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State of Civil Society and NGOs in Bangladesh: Examining the Recent Trends and Changes

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Abstract:

This paper is the outcome of a revisit study conducted in 2016 in three locations of two districts in Bangladesh. The original and/ or the 1st study was conducted in the same locations using same objectives and methods in 2005. The main purpose of the revisit study was to perceive the changes taken place in relation to the civil society space and activism, and the state of activism of NGOs. Qualitative approaches were used in collecting primary data from field and secondary sources were also used. The revisit study finds that NGOs are increasingly offering support to non - poor borrower groups, and today less emphasis is placed on offering small loans to the disadvantaged. The provision of larger loans (than the micro-credit loans encountered earlier), support to small businesses, and the appearance of migration support loans. In other respects, civil society space has been reduced in 2016. In 2005 we found rights-based works on the road to room for maneuvering, such as legal aid, we also found a civil society had been more politically focused, with the power to influence local officials in some cases. The 2005 study also found that with various civil society actors (services, rights, social mobilization and advocacy) a kind of dynamism in the stage, there was an opening of space indeed. On the other hand, the revisit study 2016 observed the shrinking state of civil society space. Rights based NGOs and informal civil societies are at significantly reduced state; and it was found the social mobilization by the non-government organizations and agencies has a very slim opportunity to reinstall their activities in civil society space in near future. Extreme political control over institutions and citizens' rights- based activities may be attributed as the main reasons of halting civil society action in Bangladesh.

Key Words:

Rohingya peoples, economic challenges, earning method.

Introduction:

This paper emerges out of the two longer studies¹ on local power structure in Bangladesh undertaken respectively in 2005 for the first study and in 2016, a decade later, for the follow up study. The primary objective of the first study was to better understand how the structures, relationships and processes that formed the local power structure both encouraged and restricted attempts by poor people to improve their livelihoods and how the poorest people sought to manage relationships in their local communities with powerful people. Afterwards, building on the same target, the follow - up study was conducted to record changes in the 10-year span of local institutions vis-à-vis the local power structure. In short, the first study presents new qualitative data to analyze the evolving formal and informal structures that regulate lives of people and document the obstacles and challenges they face. The follow - up study came back to the same places to find out how things had changed in the decade that followed.

For those studies, rigorous and extensive fieldworks, applying the qualitative methods, were engaged in three locations of greater Faridpur district (Faridpur and Rajbari districts) for capturing the dimensions of institutions interplay at the local political space illuminating the pro-poor outcomes. The fieldworks of the both loner studies also documented the microcredit NGOs working for poverty alleviation and activities of rights-based NGOs and civil society actors engaged in widening the civil society space at the local level.

In fact, this article is prepared based on the data collected for the two longer studies mentioned above but the focus of this article is unlike the broader studies. The purposes of this paper are: (a) to see the changes in microcredit NGOs concerning their credit distributions, modalities and examine whether these finances have brought any positive outcome for the poor segments. (b) to see the changes in the rights – based NGOs, formal and informal civil society actors interact with state and society in a changing environment. And, (c) to explore whether the civil society space and/or the local political space at the local level is widening or shrinking in the last 10 years.

¹The field research was conducted in central Bangladesh's Rajbari and Faridpur districts which was published by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency as a book entitled *Understanding the Local Rural Power Structure in Bangladesh* (Sida, 2008). The research's main objective was to better understand how the systems, relationships and processes that formed the system of local power. The follow - up study has returned to the same areas to ascertain how things have changed in the decade that followed. The restudy was published as book named *Revisiting the local powers structure in Bangladesh – Economic Gain, political pain* (Sida, 2017). The research and authors of both books were carried out by David Lewis and Abul Hossain.

The main aim of this article is to examine and review the NGOs growth in Bangladesh and the how they interact at the local level in implementing their multiple programs, particularly with their loan/credit programs, and examines the outcomes. Secondly, this article will review critically the concepts of civil society; along with the concept of 'civil society space' and/or and political space where rights-based NGOs embedding with civil society at the local level exercise rights for pro-poor. The major focus area is to know the outcomes by a comparative analysis of the data collected in 2005 and the recent fieldwork undertaken in 2016, which were used in the comparison to document the changes. And finally this article notes the changes of credit NGOs strategy and state of civil society's activism at the civil society space at the local level and examine the way this space is widening and /or shrinking.

