

ETHNOGRAPHY OF A POLICY PROCESS:  
A CASE STUDY OF LAND REDISTRIBUTION IN BANGLADESH<sup>1</sup>

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Throughout the developing world, there are signs that NGOs are becoming increasingly involved in various aspects of the policy process. The donor-driven New Policy Agenda legitimises this new role for NGOs. One of the key assumptions underpinning the Agenda states that increased NGO involvement will result in more resources being distributed to the poor, and will facilitate the establishment of a policy process which is more inclusive and egalitarian. Here the involvement of NGOs in an important land redistribution policy initiative is used to examine both these assumptions. While there is strong evidence that more land was redistributed to the poor as a result of NGO involvement, the actual mechanism or process for deciding the distribution of land was not found to be all inclusive or completely egalitarian. This ambivalence serves as a timely critique to the naive optimism and simplified assumptions often found in the New Policy Agenda.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

For over a decade now, considerable attention has been given to understanding the role of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the policy process. The notion of the New Policy Agenda (Edwards and Hulme 1995) has served as an important corner stone legitimising the NGO-policy nexus among the donor establishment, development practitioners and analysts. Within this Agenda, it is argued that NGOs can effectively mediate between people and the state to secure policy outcomes that are more beneficial to the poor. Policy engagement has come to be seen therefore as a defining feature of the NGO sector and indeed one author has gone further by arguing that the capacity to influence public policy from outside the formal structure of elected government constitutes "the fundamental objective" of any NGO (McCormick 1993 in Najam 1999:147).

Both our analysis and knowledge of the involvement of NGOs in policy processes however remain relatively underdeveloped. In offering an ethnographic account of NGO engagement in a particular policy arena, I hope to contribute towards a deeper appreciation of the dynamics underlying the NGO-policy nexus. The analysis is based on fieldwork carried out in Bangladesh between November 1996 and December 1997, in which the author benefited from the active participation of a number of actors situated at different levels of the policy process.

## **NGOs AND THE POLICY DOMAIN**

In 1980, Merilee Grindle edited a collection of essays focusing on a range of policy experiences from different developing countries. In the introduction to the essays, she argues that one of the characteristics of the policy process in developing countries is that the focus of participation and conflict occurs at the implementation or output stage.

This contrasts with the experience of the United States and Western Europe where the focus rests instead on the input or policy making stage. Grindle identifies two reasons for this difference. First of all, in developing countries there are few organisational structures capable of aggregating the demands and representing the interests of broad categories of citizens. Furthermore, the structures that do exist tend to be controlled by elite groups. Grindle's second argument is that those national leaders with greatest influence in deciding the allocation of policy goods actively discourage citizen participation in the policy process on the grounds that it is either inefficient or illegitimate. Trapped therefore between weak representation and discouraged participation, citizens are forced to engage with the policy process by presenting individualised demands. Grindle notes that for the majority of poor people in developing countries, "factions, patron-client linkages, ethnic ties, and personal coalitions" (Grindle 1980: 18) are the most common mechanisms used to solicit particular policy goods and services.

It is significant for our discussion here that the book edited by Grindle was published in 1980 placing it chronologically before the exponential growth of NGOs globally and the emergence of the New Policy Agenda. The literature that has accompanied this growth presents two overriding assumptions regarding the involvement of NGOs in policy arenas. Interestingly, both assumptions directly address the points highlighted in Grindle's analysis. First of all, it is argued that NGOs have become effective policy intermediaries articulating and representing the demands of the poor not only at the implementation stage, but also throughout the entire policy process. In short, the involvement of NGOs ensures that the policy process is no longer inaccessible to the poor. Second, it is argued that the presence of NGOs has induced a more transparent and accountable policy process by removing the inequities and arbitrariness which helped elite groups control the use and distribution of policy resources. In short, the

involvement of NGOs should help create a fairer mechanism for allocating policy resources.

Here I intend looking at both these claims. Specifically, it will examine the experience of land redistribution in Bangladesh and explore two interrelated questions about the involvement of a particular NGO. Did the involvement of the NGO make the policy process more accessible and responsive to the needs of the poor? Did it reduce the influence of arbitrary patron values in the eventual allocation of resources?

