society includes what might be termed an informal (or semi-formal) system of local governance, involving kinship structures, patron-client networks and religious institutions. This system helps to structure local relationships, and also links these into wider district, national and international levels.

Informal institutions influence norms of social justice among rich and poor people by helping to create a ‘moral context’ in which socially-sanctioned codes of conduct, such as patronage, assistance and charity, help govern everyday social interactions between the various social groups. Within this framework, as Bode (2002) argues, informal leaders play important roles in the local power structure, within both formal and informal institutions, based on the enactment of a ‘politics of reputation’. Alongside this, religious beliefs and practices also become very important in the formation and maintenance of power by these informal leaders, particularly through their membership of the mosque or temple committees, which are important informal civil society institutions.²⁰

6.2 The Community and Social Relations

Clientelism is a key feature of social life in rural Bangladesh (Wood, 1992; 2001). Layers of patron-client relationships have long been the dominant

²⁰ A limitation of our study is that we were unable, in the areas where we conducted fieldwork, to collect data on non-Muslim institutions such as Hindu temple committees.

form of social organisation structuring relations between rich and poor: for landowners, such relationships can be used to ‘tie in’ the poor into unfavourable or exploitative relationships around land tenure or money-lending. For poor people themselves, the negotiation of patron-client relationships provides access to resources and a measure of social security in the absence of more favourable alternative livelihood options.²¹

Yet these relations of exploitation are nevertheless balanced by social norms and values, as Bode and Howes (2002) point out:

... moral values, rooted in religion and kin-based social institutions, have served to partially constrain the rich; obliging them to engage in redistributive activities and to provide minimal safety nets if they wish to command respect and secure sustained political support.
(p. vi).

The term *gusti* refers to the local lineage group which is composed of several related families within a village, which has traditionally formed the basis for the organisation of agricultural labour and systems of reciprocity. However, this is a fairly flexible rural institution, and there may not be a clear agreement about the precise membership details of the *gusti*. It is common for poorer families to seek membership in order to claim benefits while wealthier households may seek to limit membership in order to safeguard resources (Jansen 1987).

The *samaj*, the local residential community (the word also means ‘society’ more generally) is the main social institution in rural areas. The *samaj* is, according to Bertocci (2001), an indigenous institution which is relatively free-floating, since it is detached from local government structures. It depends primarily on the power of elite charismatic leaders and their supporters, framed in forms of patron and client relationships within neighbourhoods, based around the role of informal village leader village elders in managing factionalism, everyday disputes over resources, and crises. For Bertocci (2001), the *samaj* provides a framework for moral order in which followers may have means of redress if leaders are seen to behave in ways which offend norms of justice and morality. At the same time, Bode (2002) points out that while support to such leaders does not necessarily guarantee followers tangible benefits and resources, opposition can result in exclusion from any benefits.

Mosque and temple committees are also important at the local level (Bode 2002). Informal *samaj* leaders build their reputations through par-

²¹ Patron-client relationships are also of course reproduced within other areas of institutional life, such as within government and NGO organisations, and in relationships between organisational actors.

ticipation in public activities, such as the muslim congregation, *jama'at* and its provision of charitable redistribution *zakat*.

6.3 The Politics of Clan and Community

Box 6.1 shows the ways in which patrilineal clan politics are becoming intertwined with wider party politics in the peri-urban village. Two powerful local families, concerned about their changing and waning local power bases, are competing to consolidate and maintain local power through the construction of alliances with other more powerful outside patrilineal clans associated with the Bangladesh National Party and the Awami League.

Box 6.1: Clan politics and the power structure

In the peri-urban village, there are two *paras* which have divided the village between North and South, helping to define and structure village politics for many decades. One patrilineal clan (*gusti*), which we shall call Clan A, has built strong links with wider politics through having both Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Awami League (AL)-affiliated family members. A second rival patrilineal clan, which we term Clan B, has build strong links with the *Jama'at-i-Islami* party and a member of this family currently controls the local party chair position. Since 1962, the local union council chairman has been drawn from one or other of the two families. Despite this being a peri-urban area, the patrilineal clan remains the basic structure linking the village into the union level political power structure. These politics have therefore become strongly party politicised. In the village, it was suggested that Clan A patrilineal clan power is said to be waning due to lack of education, while the Clan B patrilineal clan has been strengthened via its *Jama'at-i-Islami* party links, particularly since the party was a partner in the BNP government at the time of the fieldwork. But what is particularly interesting is the way that these two patrilineal clans have successfully consolidated their power by building links beyond this village with two other bigger local patrilineal clans, families which are the two most powerful in the union – Clan C and Clan D. Both these linkages have helped to link A and B into wider national party politics. For example, Clan A has one son who has formed a good relationship with an individual high up in the BNP central office; while another brother and an uncle are both AL activists. This particular patrilineal clan therefore manages to balance several power centres. There is a complex web of patrilineal clan links and cross-cut with party political affiliations. These affiliations cannot be simply 'read off' as being part of long-term allegiances with one or the other of the main parties, but instead arise from a complex balancing of interests – both long term and pragmatic.

A local mosque committee may be linked with wider formal political process through the weekly sermon (*khutba*). At election time, candidates favoured by the committee are invited to address the *jama'at* (muslim con-

gregation) and even tour the village during their election campaigns, being careful to maintain a non-political façade by presenting themselves as ‘patrons of the congregations’ ready to donate materials for mosque repairs and improvements (Bode 2002).

In Box 6.2, we present a case which illustrates the ways in which these informal institutions may in small ways be open to change, but also to the ways in which the system resists such change. This woman, whose involvement with the NGO BRAC had empowered her to the extent that she has set up small businesses and achieved considerable economic progress, had set her sights on gaining a position on the local mosque committee and the *shalish*, both traditionally male domains. However, she had not managed to overcome the prejudice of either the local informal village leaders or the muslim religious leader. Despite potential new ‘spaces’ being created with positive opportunities within the changing power structure, gender discrimination remains a fundamental brake on social progress.

Box 6.2: Gender, local prejudice and the limits to empowerment

Salma is a longstanding member of a BRAC NGO-formed grassroots group, and she has worked very hard to overcome a range of extreme social and economic barriers which she has faced. She rears goats and poultry, and has received vet and midwifery training from the NGO. In addition to these NGO links, she is also actively involved with the income generation activities of the government-organised rural cooperative network organised by the Bangladesh Rural Development Board, through her membership of her local women’s group *Mohila dal* (women’s cooperative) branch. All this means she has become the main breadwinner of her large extended family. Empowered by these involvements, she has also built up the confidence to try in recent years to extend her activities into what remain two traditionally male ‘domains’ in the public life of the village – the mosque and the *shalish*. As a result of many years of working to organise *iftar* (the food which celebrates the end of the Ramadan fast at sundown) for the mosque on behalf of the women’s group, she decided to apply for membership of the mosque committee, in order to deepen her involvement. But she was dismayed to find that her application was refused. She was told that committee membership was simply not open to women. She had also begun to participate in the village *shalish*, but has found it difficult to have her voice heard. She told us that one informal village leader had explained to her that since she is poor, and knows nothing about either the *sharia* or the federal laws, her views have no value there. Meanwhile the muslim religious leader of the local *Jama’at-i-Islami* party told us during our fieldwork that, since Halima did not wear the veil, her opinions were not acceptable in the *shalish*.

6.4 NGOs Seeking to Challenge Patronage and Exclusion

Despite their organisational flaws and the contradictions of their relationships within the local power structure, NGOs are often the focus of local change efforts. Case study 6.3 shows the way in which a local NGO had successfully mobilised local rickshaw pullers and freed them from paying exploitative rental fees to a small number of local businessmen rickshaw owners. Instead, the NGO was able to provide loans to each puller so that they could own their own vehicles. The same NGO has also been able to use credit services as a platform on which to mobilise local women's groups work in support of women's rights. What is distinctive about the situation here is that of the three study areas, the peri-urban village is the most economically buoyant, which makes it possible for economic opportunities to follow from NGO interventions, making them potentially more sustainable than in other areas.