NGOs in Bangladesh – growth, operations and Emerging Realities:

NGOs in Bangladesh are best known for their micro - finance ventures, and there is no question that they have contributed to a significant reduction in poverty over the last few decades. (Westergaard, 1996). Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh has also had numerous non-state institutions, not least in the form of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), most of which are donor-financed (Westergaard and Abul, 2002). There are many reasons and factors behind the emergence of NGOs. The reasons behind the growth of the NGO sector in Bangladesh have been identified by Lewis (2004). The initial factor in the rise of the non - governmental organisations ' sector is the national emergency following the independence war and the cyclone which occurred immediately afterward shaped the sector, as its response was based on traditional local self - help and voluntarism tradition. The second factor is that foreign aid has a strong role to play. Third, the cause of the growth of Bangladesh's NGO sector is frequently cited as State failure.

The Bangladeshi NGO sector has a variety of organizations and approaches. In Bangladesh, many NGOs can generally be located along a continuum ranging from mainly economic activities such as utilities, credit and income generation, to more radical "political" approaches emphasising Freirean concepts of knowledge and empowerment. Unlike many other countries worldwide where NGOs are often the dominant organizations for foreign and Northern growth, Bangladesh has a remarkable number of "indigenous" NGOs for development. About 3000 NGOs in the country are expected to be involved. Most of these non - governmental organizations are local and many are small and voluntary (Hossain, 2006).

Hobley (2003) is focused on how NGOs help or impede structural transformations for the vulnerable through their forms of social organization. The NGOs were called "private partners."

Focused on her activities, she has developed a typology of NGOs. The four types are: alternative financial institutions, service providers, social development and mobilization. The generic work of Thornton also stresses the role of NGOs as actors within the local political environment (Thornton et al , 2000).

Changes of NGOs strategy and operations in 2005 and 2016 and outcomes:

Our field data that we collected for the first study in 2005 on NGOs found that about 40 NGOs (large, medium and small-scale considering their size) were operating in the Greater Faridpur district. Of them the large sized NGOs were only five operating in greater Faridpur as elsewhere of Bangladesh (Proshika, BRAC, Grameen Bank considered as large sized NGO). These NGOs work for poor people through their micro-credit programme. Some regional and medium sized NGOs were also found with micro credit programme. In 2005 data showed NGOs with micro-credit programme offer loans to poor women and men NGO group members, the highest amount of loan for a client (a NGO group member), they provided amounting to thirty thousand Taka (about 375 US dollars). The fieldwork of first study, conducted in 2005 found NGOs micro-credit was quite successful in villages, though in some cases local elites exposed a mixed attitude towards NGOs microcredit activities. Local power structure (formal and informal institutions including the branches of political parties) was found divided into different opinions on NGO micro-credit question.

The chairmen and members of the Union Parishad (Bangladesh's lower level of local government) tier have not been very critical of microcredit or other strategies of NGOs, such as training, research on health care, etc. They saw NGOs playing a vital role in poverty alleviation and development sector, although in a few cases, some NGOs have frustrated minor disputes relating to credit. On the contrary, the defeated union parish chairman candidate, in the 2003 local administration elections, who also holds a position for Amir of Jamaat - e-Islam in the union (the grassroots management unit) was critical of the NGOs. NGOs charge unfair interest rates and have increased household feuds by empowering women, the Amir Jamaat - e-Islami² of Bangladesh said (Hossain, 2006).

The first study also found the small and very small sized local NGOs in Greater Faridpur were facing fund crisis. Their activities were not strong either in microcredit or in social mobilization domain. For securing funds those NGOs formed forum (Association of small NGOs in the region) to show their combined strength to fund providers, the Donors and central NGO

²a political party in Bangladesh advocating for incorporating Islamic *ideology* into state system.

Networks. In an in-depth interview the president of Rajbari Development Forum (RDF), a small NGOs forum consists of 26 small NGOs, said, "We, the small NGOs, are lacking opportunities to get involved with multiple donors as well as NGO Networks and leaders at the centre who could secure funds for us. So we have formed a Forum (Association of small NGOs) to draw attention of multiple donors, development agencies for resources and Networks" (Hossain, 2006).