## **LAND REDISTRIBUTION IN BANGLADESH**

### ***A Short Introduction***

Having briefly posited some reference points for a discussion on the NGO-policy nexus, here I will explore various aspects of a specific case study where NGOs were involved in the distribution of *khas* land in Bangladesh. *Khas* land refers to unoccupied land that is legally owned by the Government and managed by the Ministry of Land. Although the legal framework that designates land as *khas* has changed over time, the main sources of *khas* are:

- Land already possessed by the Government,
  - Accredited lands from the sea or rivers,
  - Land vested in the Government as ceiling surplus,
  - Land purchased by the Government in auction sales,
  - Miscellaneous sources such as surrendered, abandoned or confiscated land
- (Momen 1996: 100).

The question of *khas* distribution is situated in the wider policy context of land reform. To date there have been three major land reform legislations in Bangladesh: the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950, a collection of Presidential Orders executed in 1972, and the Bangladesh Land Reforms Ordinance of 1984. Other reviews have shown that both the 1950 and 1972 reforms failed to accomplish their most important objectives (Siddiqui *et al* 1988, Momen 1996). Thus, the actual amount of land redistributed was minimal, and most of this ended up in the hands of powerful elites who used the policy initiatives to strengthen their own socio-economic and political positions (Siddiqui *et al* 1988). Such was the value of *khas* resources that the level of inter-elite competition to control the allocation process was intense. Indeed one author found that the competition managed to engender a new entrepreneurial group (consisting of both government officials and private actors) deployed by elite groups solely to collect information on the status and security of *khas* land (Jansen 1987: 228). Naturally, the ability to control the allocation of a state resource like *khas* land cannot be divorced from wider political economy considerations confirming a significant level of collusion and dependence between local and national elites in Bangladesh (Wood 2000). Attempts therefore to wrestle control of land reform initiatives from the hands of local elites invariably failed for as Hossain and Jones (1983) pointed out

(n)ational politicians and bureaucrats are often themselves large landowners and even if they are not, they depend on rich peasants both for political support and to ensure that the countryside remains reasonably tranquil. To attack the interests of this dominant class would be political suicide for any of the political parties. (Hossain and Jones 1983: 180)

### ***The Land Reforms Action Programme***

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1987, the Ministry of Land in Bangladesh published a circular entitled the *Land Reforms Action Programme* (LRAP), which effectively converted the specific

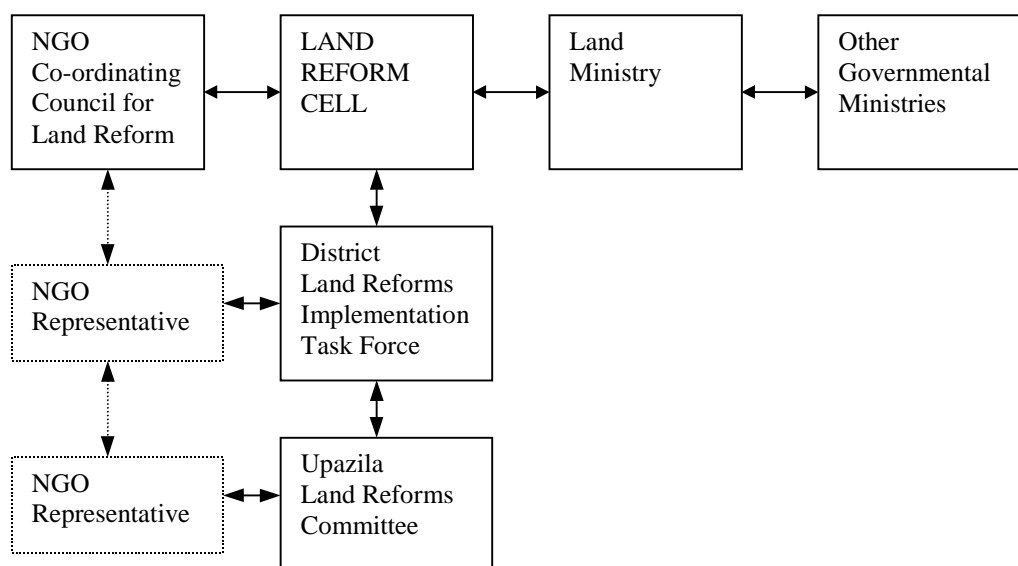
question of *khas* distribution into the centrepiece of President Ershad's 1984 land reform initiative. The aim of the LRAP was to distribute *khas* land on a permanent basis to landless families, defined as households dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods but possessing less than 0.50 acres of land.