Box 6.3: Economic dimensions of mobilising against patronage and violence against women

We found one small local NGO in the peri-urban village which had been established in 1975 and had been engaged in making loans for small enterprises such as rickshaw-pulling, goat and cow rearing and raising chickens. There were several 'success stories' reported from this NGO, which now employs more than 170 workers and is funded mainly through the government's *Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation* (PKSF), which lends money for productive activities by the poor. One is the way this NGO's credit programme has helped rickshaw pullers free themselves from having to rent rickshaws by supporting them to buy their own vehicle. Until recently there were four powerful rickshaw businessmen in Faridpur town, who controlled virtually all the 18,000 rickshaws there. Today, the NGO has converted 4000 pullers into rickshaw owners. Arguably the NGOs' success has been highly dependent on the economic growth in this peri-urban context, since the rickshaw pullers have been able to quickly convert newly-available credit into economic power in order to free themselves from a 'tied' exploitative relationship with local rickshaw owners. The NGO has also been successful work in relation to violence against women. In particular, the NGO has been active in addressing local problems of wife beating (*bou pitano*). While most of the emphasis has been on micro-credit services, they have also incorporated a gender rights and mobilisation component. In one action, the NGO led an intervention in a particularly notorious village in which two hundred of its workers and activists confronted one particular recurrent offender and insisted that his wife beat him with a brush in front of the crowd! The resulting high profile public humiliation of this man has reportedly led to a general reduction of violence against women in this area.

Yet NGO interventions of this kind are highly susceptible to political influence, as the women's action committee case shows (Box 6.4). *Samata's* efforts to build an alternative *shalish* system through a system of mobilisation of grassroots women's group has achieved important gains, but it is also vulnerable to penetration by local party activists with negative implications for securing and enforcing justice.

Box 6.4: Citizen action, party politics and dispute settlement

In the remote village, we found a local civil society group experimenting with a new and more gender-friendly form of *shalish*. The *Women's Action Committee* (WAC) is a *Samata* programme for dealing with violence against women, and has been active in three the union's nine wards since 2001. It has established a ten-person committee in each of these wards, headed by a *Samata* women's group member. Each WAC group member is paid Tk500 per month by *Samata* to look for and take action against infringements of women's rights. In one recent case, a local man was accused of raping his wife's younger sister. The WAC group decided to organise what they term a 'non-conventional' *shalish*, by calling local informal village leaders and other influential people to sit in council and review this crime. The local union council member from the village attended, and after hearing the details, he said that he would take care of the problem using his strong connections with a powerful Bangladesh National Party (BNP) party person (he was himself a BNP supporter). He then took matters into his own hands, and did not want to listen to the views of the other members of the WAC *shalish*. He ruled that an Tk8000 penalty should be paid by the accused man to the victim. However, it turned out later that although a fine had been paid, the union member himself had taken Tk3000 of the fine, ostensibly because he had arranged for new cooking utensils to be purchased for the use of the *samaj* for public gatherings and festivities, arguing this was for the benefit of the whole village. However this purchase was entirely unrelated to the case. Yet there was another less immediately visible side to this story. When a *Samata* staff member initially told us about this, they had said that the member had forced them to accept his decision. But our subsequent enquiries uncovered a slightly different 'inside story', because it turned out that the local WAC group itself had become politicised, with six of its ten members apparently affiliated to the BNP, having voted for this particular union council member in the election. They had therefore supported his decision, and his right to take a large 'cut' of the fine. These women had concealed their political affiliations during earlier *Samata* meetings where they had been critical of various local men, including those linked to the BNP authorities, as being unaccountable and violent. Two other women in the group were Awami League supporters. The committee is therefore cross-cut by both party political loyalties, despite the surface NGO rhetoric of grassroots mobilisation of the poor.

6.5 Conclusion

Informal civil society institutions are at the heart of the local power structure, but they are often difficult to identify and analyse.²² Our data suggests that they are diverse and more importantly perhaps, are not fixed, and as with other types of institution we have analysed, they are changing. While some elements of this change, such as the ways in which traditional modes of authority are becoming politicised by the increased penetration of the national political parties and their networks, have quite negative implications for the poor there are others, such as the efforts by NGOs and through new forms of informal settlement mechanisms, which appear to have some useful potential for pro-poor change.

Along with the formal civil society institutions discussed in Chapter 5, informal civil society highlights the complex ways in which local institutions interact with the structures of local government to produce the governance frameworks in which rural people go about their daily lives. Writing on decentralisation processes in Bangladesh, Barenstein (2000) has made the case for a shift from focusing only on 'local government' towards one which takes a broader, more inclusive view of 'local governance' in which elected local authorities are seen as only one set of important actors in decision-making and service provision, working in conjunction with a diverse range of different actors – state and non-state – through various forms of network and relationship including complementarity, cooperation and competition. Our data also resonates with Lund's (2006) idea of the importance of 'twilight institutions' which exist between state and society and between public and private space, and which help give shape to the exercise of public authority in particular contexts.

²² Bode (2002) is by far the most up to date, insightful and far-ranging analysis of informal power we could find, and we have drawn upon her study more than any other.

Comparing the Three Villages

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we move on from the direct focus on local institutions in the preceding chapters to review briefly key issues in relation to the changing power structure within each of the three field study areas, drawing primarily from our field work data. Four main themes are discussed: (a) the interplay of formal and informal political processes at the union level, (b) the changing role and composition of local social institutions such as *shalish*, (c) the local roles of non-governmental actors, and (d) the economic dimensions of local change.

We refer back to some of the case study boxes found in the earlier chapters, and place these cases within their local contexts, in order to show the importance of recognising the ways in which diverse local institutional landscapes and histories help to shape the local power structure and its processes. While the local power structure can be seen to be changing in each locality, the specific forms of that change, and the potential implications for people living in poverty, can be seen to vary in each case.

7.2 The 'Well-Connected' Village

The first village, while still rural, is one that has benefited from the widespread improvements in rural infrastructure which have been seen across the country during the past decade. There are good roads, a modern high school and primary school, a college, seven mosques and an agricultural bank. Most of its seven hundred households continue to depend on farming as primary occupation, but many are now also able to supplement their farm income with agricultural and non-agricultural seasonal em-

ployment. About twenty per cent of households depend on rural businesses, while another ten per cent remain functionally landless. Though primarily an agricultural village, there is also a large *bazaar* which serves the surrounding area. This market has become an important local economic centre, containing the area's major jute and onion wholesale supply facilities. This has created buoyant wholesale businesses for some of the wealthiest households and additional trading income for many other village households.

7.2.1 Politics

The local union council chairman comes from this village. He was first elected to office in 1988 and has been continuously re-elected ever since. An energetic and often innovative local leader, he has built a power base from diverse political relationships, and placed this village at the centre of local politics. During that time, like many other neighbouring chairmen, he was affiliated with General Ershad's ruling Jatiya Party. However, he is now with the Awami League, and as this suggests, he has built his reputation through being politically flexible. He maintains good relations with a wide range of key people in the village including a young Bangladesh National Party political leader, the local *imam*, an influential religious teacher and with some of the area's 'left' intellectuals. He has used the Union's role in the distribution of outside relief resources to build and maintain local support, taking care to distribute resources as evenly as possible across the village to keep all groups happy. For example, his work after the severe floods of 1988 is still remembered for being exceptionally even-handed.