Returning to the same area in 2016 we have found the 'Small NGOs Forum' were not in their existence. Most of the small NGOs facing fund crisis and that formed the forum were scattered and inactive; only a lesser number of small NGOs were found survived by implementing their micro- credit programmes. Funding sources for small NGOs are now drastically reduced in Bangladesh, which was the major cause we have noticed during fieldworks undertaken in 2016. Our 2005 study found that the large and medium sized NGOs that were involved in micro-credit programme disbursed loan to their poor clients starting from Tk. 5,000 to 30,000 (the highest limit found Tk. 30,000 for a client). The credit NGOs are now providing larger loans to their clients that found from the fieldwork undertaken in 2016. For example, rickshaw pullers were previously taking loans of around Tk. 8000. Now loans for rickshaw pullers and tiny loans are disappeared, in its place the NGOs are now providing Tk.50,000-100,000 for the purchase of 'easy bike' (motorised rickshaws or the new battery driven auto rickshaws). NGOs are providing loans starting from TK. 50,000 and up to Tk. 300,000 to a client (highest limit is 300,000 and in some cases more). Poverty alleviation is now not the main aim of the credit NGOs; they are now providing loans for non-poor business and well off segments. NGO credit facilities are now providing people with easy access to loans, which are higher and support small businesses rather than poverty reduction.

In 2005 study, we found a mixed attitude towards NGOs credit, some elites were critical to microcredit, but in 2016 study, we could not find such attitudes of the local elites and from any quarter of people. Although the micro-credit NGOs were active in reducing poverty, the fieldwork for the first study in 2005, revealed proactive role of rights-based NGOs along with civil society at the local political space.

Moreover, our fieldwork in 2016 found a paradigm shift of NGOs' categorization as made by Hopley in 2003. The "Social development organizations" and 'social mobilization' categories of NGOs are now obliterated. The existence of 'service provision' category of NGOs has flag down and the 'alternative financial institutions' category exists with its gigantic shape. This, alternative financial institutions, category of NGOs now provides loan to non-poor and supports

business. Poverty reduction role of alternative financial institutions/ microcredit NGOs seems obsolete. Likewise, the role of NGOs as actors within the local political environment, that Thornton emphasized in 2000, is surprisingly muffled in 2016.

The following section will illuminate the concept of civil society and civil society space and the changes of those rights based NGOs and Civil society's activism by a comparative analysis using 2005 data and 2016 fieldworks data on the issues and look into how civil society exercises their rights to the civil society space at the local level.

Civil society and Civil society space: Searching for Relevance:

The definition of Civil society is highly contested, and there was no agreement on the word 's meaning. United Nations (UN) defines civil society, along with government and business, as the "third sector" of the society. This includes members of civil society, and non - governmental organisations³.

Non - political civil society organizations are important to democracy as they build social capital, trust, and shared values that are transferred to the political sphere and help to integrate society, promoting an appreciation of the interconnectedness of society and its interests (Robert D. Putnum, 1993). Harbeson's (1994) statement on civil society is: civil society work can be a particularly suitable place to explore State, society and growth conceptions, as civil society denotes the processes by which societies form their fundamental political game rules. Most would agree that the divide between household and state is reflected in civil society.

The term political space used differently by the different researchers. OlleTornquist (1997) used the term 'Political space' to study the processes of democratization from below. Lars Engberg – Pedersen and Neil Webster (2002) viewed that the constraints and opportunities provided by national and sub- national politics and the state administration create a political space which delimit the scope of activities that local organizations can undertake.

In assessing the performance of NGOs in the development sector, particularly in the context of Bangladesh, some researchers⁴ argued that some NGOs shift their roles from service delivery to civil society. During the 1990s, the idea of civil society among development donors became

³<http://www.un.org/en/sections/resources-different-audiences/civil-society>

⁴Alam, Mustafa et al, 1994; Karim, 2003

very fashionable. Civil society in Bangladesh – mostly in the form of NGOs – has been strongly supported since the 1980's by the international donor community (Lewis 2004). While there have been massive discussions about the appropriate development orientation of civil society groups, it is important to realize that the NGO community based on social mobilization and rights is one of the vital actors in civil society. There is a vast array of civil society social institutions that have roles in the domain of civil society.