The most unusual feature of the LRAP was the establishment of a Land Reform Cell (LRC) which was predominantly made up of staff from various NGOs committed to agrarian reform issues. The LRC was located within the Ministry of Land and was responsible for overseeing the entire LRAP initiative. The opportunity for NGOs to occupy such a key position within the political system, unprecedented in Bangladesh, was created by the then Land Secretary who was a close friend of a senior member of staff from Oxfam, an international NGO working in Bangladesh. Both men had worked previously together on relief projects, and trusted and respected each other. Importantly, both recognised in the LRAP a strategic opportunity to pursue their respective agendas. By asking NGOs to manage the LRC, the Land Secretary was hoping to build on their ability to actually reach the poor and make his reform programme a success. By accepting to manage the LRC, NGOs were hoping that their position in the Ministry would become an important political resource which could be deployed to further strengthen and legitimise their own operations. A coalition of around 60 NGOs came together and formed the NGO Co-ordinating Council for Land Reform Programme which is an important precursor to the NGO sectoral co-ordination groups found throughout Bangladesh today. The main aims of the NCCLRP were to devise appropriate policy positions, provide personnel and resources to the LRC, and collect information on the actual implementation of the LRAP.

The establishment of the LRC was not the only means through which NGOs fortified their position in the *khas* distribution programme. The LRAP (written almost entirely by

the LRC) established a unique administrative structure to ensure the successful implementation of the reform programme. This consisted of three inter-linked bodies: the National Land Reforms Council (NLRFC) presided over by President Ershad, the District Land Reforms Implementation Task Force (DLRITF) and the *Upazila* Land Reforms Committee (ULRC)<sup>2</sup>. Crucially, NGO representatives were officially allocated a position on both the DLRITF and the ULRC, while landless members were also offered a place on the ULRC. Since the NGO Co-ordinating Council for Land Reform was very closely supporting the LRC, NGOs had in effect secured formal representation at all the major administrative levels (national, district and local) in the country. This position, presented diagrammatically below, both permitted and demanded a degree of co-ordination that NGOs had never experienced before in Bangladesh.

Figure One: Land Reform Institutional Framework



<sup>2</sup> *Upazila* designates a sub district administrative unit.



### ***Securing and Maintaining Advantage***

The fact that NGOs had secured a niche giving them authority over the process of allocating *khas* land quickly became a source of real tension and conflict. The first source of tension was evident among NGOs themselves. On the one hand, they realized that the political leverage gained from having secured a position within the Ministry was strategically important. Till then, they had been involved mostly in small-scale and isolated interventions, and efforts to make wider impacts had been routinely frustrated by the collusion forged between local and national elites. Membership of the *khas* policy coalition at national, district and local levels offered an opportunity to outmanoeuvre these elites, and this was perceived as a necessary first step towards ensuring the delivery of greater resources and goods to the poor. However being a member of the LRC was not without its complications. Above all, the LRC was established during a time when a military and autocratic regime led by General Ershad was governing the country. Having assumed power in 1981, Ershad spent the best part of his time desperately trying to win legitimacy and credibility for his regime both at home and abroad. The LRAP initiative was one of the many attempts engineered by Ershad to win popular support. For NGOs therefore, the opportunity to participate in the LRC was embedded in very specific conditions of co-optation.

The second source of tension can be traced to those who had been excluded from the policy coalition. These groups were most vociferous in highlighting the co-optation of the NGO community. First of all, opposition parties and other political groups criticized the whole LRAP initiative and the role of NGOs therein. NGOs were accused of conspiring with Ershad's regime and perpetuating an 'anti-people' and 'pro-imperialist' government. The scepticism of the opposition parties was not helped by the fact that the LRAP was launched around the time they were promoting a mass movement