7.2.2 Social institutions

In this area, the traditional *samaj* system is regarded by informants as having become weakened, as a result of a growth of inter-generational tensions, the post-1991 growth of party politics, and the increasing scale of households' external linkages. The chairman now often convenes a *shalish* by drawing upon a wider range of people of good reputation from the surrounding area, such as people from the local business community, rather than depending on the informal village leaders (see Box 4.3). Poorer members of the community were cautiously optimistic about the new arrangements for dispute settlement, but outcomes remained somewhat mixed for women. Despite the chairman's attempts to involve women union council members in the *shalish*, our evidence suggested that the women's attendance was poor and that women-friendly outcomes remained difficult to enforce (see Box 4.1). The new *gram sarkar* village gov-

ernment arrangements, which were supposed to have been established in 2003, had not materialised, probably because the union council chairman was an Awami League supporter.

7.2.3 Non-governmental actors

At least five different NGOs were found to be working in this village, mainly with credit services. Three of these were well-known large national organisations, each with more than a decade's experience of such work in the village. A fourth concentrated on social mobilisation work over land rights. The fifth was a small NGO for women which had been established by an influential local family in 1992. The formation of this last NGO was an interesting example of the ways in which the traditional power structure of the rural elite is adapting its institutions and activities and diversifying its livelihood strategies (Box 5.4). Its director can be seen as a new type of 'non-party' political rural women's leader who has become interested in doing something about the position of local rural women. Initially, she had wished to undertake social mobilisation through the NGO, but unable to secure funding, she shifted instead towards a more developmental set of activities for her NGO. The NGO has subsequently grown, receiving support for its work from two Dhaka-based organisations.

Tensions exist between the Union authorities and NGOs over credit services (see Box 5.1 p. 64). There were reports that some poor households have lost assets, after getting behind with loan repayments and falling foul of NGOs' tough stance on recovery. Indeed, the chairman complained that the NGOs' strict loan repayment rules and high interest rates have turned NGOs into '*the new money-lenders*'. For example, it was reported that a few years back one NGO had tried to confiscate and sell the house of a group member who was failing to make their loan repayments. The chairman then became involved in the dispute and dissolved that particular NGO's local group, replacing it with new cooperative lending arrangements made through the Bangladesh Rural Development Board, BRDB. He told us he had become 'anti-NGO' as a result of the excessive time he has had to spend on disputes arising from these loans. We found that some of this hostility among elites to NGOs also resulted from the fact that NGO money-lending threatened the interests of established village money-lenders. Yet there is broad support for the credit programmes from within the community amongst both poor and non-poor, both of whom appear to be able to access NGO credit equally. But we found that this chairman was – against expectation – much more sympathetic to NGO activities mobilising the poor to claim their rights in relation to the distribution of unclaimed *khas* land than to their credit work. Illegal *khas* land occupation not only

causes problems for the chairman, but by being seen to assist with solving such problems, he knows that it will reflect well on him locally and help strengthen his own power base (Box 5.5).

There is in the *bazaar* a business association which set up in the early 1990s. The main purpose was one of ‘self-help’ for the business community, such as assisting members with problems with security and legal advice. As result of recent thefts from the *bazaar* premises, the association had established a new system to provide guards. The association has also become a source of new *shalish* members, signalling a new recognition of the importance of the business community as a force for stability and law and order. But the association has recently been threatened an attempt to seize control of its committee by a rogue businessman associated gambling and *mustaan* culture (Box 5.3).

There is also a longstanding youth association, registered with government as a club since the 1960s. This group collects funds locally to provide scholarships and prizes to the best village students. However, it is reported that the association has become less effective than it was, due to creeping politicisation as a result of infiltration by Bangladesh National Party youth activists.

7.2.4 Economy

Finally, the importance of the local economy in helping to determine the level and trajectories of change within the local power structure cannot be underestimated. The thriving *bazaar* is at the centre of the village economy. Once an important local cattle market, it has diversified over time as local road communications have improved. This also means that the union has an important stream of market revenue that is not available to other surrounding unions, and this has provided resources to support the chairman’s vision of local modernisation.

7.2.5 Conclusion

What becomes apparent from this village is the way in which local elites are diversifying their power base beyond land-ownership and money-lending into multiple and often flexible party political affiliations and other forms of income generation, such as NGO work. Despite some ‘opening out’ of the local power structure in terms of access to decision-making and dispute settlement, local poor people still comment on their own powerlessness, finding it impossible to participate in and influence local decisions without owning wealth. One said ‘*We have no stick, we have no money*’. Another was critical of the increasing power of party political affiliation, so that a link with the ruling party provides a person with the freedom to

do whatever they want: *‘The people who have power here – police, lawyers and ministers – are all connected with them’.*

7.3 The ‘Remote’ Village

The ‘remote’ study village was located within a riverine area, largely isolated from the rest of the sub-District by a tributary of the Padma river. The area’s relative isolation and physical instability contributes to a measure of social disequilibrium that often characterises these types of *char* areas. People here have a distinctive social identity attributed to them by outsiders, embodied in the label *choira* (or ‘char people’), that implies a judgement about inferior levels of education and culture. Like our first village, this one is also primarily dependent on farming, but regular river erosion has undermined much of the local agricultural land, throwing the land titles of many of its small-holders into confusion and dispute. As a result, some households have been forced to move from one their homestead to another from time to time. People here need good local networks and contacts if they are to survive, and strong patronage ties are the means through which people who lose homestead plots try to access new land for housing from better-off patrons by paying a deposit (known as *kot*).

There is a primary school and two mosques, but there are no metalled roads, no electricity supply nor a local high school. Education levels are low compared with our first village and there are only three graduates here. These days about half of the workforce work outside the village, often in non-farm employment. One important source of income for the poor comes from seasonal labour opportunities, in the form of sand-gathering work from local riverbeds for the construction industry. Local land-owners employ around a hundred villagers in this kind of work for seven months of the year, each person earning about one-third more than the daily agricultural labour wage. Other important non-agricultural employment opportunities include rickshaw-pulling and construction work, both requiring a commute to the nearby town. Some poorer household members, usually younger boys and youth, engage in small-scale boat transport work and local fishing.

7.3.1 Politics

A steady growth of party politicisation in local institutions has taken place in recent years. Since 2003, there has been a Bangladesh National Party (BNP) union council chairman in office, who has strong links to the local MP who is also BNP. Here all the union members, including the recently elected women, all have formal political affiliations. In this area there is a

good balance between parties on the union council (*union parishad*): the MP and union council chairman are both BNP, with five BNP members, five Awami League and two left parties. It is said that about half of the people in the village are now directly involved in party politics, while the other half constitute a block of ‘floating voters’. These are the decisive force at election time, with each of the two main parties courting their votes. For the ruling BNP, support is built through influencing local decisions and resource allocation, such as the allocation of contracts – such as for road improvements – to the party faithful. The local member of parliament may also become heavily involved in this process, as we found in the case of a union road-building project which he sought to control (see Box 3.2).

7.3.2 Social institutions

Even in this remote village, social institutions are far from static. The informal village leader (*matbars*) were once powerful landowners in what was a predominantly agriculture-based community. They could command respect through their landlord-tenant relationships. But as villagers have become ever more mobile, and less dependent on land and farming, their power is slowly diminishing. The growth of contracting work opportunities beyond the village has brought new perspectives in from beyond the village, even for the poorest people. Another factor contributing to change has been a distinctive and atypical history of leftist grassroots politics in this area since the 1960s, which had sometimes challenged traditional local landowning interests. One of the two union council members from left parties comes from this village, and he has build respect here on the basis of his long history of pro-poor activism. As a result, his party is seen locally as being less ‘predatory’ than other modern political parties, and both the Bangladesh National Party and Awami League candidates try to claim an association with this left-wing tradition of community organising during election time.

A new middle class from this village is making political connections beyond the village, and there is a better-educated younger generation emerging from the local high schools. For the next generation of informal village leader families, life is already very different to that of their parents. Land-based patron-client relations have begun to fade, and the foundations for power and respect are more multi-dimensional, and perhaps, more open. Female education levels are also slowly increasing. While there are still no female college graduates in the village, there are some 15–20 girls attending high school and in five years there will be female graduates. Some village households which have been earning well outside the village

are investing in girls' education, and there are successful government and NGO efforts to improve primary school enrolment for girls.