Nonetheless, our working definition of civil society and civil society space to capture the fieldwork of 2005 and 2016 was: Civil society is a certain area of society, that is, the public space between the household and the state, where social actors and/or Civil Society Actors⁵ (CASs) communicate with each other and with the state. It is an arena in which it faces moral struggles. It is mainly a definition of relationality. Civil society dialogue, and civil society / state dialog establishes rules that form relationships and balance of power between society and government. The outcome of the struggles influences the civil society space⁶ and/or political *space* (Lewis & Abul , 2017).

Changes and challenges of civil society and civil society space in 2005 and 2016 – Empirical outcomes:

Returning to the same locations in 2016 we have noticed the following changes in civil society actors and space:

- (a) Less civil society space but renewed credit and business support (fewer rights advocacy);
- (b) Some evidences of increased local level media (press) activity around rights.
- (c) Rights based NGOs and informal civil societies are at significantly reduced state.
- (d) Formal rights based civil society actors are squeezed, more informal and/or 'unruly' civil society actors emerged and occupied the political space.

⁵individuals and groups who voluntarily engage in forms of public participation and action around shared interests...the maintenance of peace and security, the realization of development, and the promotion and respect of human rights. ... to improve our lives is rooted in respect for human rights. CSAs promote awareness of rights, assist communities in articulating concerns, shape strategies, influence policy and laws, and press for accountability. CSAs collect and channel views of communities so that decision-making on public policies can be informed more fully. ...also fulfil services for those who are at risk and vulnerable on multiple fronts. CSAs operate at all levels: local, national, regional and international. (A practical guide for civil society: Civil society space and the united nations human rights system).

(http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/AboutUs/CivilSociety/CS_space_UNHRSysystem_Guide.pdf).

⁶Civilsocietyospaceistheplacecivilsocietyactorsoccupywithinsociety;theenvironmentandframeworkinwhichcivilsocietyoperates;andtherelationshipsamongcivilsocietyactors,theState,private sectorand the general public (Civil society space and the united nations human rights system). http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/AboutUs/CivilSociety/CS_space_UNHRSysystem_Guide.pdf).

(e) An unbalanced future perceived in which state and private sector institutions dominate, but little civil society or 'not for profit' activity.

Concluding Discussion:

Our original 2005 study found many small and potentially important ways of opening up new spaces to improve the situation of both vulnerable women and men. These opportunities focused on enhancing the functioning and inclusiveness of local government structures, building more inclusive 'traditional' institutions and forms of action of civil society that would encourage poor coalitions involving local elites, support local governments and civil society together and recognize the importance of economic development as a sound foundation for action.

The interplay between the processes of decentralization and the actions of civil society to promote poor change has become limited by 2016, so that space in civil society is now reduced. The relative diversity of participants and practices in civil society has declined. We found that, in Greater Faridpur, the scope of credit - based development NGOs has increased, in place of rights based development NGOs engaged in land rights and social mobilization. These provide larger loans (than the micro-credit loans encountered earlier), support to small and medium businesses, and there are now migration support loans too. NGOs, however, support non-poor borrower classes increasingly and the emphasis on the provision of small loans to the poor today is less pronounced.

In other respects, civil society space has been reduced. In 2005 we found rights-based work at the local level alongside institutions, such as legal aid. We also found a civil society have been more politically focused, with the power to influence local officials in some cases. There is less pressure from civil society today to hold government accountable for the implementation of progressive legislation.

A decade ago, the diverse and extensive social mobilizations by the non-government organizations and agencies were at the fore in the organized sphere of citizen activity. The scenario has changed in recent years. The social mobilizations by the NGOs and agencies are no more apparently noticed in action.

Extreme political control over institutions, particularly on the local government institutions, and citizens' rights- based activities may be attributed as the main reasons of halting civil society action in Bangladesh.

Funding for rights- based activities from multiple donors is also seen significantly reduced in Bangladesh. Thus, it can be assumed that, the social mobilization by the non-government organizations and agencies has a very slim opportunity to reinstall their activities in civil society

space in near future. However, absence of civil society activism and citizen's rights to talk may further intensify the political control over both formal and informal institutions at the macro and local levels.

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