against Ershad that would lead to his eventual downfall three years later. Although some NGOs offered support to the movement towards the end of the campaign, this did not prevent accusations being levelled at the NGO community that they had betrayed the pro-democracy movement (Devine 1996). The second group that was unhappy at the role of NGOs in the LRAP were peasant organisations from the left of the political and ideological spectrum. The relationship between the NGO community and these peasant organisations was traditionally a tense one with the latter accusing the former of being self interested, donor dependent and neglectful of the real needs of the rural poor. With the LRAP, the antagonism between the two sides increased because NGOs and their member groups had been invited to manage the LRC while peasant organisations had been completely overlooked. This tension was captured in a series of articles debating the role of NGOs in Bangladesh that was published towards the end of the 1980s (Dhaka Courier 1989). While the debate presents the views of a wide range of prominent civil society leaders, there was a clear division between NGO advocates and leaders of peasant organisations. The latter in particular were keen to portray NGO activists as defenders of the *status quo* rather than as agents of change or champions of the poor.

These tensions and debates arise from a fundamental supposition concerning policy leverage in Bangladesh. Namely, that in order to exert influence it is important first to secure and control political positional advantage over others who would seek different policy outcomes. Strategically, this is the main reason NGOs agreed to participate in the LRC. Participation opened up opportunities for NGOs which opposition parties, peasant organisations and other elite groups were excluded from. It is not surprising to find out therefore that a political struggle soon evolved between NGOs trying to protect their positional advantage and other interest groups plotting to overturn that same advantage. The NGO strategy moved in two directions: maintaining unity among

themselves (mainly carried out through the national NGO Co-ordinating Council for Land Reform Programme), and controlling the process of deciding who could be members of the policy coalition (facilitated by the close ties they had established with the Land Secretary).

The significance of the relationship between securing positional advantage and exercising policy leverage is revealed when we look at how and why the LRAP eventually came to an end. Three factors contributed to the break up of the coalition. First, there was a reshuffle of senior bureaucrats and as a result the Land Secretary, praised for his job at the Ministry, was transferred to another department. This in effect orphaned the coalition and left it without political protection. Given that the coalition had no legal standing (Rahman *et al* 1991), whoever succeeded in the Ministry had no obligation to work with NGOs. Indeed, after the transfer of the Secretary, the level of interaction between NGOs and the Ministry reduced drastically and the coalition's significance diminished.

Second, political and bureaucratic interest groups that had been excluded from the LRAP were gradually re-establishing themselves within the Ministry of Land even before the transfer of the Secretary. The main entry point for them was a programme inaugurated by the Ministry called 'Operation *Thikana*' which sought to allocate both *khas* land and different agricultural inputs to landless families. Operation *Thikana* was a significantly larger programme than the LRAP initiative and had much more resources. NGOs had not been asked to play a role in the new programme. Slowly their privileged position within the Ministry therefore was being undermined as a new policy coalition formed around other powerful bureaucrats and political leaders began to emerge.

Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party won the 1991 parliamentary elections which took place after the fall of General Ershad. By this time, the position of the NGOs within the Ministry of Land was very weak. Zia's government terminated the *khas* land redistribution programme and officially replaced it with 'Operation *Thikana*' albeit under the new name of '*Adarshagram*' (literally 'Ideal Village'). Although 55 NGOs were selected to implement '*Adarshagram*', the NGOs involved in the LRAP initiative could only recognise the names of 3 or 4 of these NGOs. Most of the others were new organisations with links to different elite groups. There was a strong suspicion that these new NGOs had been established simply to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new programme. The tables had therefore been fully turned and the LRC coalition had been replaced by a new and potentially lucrative policy coalition.

### ***Evaluating the LRAP Initiative***

The aim of the LRAP was to distribute *khas* land to the landless poor and this implied ensuring that the distribution process was not captured by elite groups. The involvement of NGOs in the LRAP therefore offers a good case study to explore the two main questions highlighted earlier. First, does NGO policy involvement make the policy process more accessible and responsive to the needs of the poor? Second, does NGO policy involvement reduce the influence of arbitrary patron values in the eventual allocation of resources? In this section, I will begin to address these questions.