The *gram sarkar* village government system had taken stronger shape here than it had in the first village. However, the interplay between traditional and formal local institutions had become complicated, since two competing local governance institutions were now operating at the village level. Ignoring the formal guidelines for composition, the Bangladesh National Party had kept a very tight rein on the *gram sarkar* formation process and chosen only their own supporters, resulting in low levels of overall trust in the new arrangements.

The *shalish* still operated along traditional lines but had become more politicised, and was seen by some as being in decline. Sometimes district officials and MP became involved, with the result that decisions were being made based on partisan political criteria. Disputes with a party political dimension have become common, such as over the annual auction of union *bazaar* rights. Both the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party had formed 'ward committees', which provided a platform for local leaders to involve themselves more directly in the *shalish*. It was not unusual for money to change hands behind the scenes in relation to decisions. For example, in a recent land dispute, one person did not accept the decision given, and went to complain to the Bangladesh National Party, resulting in a second larger *shalish* with BNP participation. The village government then became involved, and took money from both parties. Some people view this trend of politicisation of *shalish* as 'interference', but others do not necessarily consider it a bad thing and instead see it as a more constructive improvement on previously unaccountable traditional decision making.

7.3.3 Non-governmental actors

A number of NGOs have been working in the village since the 1990s, including those with both micro-credit approaches and social mobilisation efforts. Two were local micro-credit organisations, while a third was a national level micro-finance organisation. A fourth national NGO came to the village in 2000 to undertake social mobilisation work over *khas* land rights, avoiding service delivery work, micro-credit and emergency relief. Although there are both rich and poor households in the village, all households have become accustomed to receiving untargeted flood relief from the government and from the NGOs. Neither the union authorities nor the NGOs undertake 'means testing' for relief. The chairman explained that since everyone works for a living, everyone is affected by the floods. He explained: '*If I help everyone in times of hardship, then it is good for me at election time*'.

At the time of the fieldwork it was possible to observe relief operations in action, as they were being coordinated through the Union during August flooding. Both rich and poor households received compensation in equal measure. One informal village leader who was asked about the reasons why he got relief as a rich man said: *'They are giving it, so I am getting it'*. The union member who was there also said *'I have given them all the names on the village because everyone has been affected'*. The NGOs also provide largely targeted services outside the relief context. For example, the union council (*union parishad*) member's wife – a well to do woman – took a substantial loan from one national NGO in order to mortgage in some land. The woman's husband explained that *'Those who have some wealth can benefit from an ngo loan, those who do not cannot'*, implying that NGO credit for the poor brings them little benefit. Another village women explained that she was involved with taking credit from three different NGOs at the same time.

Our data suggested that development NGOs which focus purely on social mobilisation rather than offering hand-outs or services may face opposition from certain sections of both the rich and poor. Some of the non-poor informants said they were angry with the mobilisation NGO, complaining that its staff were always talking about *khas* land for the poor, but never doing anything. One staff member complained that it can be very difficult to get group members interested in social mobilisation issues, since most are just interested in loans. But members of the male focus group who were poor reported that this NGO had established a NGO-formed grassroots group that had become a twenty person coalition of poor villagers, which acted as a pressure group in time of crisis to press for the rights of the poor. The group is building respect in the community and have performed in a dispute settlement role from time to time as a kind of 'NGO-formed *shalish*'.

There are also signs that wider civil society associational life has been becoming stronger. For example, a strong rickshaw puller association covered all 3,000 rickshaws in Rajbari town. It once had had strong connections with the local MP, but had now become a more independent bargaining association for rickshaw pullers' economic rights. Another self-help association had been established by local construction workers, with its members paying a small weekly subscription to provide accidental death insurance cover for their families.

7.3.4 Economy

The development of the local economy has been severely hampered by its comparative remoteness. Local resource mobilisation levels are low, and less than half of projected tax revenue was actually being collected. It was

felt to be too politically difficult to collect personal taxes, and instead the union council depends on revenue collected from small traders through the sale of trading licenses and occasionally, if people can be coerced through personal networks, from land taxes.

Many people are compelled to migrate daily for work outside in the town, while some others go for longer term temporary migration for a few months for construction and other work. Some thirty village women have been working in Dhaka garment factories since the 1990s, but the lack of wider connections means that there has been none of the international migration found in some villages in rural Bangladesh. The importance of such networks and contacts is shown by the experience of the garment workers, whose jobs were originally the result of links established by a few young men from the village in Dhaka where they worked as rickshaw pullers, and where they managed to build contacts which secured work for their sisters or daughters.

7.3.5 Conclusion

As with the well-connected village, the evolution and deepening of party political linkages locally has brought some potentially positive effects in relation to competition for resources. For example, during the early 1990s, a local school building had been destroyed by river erosion and had had to be re-located. Both nearby villages had started to make the case for it to be built on their side of the riverbank, and it was the opposite village which ended up establishing the school on their side. Not to be outdone, the people of this village then established a committee which decided to build another school on their side. The outcome was in the end two schools instead of one, with benefits for the wider population.

7.4 The 'Peri-Urban' Village

Our third study site was a relatively prosperous peri-urban village well-connected to Faridpur town, where many of its inhabitants now work. The next village along on the Faridpur town side is no longer part of the union, and has become fully urban as part of the municipality. There are about seven hundred households in this village. More than half have members whose main income is in the construction industry, and only a fifth now have agriculture as their main source of income. About five per cent are in rural businesses, and another five per cent are dependent on rickshaw pulling. A quarter of the households are functionally landless, and three quarters are considered 'middle class'.

Since the extensive 1988 floods, there has been steady development

and modernisation in this village, with good infrastructure that includes a hospital established in 1994 when the rural electricity supply was connected. There has been some migration from local *char* areas, but migrants have been assimilated effectively and there are no reported tensions. The pace of urbanisation and modernisation has been quite rapid, and there are now some reports of social problems associated with youth drug use and deteriorating law and order.

7.4.1 Politics

One of the most noticeable characteristics of this village is the continuing importance of the clan politics (Box 6.1). Two competing families have long dominated local politics in the village, and have now each constructed patron-client links with clans outside, associated with current and past union council chairmen. The village's politics can best be understood as having been effectively 'captured' by the efforts of these two outside patrilineal clans (*gustis*) to control the union council. No one from this village has competed before in an election, since they have instead become clients of the two outside patrilineal clans. Unlike many villages where patrilineal clans are found to be in factional tension around local village matters, these patrilineal clans are fully focused on outside political linkages.

A level of social change was apparent in this village which we did not see in the other two study sites. The newly-elected female union council members are fully engaged in its affairs, having been provided with additional training by a Dhaka-based women's rights organisation. They have also participated in the *shalish*, partly as an outcome of this training, but also perhaps as a result of the more urban context of this union, where there is a higher degree of female mobility and participation.

7.4.2 Social institutions

Yet the traditional *shalish* system no longer functions effectively, with increased popular distrust of both the informal village leaders (*matbars*) and the *shalish* system itself. Instead, disputants prefer to call the union council chairman and other members to an informal tribunal, instead of taking an issue to the informal village leaders. One of the reasons for this decline of the traditional *shalish* is the more outward-facing nature of the village, articulated through the wider networks of clan linkages. In small arguments over land which do not involve legal or technical rights issues or neighbourly quarrels, it was reported that politically-involved male youths have recently started to act in the informal village leader role. Meanwhile mosque leaders tend to be involved in the intra-household marital disputes.