The most comprehensive evaluation of the LRAP was carried out by Rahman *et al* (1991). While the report acknowledges and praises the pro-poor focus of the LRAP, it is critical of the actual outcomes. The report states that just under 40% of available

identified *khas* land, a figure provided by the LRC itself, had been distributed to landless households over a period of two and a half years. Although 40% is a low figure, it is still very misleading for it reflects only the amount of *khas* land for which a decision to allocate had been taken and not the actual amount of land distributed. There are many reasons why the policy intention of the LRAP was never fully realised. One set of reasons are of a more technical nature and include: the difficulty in identifying unutilised public land, the lack of updated and reliable maps, the large amount of tampered or falsified land deeds and a low level of technical support and capacity. However the main obstacle to the land redistribution process turned out to be more political than technical. Momen (1996), benefiting from the privileged insights of having worked as a bureaucratic on the LRAP initiative, captured succinctly the nature of the political obstacles undermining the whole process by stating that

(i)n this land-poor country, unutilised public land is soon grabbed by the influential people, and the local authorities either overlook their illegal possession and or help them to consolidate their rights in such land. (Momen 1996: 104)

This diagnosis is all too familiar in the context of Bangladesh and serves to highlight again the advantage elite groups enjoy over other weaker sections in society, and how this advantage is used to monopolise the use of resources and goods. However, while the broad picture that emerges from the LRAP is a familiarly negative one, there were reported cases where *khas* land was effectively allocated to landless households. Studies carried out by NGOs (Gani 1991), bureaucrats (Momen 1996) and the Ministry of Land itself (Rahman *et al* 1991) all acknowledged some degree of success where and only where NGOs were committed to the LRAP initiative locally. The next section examines the experience of Shammo<sup>3</sup>, a local NGO which has been at the forefront of the struggle to distribute *khas* land to the poor.

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<sup>3</sup> Shammo is a pseudonym.

## **A Brief History of Shammo**

The origins of Shammo can be traced back to the mid 1970s when a group of students from a village established a local youth club. Although the main aim of the club was to promote recreational and cultural activities for its own members, it also carried out some modest relief and welfare activities. Impressed by the enthusiasm of the youth, the headmaster of the local high school put the club leaders in contact with an acquaintance of his who happened to be the same member of staff from OXFAM behind the LRAP initiative. He in turn visited the club and encouraged them to register as an NGO, focus more on activities that would contribute to the struggle against poverty, and extend membership status to the poorest households in the village.

Through their contact with OXFAM, the leaders of Shammo also began attending seminars and workshops organised by the more established NGOs in Bangladesh. This enabled them to network with important contacts and learn of the ideas and practices used in the wider development community. In those days, development thinking focused predominantly on 'conscientization' strategies that emphasised the need to understand, identify and confront the structural causes of poverty (Freire 1972). This type of exposure encouraged Shammo to work more explicitly with the poor by promoting smaller membership groups known in Bengali as *samities*. This initiative proved to be very successful and the number of *samities* grew rapidly. In the space of a few months, 50 *samities* were established each with between 10 and 15 landless farmers.

To the North East of the village where Shammo had its office, lies an open water body known as 'Boro Bagher Beel'. The Beel was a large lake used for fishing until 1962

when Government authorities decided to drain it by digging a canal to a nearby river. As a result, over 820 acres of low-lying agricultural land emerged which legally became *khas* land. Having been assured that they would inherit the land, local landless farmers spent almost two years clearing and dredging the whole area. As soon as this task had been completed however, the local elite leaders organised themselves and forcibly took possession of the land.

Many of Shammo's early members had been allotted parcels of land from the Beel on occasion of the land reform initiatives of 1972, and were given legal documents to prove this. Few however managed to take possession of their land thereafter and were forced to continue working as labourers for the same elites who had stolen the land. Not surprisingly, when Shammo's members were asked to analyse the causes of their poverty during *samity* meetings, they inevitably raised the issue of land and how they had been dispossessed of what was theirs by right. *Khas* distribution and land rights in general therefore became the focus of Shammo's work, and throughout the late 1980s the organisation was involved in a prolonged struggle with local elites over the Boro Bagher Beel.

### **Shammo and the LRAP**

Shammo was initially supported by OXFAM who at that time were keen to support small organisations with more radical agendas (Black 1992). OXFAM proved to be an important partner for Shammo because, as indicated earlier, it was also the main broker and supporter of the Government-NGO relationship underpinning the LRAP initiative. The struggle over the *khas* land at Boro Bagher Beel was an intense and violent one (Devine 1999). Soon it became the focus of national media coverage and consequently, one of the LRAP showcases. Staff from Shammo became members of

the various district and local committees established to oversee the implementation of the LRAP (see Figure One) and its leaders began networking with key individuals within the State, donor community and other national NGOs. This networking gave Shammo the political leverage and authority to legitimately challenge those elites who monopolised the local process of *khas* land distribution.

In terms of the allocation of *khas* land from the Beel, it is possible to identify three main outcomes that are directly linked to Shammo's involvement. First, Shammo investigated existing records and found that there was more *khas* land in the Beel than had been originally indicated. New parcels of land were therefore identified and re-registered as *khas*. Second, Shammo was instrumental in identifying *khas* land that had been illegally occupied by local elites. This too was eventually re-registered as Government owned land and designated for distribution among the poor. Third, all the legally identified *khas* area was eventually allocated to and registered in the name of landless households. Shammo played an important role here in identifying genuine cases, preparing applications and ensuring that the rightful owners of the land received the legal deed to their land. In total, 720 acres of *khas* land were distributed to 1,087 landless households living in close proximity to the Beel.

The struggle over the Boro Bagher Beel however has had other repercussions beyond the amount of land distributed or the number of families benefited. The most significant of these has been the change to the nature of class formation in the area. As Shammo's membership has grown and its activities expanded, the balance of power has shifted very noticeably from the hands of local elites to the NGO and its members. This is most evident in the conviction held by Shammo's members that local elites are no longer capable of taking possession of their land or other *khas* land in the vicinity by force. Furthermore, Shammo and its members have built on their success in local *khas*



issues and are now mobilising around other policy areas and rights based issues where elites have traditionally exercised authority and control (Devine 1999).

At this point therefore it is possible to answer one of the two main questions under discussion here. The involvement of Shammo has without doubt made the policy process of *khas* distribution more accessible and responsive to the needs of the poor. Thus entitlements are respected and more *khas* resources are being distributed to the poor. In the next section, I will deal with the second question raised in the introduction and examine whether the involvement of Shammo has led to a reduction in the influence of arbitrary patron values in the allocation of resources. To do this I move my analysis from how *khas* resources are allocated to the poor to examine instead how they are subsequently allocated *among* the poor.

### **Membership and Patronage**

The argument thus far suggests that Shammo's ability to influence the allocation and use of *khas* resources derived from the fact that they had outmanoeuvred rival local elites by securing a position of authority within the LRAP policy coalition. Crucial to this strategy was the relation between Shammo and OXFAM, with the latter brokering the former's access to the coalition. It is interesting that in the case of landless households around the Beel, a very similar strategic logic can be found. Thus, just as Shammo's ability to exercise leverage at the local level relied significantly on support brokered by OXFAM, similarly landless households depended on the support of Shammo when seeking *khas* resources. In other words, Shammo had replaced the elites as the main broker determining the eventual distribution of local *khas* land. For those applying for *khas* land, it was crucial that they could show not only that they were both poor and

landless, but that they were also in some way linked or allied to Shammo. Allegiance was most clearly defined through membership.

The case of Roton Ali, a landless farmer of the Boro Bagher Beel area, illustrates how membership directly affected livelihood opportunities. Roton's family had farmed around the Beel for three generations. In all of that time, they never managed to buy their own land and so were forced to work as hired labourers for their local patron. Like other landless farmers, Roton was officially allocated *khas* land in the early 1970s through the Government land reform initiative. He approached his local patron, Golam Member, and asked for help to secure the legal deed for the land. Golam agreed. After a few years however, Golam informed Roton that due to an administrative error the land had been registered in Golam's name. Roton was reassured that his legal entitlement to the land had not been affected and as such there was nothing to worry about. Although sceptical, Roton had little option but to go along with Golam's version of events. Like his father before him, Roton's dependency on Golam's patronage was absolute. He lived, rent free, with his family in a small dilapidated hut not far from the toilet area of Golam's *uthan* (household courtyard). In exchange, Roton worked as a labourer on Golam's land for a pitiful wage, while his wife and children worked in Golam's homestead without receiving any wage.