Issues which affect the whole community, such as declining law and order, or problems with young people and drugs (mostly males), might be taken to the sub-district level. Indeed, there was evidence of wider social problems here as compared to the other two villages. The non-poor females in the focus group were particularly concerned about the rise of youth disaffection, and in particular increased drug use among young men and boys. They explained that the most powerful people in the village were male youths, who derive their power both from the use of interpersonal violence and were in their view negatively influenced by drug use. They ranked the union council as only really being important in times of crisis such as flood, while informal village leaders (*matbars*) were only useful for dealing with minor problems.

We found that the *gram sarkar* system had been operationalised, but that it had been convened largely on the basis of political affiliation and kinship, rather than according to the formal guidelines. The effort to establish the village government system had led to a conflict in the village, because local influential informal village leaders came into conflict with local government officials, delaying the formation of the new committee. This resulted in a conflict with the sub-district administration which is still running. These village government members also participate in the *shalish*. The informal village leaders did not like the choices that were made for the committee, and opposed the list. A pressure group has been formed by villagers to seek changes in the committee, but all that has happened is that the dispute has been reported to the local Sub-District Coordination Officer and there has been no resolution. The committee has not met once since its formation. No village level development work had been carried out recently in the village due to this dispute.

7.4.3 Non-governmental actors

There are even more local and national NGOs working in this area than in the other two study sites. The NGOs are primarily engaged in micro-credit work, along with water and sanitation, education services and disability activities. The emergence of small civil society-type initiatives at the local level is also notable. Many of these are now turning into formal structures and becoming registered NGOs, in a process of NGO creation as an elite strategy (see Box 5.4). Despite the appearance of formal structures, many of these small NGOs retain a strongly local identity and may incorporate important elements of kinship relationships and informal systems (Lewis 2008).

7.4.4 Economy

Micro-credit from NGOs is more successful here than in the earlier two villages, no doubt because of the proximity to the town and the economic opportunities this affords. Proximity has also helped reduce chronic poverty because of the economic opportunities that are to be found there. Many landless people have received loans and are able to use these for rickshaws and convert to ownership of their vehicles. The majority no longer depend on agriculture, since local economic conditions provide a reasonably strong basis on which to build sustainable self-employment and micro-enterprise.

7.4.5 Conclusion

There was a widespread perception that there were negative social changes, as might be expected in a peri-urban area. There are far more reports of law and order problems such as drugs, petty theft than in the other two villages. There are some young men and boys who have begun to disregard local village norms, and feel themselves immune from social sanctions in the town, and are seen by others in the community as creating nuisance. But, more positively, there are in this ‘modernising’ area more women members attending the *shalish*, since conservative gender norms are open to challenge and female *shalish* members are increasingly accepted, supported by the work of outside NGOs and some elements of local town elites.

7.5 Conclusion

When we consider each of the three study locations in turn, we find that the general outline of institutions set out in Figure 1 (see pp. 19–20 and Annex 1, pp. 106–107) are common to each area, but is configured differently within each local landscape. The interplay of formal and informal political processes at the union level, the changing role and composition of traditional social institutions such as *shalish*, the types, roles and perceptions of non-governmental actors, and the local economic dimensions of change each interact to produce different types of outcomes.

This finding fits with Meagher’s (2008) argument from studying local government and the power structure in Uganda, where she finds that ‘the restructuring of networks does not take place within a vacuum, but is critically shaped by the locality in which networks operate’ (p.11), and that we therefore need to situate analysis of these patterns of change against broader ‘history, power relations and relations with the state’ (p.12). It is also supported by recent work by Faguet and Ali (2007) in Bangladesh,

who compare two sub-districts (*upazilas*) in different parts of the country where they find very different service delivery outcomes from ongoing processes of decentralization. These authors stress the importance of the local ‘micro-foundations’ which can make it possible for a set of common administrative and governance frameworks to produce very different outcomes across different settings, based on ‘local incentives and patterns of interaction’ within complex and dense webs of relationships (p.25).

For agencies seeking to intervene in support of securing rights and entitlements for people living in poverty, this means that a ‘one size fits all’ view cannot be applied to understanding conditions and processes of change within the local power structure, but that important local differences of emphasis exist. For example, while the union council is a potentially useful focus point for initiatives in all three locations, in the remote village initiatives which seek to generate employment and income generation will probably be needed before dominant patronage patterns can be challenged, or before much pro-poor can be expected from non-governmental actors. Within the peri-urban village, by contrast, where economic opportunities are relatively plentiful, an engagement with the diverse set of civil society actors may help create outcomes which can build social cohesiveness within local communities.

Social change in rural Bangladesh, as Kabeer (2003) argues, tends to unfold in ways that are both non-linear and multi-directional. The dynamics of rural transformation are changing, becoming more diverse and less predictable, as the different scenarios found in our three study villages suggest. While all three villages are subject to common processes of change such as politicisation, ‘NGO-isation’ and livelihood differentiation, there are nevertheless different kinds of local outcome. For example, in the remote village, ‘the net’ still existed but had become weaker than that depicted in BRAC’s 1983 study. It had become possible for targeted external resources (such as NGO credit, public flood relief) to be provided to both rich and poor alike, rather than simply being ‘captured’ by elites – though it did remain largely untargeted. In our first and third villages, the net had been replaced by a more flexible ‘politics of reputation’, in which local leaders have become engaged in a constant and ongoing attempt to build alliances and broker relationships.

8.1 Focusing on Formal and Informal Institutions

This study provides a set of qualitative insights into the local power structure in rural Bangladesh, by focusing on the formal and informal institutions which govern people's lives across three contrasting villages in Greater Faridpur District. It aims to complement more conventional macro-level analyses of power which are frequently undertaken at country level. As such, we hope it may provide a potential model for understanding the local power structure which could be adapted for further studies elsewhere in Bangladesh as well as further afield.

In Chapter One, the power structure was introduced as a set of formal and informal institutions governing people's lives (Figure 1). Chapter Two then moved to a description of the complexity and flux found in the system of local administrative institutions, where there are considerable tensions between levels, and between administrators on the one hand and political actors on the other. The system is overlaid with a complex web of informal relationships between power-holders. Chapter Three moved on to consider political institutions. This suggests a system in which local politics revolves around two key dimensions: the efforts of elected MPs to dispense patronage and build and maintain their vote banks on the one hand, and on the other, the efforts of local union chairmen to negotiate within an increasingly complex environment to try to securing resources for their constituencies and locales. In Chapter Four, the judicial institutions are described and analysed. Access to justice for most citizens in rural Bangladesh remains very difficult or, in many cases impossible, either from formal judicial institutions such as the village courts, or from less formal ones such as the *shalish*. A diverse range of practices and outcomes suggests that openings or spaces for improving the outcomes for people

who are living in poverty may be possible. In Chapter Five, we turned to ‘civil society’, including the activities of development NGOs, and other civil society actors such as the business association, voluntary groups and grassroots organisations. NGO interventions in Bangladesh may have many positive outcomes, but it is their political dimension – particularly in relation to clientelism and its local and national networks – which requires more detailed scrutiny if we are to explain, and build upon, cases of NGO-led development success. Chapter Six examines informal civil society institutions, which form a key element of the local power structure. Chapter Seven reviews and compares field data the three locations, exploring both the similarities and considerable differences. For example, the interplay of formal and informal political processes at the union level, the changing role and composition of traditional social institutions such as *shalish* (the village dispute settlement mechanism), the types, roles and perceptions of non-governmental actors, and the local economic dimensions of change each interact to produce diverse outcomes across the three locations.

8.2 The Study's Main Contribution

How do the findings fit into the ‘bigger picture’ of research on Bangladesh? Our study indicates a higher level of change and flux than earlier studies indicated.

Agrarian structuralist accounts from the 1980s have played an important role in conceptualising the rural power structure in Bangladesh (see Chapter 1). Many elements from these accounts still resonate with current rural realities. For example, *The Net*, typical of such work, stated that there was a ‘changing combination of economic and physical power and a system of interlocking networks to gain control over local and external resources ...’ (BRAC 1983:82), and this basic idea remains critical to understanding how the power structure operates.