Golam Member was one of the fiercest rivals of Shammo because he had stolen a vast amount of *khas* land over the years. In the struggle over the Boro Bagher Beel, Golam lost all the land that was not legally his own, including the *khas* land he had misappropriated from landless farmers like Roton. In the subsequent reallocation process however, Roton did not receive land. This was a peculiar outcome given that Roton had two very strong reasons supporting his application. First, like many other applicants, Roton was genuinely landless and extremely poor. Second, he was a

resident of the *mouza* (lowest territorial revenue unit) where the Boro Bagher Beel was located and therefore had more legal entitlement to the land than other households from neighbouring *mouzas*. Today one of Shammo's members owns the same land that had been allocated to Roton in the early 1970s. Naturally Roton feels he has been cheated of a valuable resource that was his by right, and is jealous of those members of Shammo who have managed to become landowners. In trying to explain how this occurred, Roton argues that his application was overlooked simply because he was associated with Golam and not with Shammo.

The case of Roton is significant and offers important insights into the wider question of the potential role played by Shammo in reworking local power structures. Roton has family and friends in his village who are members of Shammo. Although they all started their adult lives in broadly similar positions, today Roton's friends seem to be in a much stronger position from which to provide for their families while Roton's overall position has significantly weakened. At one level, this change of fortune can be explained by reference to the local struggle for power in which Shammo has emerged as victor. In other words, Shammo's members have directly and preferentially benefited from the organisation's rise to prominence. Roton on the other hand is locked into a relationship with a patron whose power and influence are rapidly decreasing. Not only can Golam offer Roton much less in terms of services and goods, but their relationship also means that Roton cannot seek resources offered by or accessed through Shammo. The implication of this is clear. Those dependent or seeking particular resources have to establish intimate and personal ties with the resource providers or with those in a position to influence the providers. In the area around the Boro Bagher Beel, Shammo has become a key actor in the process of managing access to *khas* and other resources. Even with the emergence of NGOs then, membership and loyalty remain important mechanisms for securing reliable access to services and goods.

This analysis however can be taken a step further if we reflect on the rather obvious observation that the best solution for Roton is to move his allegiance from Golam to Shammo. This observation draws attention to the centrality of relationships in the struggle for survival in places like Bangladesh. The pertinence of this issue is reinforced if we recall that in their formative years most NGOs in Bangladesh adopted strategies intended precisely to help the poor rid themselves of the exploitative and oppressive relations (BRAC 1983). Crucially, the structure of these relations was such that the poor experienced their subordination as individuals rather than as a collective unit (Wood 1994). Subsequently, early NGO strategies also focused on ways of helping the poor organise themselves into self-reliant groups. From this perspective Roton and those related to Shammo offer different models of survival strategies. On the one hand, Roton exemplifies what I would refer to as a 'personalised client'<sup>4</sup> in that the ability of his household to survive or advance depends absolutely on Golam. Dependence is exchanged for loyalty and in Roton's case his relation to Golam makes it impossible for him to approach rival patrons, including development organisations, or indeed to form allegiances patron with fellow landless farmers that have not been approved by his patron. On the other hand, those who are related to Shammo exemplify what I would refer to as 'membership clients'. Like Roton, they are clients to the organisation but their client status is experienced in a different way from Roton. Membership of Shammo has enabled and still requires landless households to build their strategies around principles of unity, co-operation and solidarity. While this unity may not be immune from complication and contradiction (Devine 1999), there is no doubt that it has allowed Shammo's members to gain control over the use of *khas* resources, and to subsequently mobilise and address other areas pertinent to their wellbeing (Devine

2002). In other words, through their 'membership client' status, the scope for exercising agency is increased. Roton on the other hand experiences his client status as an isolated individual and as his patron's power and influence continues to decline, his future will become more precarious and insecure. The 'rational' decision to shift allegiance however is one Roton rarely contemplates for the risks to his already fragile security are just too great. Where survival is at stake, clientelistic forms of exchange, even if they are oppressive and subservient, are vital to poor households (Khan 2000). There is 'objectively' a very good chance that Roton would benefit by becoming a member of Shammo, but there is no doubt that in so doing, he would lose the little he has. Roton himself explains his predicament in the following way:

I know I would be better off if I had become a member of Shammo, but now it is too late for me to change sides. I would not get *khas* land because there is little of it left and there are other members of Shammo who have been waiting a long time to get land. If I join Shammo, the leaders would have to look after them before they dealt with me. Besides, if I ever publicly go against Golam Member, I know he would throw me and my family out of the house he has given us and I have no other place to go.

## CONCLUSION

During the past 15 years, the role of NGOs in policy processes has increased significantly as part of the donor driven 'New Policy Agenda'. Although the Agenda is not monolithic (Hulme and Edwards 1997), its dominant interpretation upholds that the promotion of a pluralistic civil society is a necessary strategy in order to undermine the monopoly of the state in providing services and allocating policy resources. NGOs are perceived as important facilitators of this political transformation on the basis of their professed egalitarian ideology and their experience of working with the poor. Two

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<sup>4</sup> The terms 'personalised client' and 'membership client' were formulated during a conversation with Geof Wood in which we were trying to link the analysis presented here with previous research he had carried

interrelated questions about the NGO-policy nexus were examined here in the context of Bangladesh. First, did the NGO presence ensure better policy outcomes for the poor? Second, did the NGO presence improve the policy delivery mechanism making it less exploitative and exclusionary?

The involvement of Shammo has clearly altered the outcomes of the *khas* land policy process. Many landless farmers have taken possession of land that was allocated to them by the Government and they have subsequently managed to retain ownership and use of that same land. The authority once exercised by local elites over the distribution and use of local *khas* land has effectively disappeared. At this general level therefore, the work of Shammo appears to have made the policy process more responsive to the needs of the poor and has enabled better poverty-focused policy outcomes. On this evidence it could be argued that the Agenda offers a credible strategy to secure positive results for the poor.

However, the discussion on how *khas* resources were finally distributed among the poor clearly illustrates that the allocative process was neither all-inclusive nor egalitarian. Indeed, as in the case of Roton, many landless groups with a strong legal entitlement to *khas* land were actively excluded from the allocation process and derived no immediate benefits from the fact that a development organisation was involved in the whole process. Being poor therefore is not in itself a sufficient criterion to secure policy resources even where NGOs are involved. However the analysis presented here indicates that the process by which some poor households are excluded is neither random nor accidental. Instead it was found that being a member of the NGO was an important eligibility criterion in securing access to policy resources and services. Whereas previously, as Grindle (1982) indicated, the poor used their allegiance to elite

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out himself.

patrons in order to strengthen their policy demands, today it is loyalty to NGOs that procures advantage in accessing resources. In this sense, both the values underpinning the policy delivery mechanism and the behaviour these elicit have not significantly altered. There are two immediate implications of this. First, the amount of policy resources allocated is not a reliable or robust indicator of policy process change. Second, even when NGOs play a key role in managing access to different policy opportunities, the poor still have to negotiate through intermediation and this requires on their part compliant and client based behaviour.

This analysis suggests therefore that the emergence of organisations like NGOs does not ineluctably lead to changes in the institutional aspects, or 'deeper structures' (Wood and Davis 1998) of society. Instead, as McGregor (1989 and 1994) has shown elsewhere, new initiatives or organisations tend to adapt to deep-rooted social institutions and values. The outcome of this adaptation can take forms or engender processes that may be *in extremis* antithetical or, more likely, a hybrid form of what was originally planned (D'Rozario 1999). In the case of Bangladesh therefore, there is strong evidence that NGOs have secured institutional authority in a number of policy arenas but that the inclusive or egalitarian nature of the resulting policy processes remains limited. Roton is a good illustration of how NGO led policy processes may actively exclude some of the poor and privilege others. Since exclusion is a form of inequality, the New Policy Agenda, which encourages greater involvement of NGOs in policy arenas, finds itself partly implicated in the process through which inequality is reproduced in Bangladesh.

The establishment of a fairer and inclusive policy environment is vital to the long-term security of the poor in Bangladesh. It is clear from the analysis here that this task requires institutional rather than organisational reform. It is an open question how far

NGOs, operating more as 'prisoners' than 'escapees' of the system (Wood 2000), can play a role in this reform agenda. What we do know is that they have become key actors in various policy arenas throughout Bangladesh and that they have also been capable of ensuring the distribution of more resources to poor people. On this basis, it would be unwise to dismiss their long-term significance too quickly.



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