However, our study suggests that this structural rigidity has weakened as a result of local government reforms, higher levels of political party influence in rural areas, the activities of NGOs, improved rural infrastructure and a sustained period of economic growth in the countryside. Two decades on, *The Net’s* finding that membership of the rural elite had been ‘very stable over the past ten years’ and that development resources ‘rarely reach the poor’ (1983:82–83) is therefore challenged by our data. Villages are now far more integrated into local economies and wider political structures than they were in the 1980s. As Westergaard and Hossain (2001:334) found in their re-study of a village in the district of Tangail, ‘the power structure is no longer confined to the village’.

Today there is a less rigid, more complex rural power structure which under certain circumstances – such as a strong local economy, the presence of new or diversifying elites, and a high level of diversity of governmental and non-governmental actors – allows some ‘room for manoeuvre’ for weaker sections of the community to advance their interests, and for action by local government leaders and NGOs to open up space for pro-poor change.

Our study also finds plenty of evidence for Lukes’ hidden ‘third dimension’ of power – the idea that power often operates subtly and ideologically by excluding opportunities for influencing change by simply keeping them off the agenda. Many people living in poverty in Bangladesh know there is little point in believing that local institutions will provide the means for them to secure rights or justice.

But there are signs that opportunities do exist locally for those with power to respond to negotiations around potential win-win issues – such as gender participation or land rights – which may advance the interests of people living in poverty, and there is a need for such opportunities to be further explored by both local and external development actors. For example, in Box 4.3, the growth of participation of a wider range of people from the union council (*union parishad*) in the *shalish* can be seen to have increased the likelihood that a gender positive decision was both reached and enforced.

8.3 Analysing the Local Power Structure

We have viewed the rural power structure using the three analytical ‘lenses’ of *governance*, *informality*, and *empowerment*.

We described and analysed the formal institutions of governance which operate locally, including the administrative authorities, elected political bodies and the forces of law and order (Figure 1). The data in each of the preceding chapters illustrates the ways in which disadvantaged people face a wide range of constraints in rural Bangladesh, including inefficient local institutions (Chapters 2, 3 and 4), relatively weak collective bargaining positions (Chapter 5), and a range of exclusionary social norms (Chapters 6 and 7). But it also shows how some people manage to use existing structures and relationships to try to increase their influence, access resources and further their economic and social goals, for example by utilizing a range of outside opportunities which arise from the activities of local administrators, NGOs, party political activists, or other powerful patrons. The study has also documented some of the barriers which limit these local change processes (such as in Chapter 2, section 2.6). Such

limiting factors include a lack of role clarity within local government systems and structures, the frequent political interference by MPs into local affairs and priorities, and the persistence of personalized patron-client ties governing access to resources.

In Chapters 2 and 6 we examined the role of informal relationships within the power structure, where we found a pervasive clientelism within social relationships, networks and hierarchies which both constrain and facilitate people's lives and livelihoods. For example, the 'reputational' politics practiced by the union chairman in Box 2.2 may have done little to foster local grassroots democracy, but it can from time to time help to bring outside resources into the village. While there is a broadening of voices within the *salish* dispute settlement system which may allow women's rights to be given more attention, resistance from traditional informal village leader (*matbar*) nevertheless impedes such progress and still makes it difficult to sustain (Box 4.4).

The recognition that both formal and informal practices characterise the rural power structure brings both opportunities and dangers. More research is needed to better understand the ways in which the worlds of 'rational' public administrative rules and procedures in local government structures, formal political organisations, and donors' ideas and policies in relation to development intervention, interact in practice with the messy realities of local community life. Formal institutions which operate informally are an important feature of any society, but this is particularly apparent in Bangladesh, and it forms a barrier to the recognition and implementation of the rights of ordinary citizens. The inability of a low income woman to achieve justice because of harassment or partiality on the part of the local police is a good example of this problem (Box 4.3). As the overall context of liberalization and deregulation intensifies, there is an increasing inter-relationship between 'official' and informal institutions and economies.

Finally, we have also described local processes of 'empowerment', particularly in chapter 5. There is evidence from our data that increasing the power of excluded people within formal and informal governance structures and processes is sometimes possible through organised pressure and by the tactical identification of opportunities and 'spaces' within unfolding processes. For example, the BRAC female group member in Box 3.1 was elected to the union council (*union parishad*) and subsequently gained responsibility for managing a local infrastructure project; but she still encountered considerable challenges in negotiating the political favours and corrupt practices embodied in local government processes.

8.4 Opportunities for Change

8.4.1 The importance of local difference

A key finding from this work is the importance of variable local conditions in helping to determine different change processes and outcomes in relation to power and resources. In the remote village, there was a surprising cohesiveness among people based on survival mutuality and reciprocity, as well as the use of patronage and the presentation by local leaders of ‘being poor’ to attract outside resources for all groups. In the well-connected village, we found numerous clubs and associations which support ‘welfare-minded’ politicians. The peri-urban area had higher levels of female employment and more business growth than the other areas, but these had also brought some social problems. People were far more mobile here than in the other areas, since infrastructure is relatively good. Patrilineal clan (*gusti*) politics had persisted, rather against our expectations.

The idea of ‘critical localism’, drawn from post-colonial theory, refers to the importance of outsiders respecting local viewpoints and differences in the face of increasingly ‘universalizing’ discourses and processes which are imposed from outside. Such a perspective is also valuable in relation to thinking about local development processes and interventions, as Warren (2005:53) has argued from her research in Indonesia. Critical localism recognises ‘the diversity of purposes, experiences and responses’ which she encountered while studying five different communities undergoing participatory community mapping, as part of changing government policy frameworks in Indonesia. She writes

Beyond deconstructing the hierarchic state-local grid, there is potential for exploring the nexus between formal modes of governance and the informal processes that contribute towards the expansion of those vital elements that are necessary to make democracy or sustainable development serious projects ... (p. 69–70)

Such a perspective may also be a useful one for thinking about development interventions in Bangladesh, where our three contrasting field study sites all reveal important differences in relation to local institutions, their links with wider networks and the extent to which ‘spaces’ for pro-poor change can be observed.

8.4.2 Seeking ‘spaces’ for change

The data suggests a picture of a complex local power structure that combines persistent structural inequalities with signs of small areas of change in which the rights of people who are living in poverty, and those of

women, are being struggled for and taken forward in important ways. Examples include the broadening of union council (*union parishad*) membership, greater awareness about the rights and responsibilities of its members, and the modest but important gains made by both rights-based and service delivery NGOs in improving people's wellbeing. These small areas constitute possible spaces for further intervention within policy processes, but such an approach will require us to engage with development not simply as a technical exercise but as one which is also necessarily 'political'. It is political in two senses. One is that while local development processes are occasionally 'win-win', they also commonly require a re-allocation of scarce resources, which cannot take place without a level of conflict and tension, both between elites, and between 'haves' and 'have-nots'. The second is that the increased influence of the national political parties in rural areas means that it is necessary for development agencies to recognise, and perhaps engage more with, the national political leaders and local party activists whose activities are both self-serving and altruistic in the sense that they must also concern themselves with meeting local people's needs.

Such spaces for change may be 'closed', 'invited' or 'autonomous', each with different kinds of implications for those seeking change (McGee 2004).²³ Following from our earlier point about the importance of local conditions, the 'spaces' within which policy change takes place each have their own local characteristics, as our comparative discussion in Chapter 7 shows. As McGee (2004) argues, the possibilities and dynamics of change behaviours which can take place in each space may look different. This is because each space will

encompass relationships, power relations, past histories, and the remembered experiences of participants and convenors of the space (p. 20)

One key potential 'invited space for change' may have recently opened up in the form of the Caretaker Government, CTG's renewed emphasis on the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy policy commitment to decentralisation. This strengthens the ongoing efforts to bring local communities more fully into the responsibilities of local governance (Das and Maru 2008). It will be important for this process can be further sustained by the next democratic government which is expected to succeed the CTG in 2009.

23 A 'closed' space is one in which public institutions do not encourage participation in decision making from those outside. An 'invited' space is one in which non-state participants are brought in for consultation by the state, sometimes on an experimental basis. An 'autonomous' space is one established outside government, with non-state actors working autonomously (McGee 2004).

8.4.3 Bargaining with elites in search of 'win-win' outcomes

Such spaces may exist in the shape of policy commitments, such as the PRS or they may occur at the local level as opportunities for negotiation with the local power structure. For example, village elites not only seek to capture external resources, but now play increasingly active brokerage roles between villages and wider institutions, seeking to maintain a power base through a flexible 'politics of reputation' (see Box 5.5). Externally, they pursue a broad range of strategies for securing and maintaining external relationships including 'NGO-ing', party political manoeuvring and patronage practices such as the delivery of outside resources into the community in the form of prestige infrastructure such as schools and colleges. Instead of the rigid power structure observed in many earlier studies, a higher degree of bargaining and manoeuvring is observed. The 'net', which still exists, has become more flexible and open to negotiation.

Our evidence supports Blair's (2005:930) assertion that the key challenge is

how to induce elites to adopt openness rather than repression as their response to non elite initiatives

He argues in particular that there may be at least two openings for civil society activity in which the power of local elites can be challenged with potential pro-poor outcomes. One is to push for universalistic goals such as in primary education and health, which can serve the purpose of building experience and political credibility which can then be used to seek more particularistic goals later on. The other is to recognise the extreme level of fluidity which characterises local party politics at union level, in which short-term factionalism leads to opportunistic shifting of party allegiance, which as our data has illustrated, can open up ground for making deals and tactical alliances which can sometimes lead to pro-poor outcomes.

While growing party politicisation is a widely observed feature of the local power structure, it is one which is normally associated only with negative outcomes. While Sobhan (2000:365) speaks of Bangladesh as a 'misgoverned polity', he also argues that we must search for 'a politics of the feasible'. While coalitions of organised citizens in civil society need to pursue issues such as primary education or healthcare directly, we must also accept the value of working with established party political activists who – despite authoritarian working practices – may nevertheless have credibility in their communities through their long experience and dependability at times of crisis.

8.4.4 The 'new patronage'

Our data indicates a wide range of negotiations around patronage, both in terms of ordinary people's access to power and resources, and in the organisation and administration of political life. For people who are poor, the impact of new forms of patronage is somewhat mixed. Positive outcomes may include (a) a far broader range of patrons to choose from that was available before, (b) access to new or adapted, more inclusive forms of traditional informal dispute settlement mechanisms, (c) some elite support – albeit self-interested – for *khas* land access and other pro-poor initiatives, and (d) tangible outcomes from constructive political competition between local leaders in pursuit of better infrastructure.

There are also a range of more negative outcomes. These include (a) increased vulnerability of poor people from 'failed' bargaining positions (e.g. unjust arrest or harassment, or the failure to follow through on implementing a settlement decision ruled in their favour), (b) the tendency to produce illusory rather than real change through participation (as in the case of female *shalish* or union council (*union parishad*) members who find that they have little or no voice in practice, despite being granted formal involvement, see Boxes 3.1 and 4.4) and (c) the cooption of efforts by poor people to seek deeper structural change.

8.5 Implications for Practice

It is always difficult to take findings from a study such as this one and turn them into recommendations for practice. However, since we have been encouraged to do so, we offer six general suggestions:

- i *Recognise locality and difference*: the need when designing and implementing interventions to recognise, allow for and if possible build upon, local institutional difference and diversity. For example, while Box 5.5 shows NGO mobilisation of the landless meeting with support from the union authorities, Box 5.2 finds gender and empowerment work being viewed by a poor informant as exacerbating local social tensions;
- ii *Build on coalition opportunities*: the importance of seeking opportunities for the identification, negotiation and support to potential 'win-win' coalitions involving elites to secure sustainable pro-poor change. For example, Box 2.3 highlights this in relation to flood relief;
- iii *Support government/civil society synergies*: the need for careful support to NGOs and civil society alongside broader institutional support to local and central government. Box 5.5 suggests that useful synergies result when local union leadership cooperates with local NGOs, while

- Box 5.1 indicates that the converse is also likely;
- iv *Work with existing political change agents*: the party politicisation of the local power structure should not be seen as an entirely negative force (though as Box 6.4 shows, it often feeds into corruption and lack of justice) but as one which can sometimes present opportunities for pro-poor change (as Box 3.3 shows);
 - v *Little progress is possible without local economic growth*: the recognition of the importance of economic development as a necessary foundation for sustainable governance reform and opportunities for community organising and empowerment, as Box 6.3 suggests;
 - vi *A gender focus*: A key to strengthening people's efforts to secure stronger rights and livelihoods in relation to the local power structure is the struggle against gender inequalities. A continuation of the gendered focus on NGOs as civil society actors which can open up spaces for women's empowerment, both through activities such as union-level training of women in their rights and responsibilities in relation to working with union councils (*union parishads*), and the formation of grassroots groups to counter gender violence.

While life in Bangladesh's rural areas remains harsh and insecure for most people, the signs of a revitalization of local democracy within decentralizing political structures, alongside continuing levels of economic growth, may still suggest a cautiously optimistic picture.

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Annex 1 An Outline of Key Institutions in Bangladesh

Figure 1: An outline of key institutions in Bangladesh

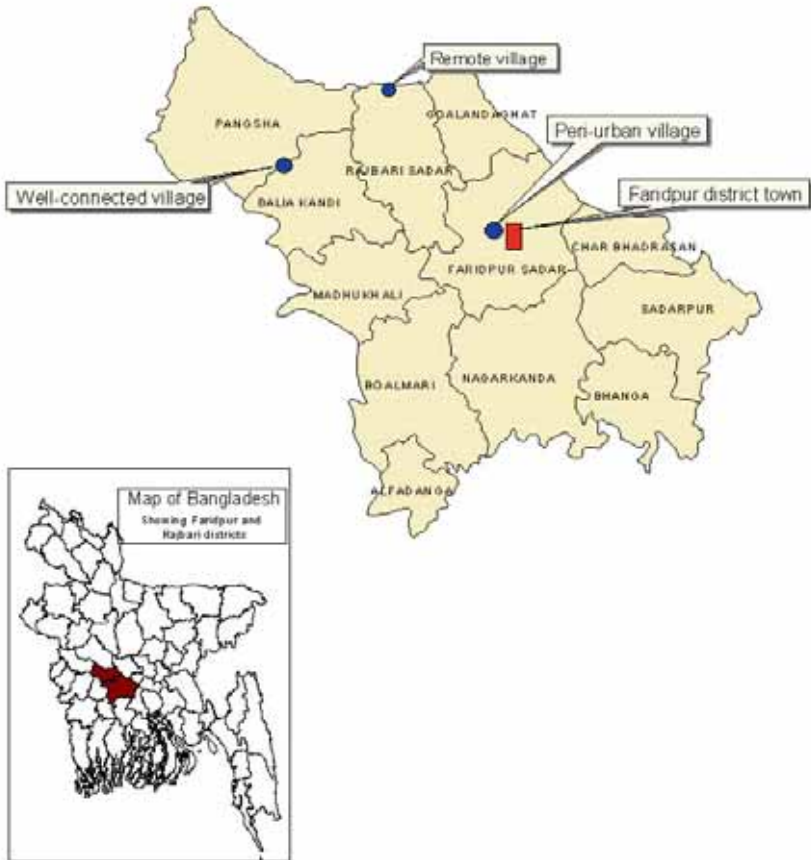
Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' civil society	'Informal' civil society/ social norms
Secretariat (36 Ministries and 17 Divisions)	300 member Parliament elected directly by constituents, plus 45 (recently updated from 30) women members selected by MPs Bilateral and multilateral international donors – governance and conditionality Political parties	High Court	Association of Development Agen- cies in Bangladesh (ADAB) National NGOs (e.g. BRAC) Federation of NGOs of Bangladesh (FNB) Chambers of Commerce, e.g. Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) Journalist associations (print and electronics)	Elites and their formal and informal relationships (e.g. positions of power in government, civil society, business plus patronage and kin networks) Social norms e.g. gender relations
Departments (254) and Directorates, boards (173) with civil service of 950,000 staff Divisions (6)				
Zila (district) (64)	Political party organisation and networks	District courts with magistrates and judges (including civil and criminal courts)	District level FNB chapters Regional NGOs (e.g. Samata) and their groups	

Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' civil society	'Informal' civil society/ social norms
Sub-district (<i>Upazila</i>) (460) Municipalities (309) Line ministry officials Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Sub-District Coordination Officer Development Coordination Committee (UDCC)	Local political party offices Upazila (sub-district) Committees of national political parties	Formal land dispute court (Assistant Commissioner (AC) land) Police station	Field offices of national NGOs Local NGOs	
Unions (4498) Union committees for school, market, law and order, etc	Union <i>Parishad</i> (council) with directly elected chairman, 9 general seats, plus 3 specially reserved for women Union branches of national political parties	Village courts (rarely used or effective) Arbitration councils (Assistant Commissioner (AC))	Business associations User cooperatives	
Villages (87,000)	Gram sarkar village government actually at 'ward' level, with 9 wards per union The system was discontinued in 2007 Community police at ward level Political party activists	Village development and welfare associations NGO-formed grassroots groups	Patrilineal clan (<i>gusti</i>) Sama ¹ (social groupings) Informal leadership Mosque/temple committees Shalish (informal courts) Philanthropic activity Occasional local <i>gherao</i> * movements Social movements	

* Spontaneous collective attempt to gain redress through protesting outside a government office

Map of Faridpur and Rajbari districts

Map of Faridpur and Rajbari districts
Showing villages under study



Acronyms

AC	Assistant Commissioner
ADAB	Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADP	Annual Development Programme
AL	Awami League
BCCI	Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce and Industry
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC	Bridging Resources Across Communities (formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee)
BRDB	Bangladesh Rural Development Board
CDR	Centre for Development Research (Copenhagen, Denmark)
CTG	Caretaker Government
DC	District Commissioner
DDCC	District Development Coordination Committee
DDLG	Deputy Director of Local Government
DFID	Department for International Development (UK Government)
FNB	Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh
LGRDC	Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives
MP	Member of Parliament
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PIC	Project Implementation Committee
PIO	Project Implementation Officer
PPRC	Power and Participation Research Centre (Dhaka, Bangladesh)
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
SCF	Save the Children Fund (UK)

Tk	Taka. Tk100 is approximately equal to UK £1.
TUP	Targeting the Ultra-Poor (BRAC)
TYRIP	Three Year Rolling Investment Programme
UC	Union Complex (often known as the UPC – Union Parishad Complex)
UDCC	<i>Upazila</i> (sub-district) Development Coordination Committee
UNO	<i>Upazila</i> (sub-district) Nirbahi Officer
UP	Union <i>Parishad</i> (council)
VAT	Value-added tax
VC	Village Court
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
VGf	Vulnerable Group Feeding (public relief)
WAC	Women’s Action Committee (of the NGO Samata)

Glossary

Amir	local political leader of jama'at-i-islami religious party
Aus	early summer rice crop
Awami League	is headed by Sheikh Hasina Wajid, the daughter of Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib). The Bangladesh National Party (BNP) is led by Khaleda Zia, the widow of General Ziaur Rahman, who gained power and ruled Bangladesh after the coup which killed SR in 1975, and was subsequently assassinated in 1981. Since 1991, there have been one Awami League (1996–2001) and two Bangladesh National Party (BNP) elected governments (1991–1996, 2001–2006).
Banik samity	business association
Basaar	market place
Bou pitano	wife beating
Char	river land, often shifting when rivers change course
Chowkidar	watchman, sometimes also tax collector
Dowry	gift payment demanded by husband's family from bride's family at time of marriage. The term 'dowry inflation' is often used in connection with rapid increases in dowry demands. The term 'dowry deaths' refers both to fatal attacks on women in cases when a dowry demand is not met, and to suicides by women as a result of harrassment.
Gherao	spontaneous collective attempt to gain redress through protesting outside a government office
Ghat	river port
Gram	village

Gram Sarkar	Gram Sarkar literally means ‘village government’. The term is used in both Bengali and English to refer to a particular, only sporadically implemented, local village government system initially developed in General Ziaur Rahman’s period of rule in the 1980s, and later revived by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) governments. It is a politically-loaded term, strongly associated with the BNP. The system was discontinued in 2007
Gusti	patrilineage clan
Hat	weekly or bi-weekly market
Imam	mosque leader who conducts the prayers
Jama’at-i-Islami	congregation of worshippers (Muslim)
Kabikha	food for work
Khas	khas land is land which passes into state ownership and is legally reserved for redistribution to landless households. It is normally land which is newly-formed by changing river courses, or else is land seized from landlords who own more than the 33.3 acres permitted under land reform legislation
Khutba	weekly sermon
Kulu	lower class outsiders
Lakh	one hundred thousand
Madrassa	muslim religious school
Matbar	informal village leader or ‘elder’
Mohila Dal	women’s cooperative
Mustaan	person involved in organised crime, local strongmen or mafia
Nirhabi	coordination
Para	neighbourhood of village
Parishad	council
Peon	an office assistant, the lowest level job in any office
Pir	saint

Poti	congregation (Hindu)
Paurashava	municipality
Purdah	curtain, referring to female seclusion
Sadar	headquarters
Sadar upazila	the main administrative centre of the district
Sarkar	government
Shalish	traditional mechanism for village dispute settlement, less formal than the village courts
Sharia	Islamic religious law
Samaj	religious community, brotherhood which helps to structure local village societal organisation (also more generally 'society')
Samity	NGO-formed grassroots group
Union	in Bangladesh one encounters some specialised usages of English words such as 'union', which refers to the lowest level of local government
Union parishad	union council
Upazila	sub-district
Upazila Nirbahi Officer	sub-District Coordination Officer
Upazila parishad	sub-district council
Zakat	Islamic duty to pay one-fortieth of one's income to the poor
Zila	district

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David Lewis and Abul Hossain
November 2008

Notes on the authors

DAVID LEWIS is reader in Social Policy at the London School of Economics. He has regularly carried out research and fieldwork in Bangladesh since 1986, and his PhD on rural development was published by Dhaka University in 1991 as *Technologies and Transactions: A Study of the Interaction Between New Technology and Agrarian Structure in Bangladesh*. A social anthropologist by training, his most recent book is *Non-Governmental Organisations and Development* (2009, Routledge, co-written with Nazneen Kanji).

ABUL HOSSAIN was awarded his PhD in political sociology from Dhaka University in 2004. He is currently a Research Fellow at the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Dr Hossain has collaborated on a number of research projects in rural Bangladesh, worked with and published at the Centre for Development Research (CDR), Copenhagen, Denmark, and has been employed as a consultant for international development agencies such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the World Bank, Sida and Danida.

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DAVID LEWIS AND ABUL HOSSAIN

David Lewis teaches in the Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics.

Abul Hossain is a Research Fellow at the Power and Participation Research Centre, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
Address: SE-105 25 Stockholm, Sweden.
Visiting address: Valhallavägen 199, Stockholm.
Tel +46 8 698 50 00, e-mail: sida@sida.se
www.sida.se