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## **Civil society and pro-poor initiatives at the local level in Bangladesh: Finding a workable strategy**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to develop the beginnings of a workable pro-poor strategy for civil society efforts in rural Bangladesh that will use advocacy to help the poor move beyond the patron-client relationships on which they have historically depended. New survey research indicates a great deal of movement into and out of poverty, and this combined with recent advances in agriculture should augur favorably for advocacy initiatives on behalf of the poor. Elite domination must be expected to continue, however, and pro-poor initiatives will have to contend with it in the struggle for developmental resources. Accordingly, it is suggested that rather than pursue advocacy for policies directly targeting pro-poor groups (e.g., land redistribution, minimum wage enforcement), it would be better to forge coalitions with non-poor groups to press for more broad-based agendas (e.g., health, education) that can gain widespread support. The paper argues that the latter course holds out more promise as a beginning effort that could build up the experience and knowhow needed to make pro-poor advocacy groups credible players in a local political arena that will in the process have become more pluralistic. By trading support with other groups initially, they will then be able to pursue more targeted agendas benefiting their constituents.

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## **Civil society and pro-poor initiatives in rural Bangladesh: finding a workable strategy**

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This paper<sup>1</sup> aims to develop the beginnings of a workable pro-poor strategy for civil society efforts in rural Bangladesh that will use advocacy to help the poor move beyond the patron-client relationships on which they have historically depended. New survey research indicates a great deal of movement into and out of poverty, and this combined with recent advances in agriculture should augur favorably for advocacy initiatives on behalf of the poor. Elite domination must be expected to continue, however, and pro-poor initiatives will have to contend with it in the struggle for developmental resources. Accordingly, it is suggested that rather than pursue advocacy for policies directly targeting pro-poor groups (e.g., land redistribution, minimum wage enforcement), it would be better to forge coalitions with non-poor groups to press for more broad-based agendas (e.g., health, education) that can gain widespread support. The paper argues that the latter course holds out more promise as a beginning effort that could build up the experience and knowhow needed to make pro-poor advocacy groups credible players in a local political arena that will in the process have become more pluralistic. By trading support with other groups initially, they will then be able to pursue more targeted agendas benefiting their constituents.

Beginning with a dynamic taxonomy of rural poverty amid a growing rural economy in the 1990s, the paper moves to considering the consequences in terms of survival and advancement needs of the different segments of society. Present and future sources of improvement are next taken up, after which the targeted and universalistic civil society strategies are considered.

### **Who are the rural poor? Changes in rural Bangladesh**

Over the years there have been many cross-sectional studies of income distribution and poverty in Bangladesh, using various definitions. These gross analyses present snapshots in time, giving a series of pictures showing how many households fall below a particular income or consumption level in this year or that. By comparing the distribution in different years, one can make estimates of how the population as a whole has improved or declined with respect to a certain poverty level. But it has not been possible to infer what proportion of families actually move up or down or stay the same over time. Only recently, with the publication of several panel studies (re-interviewing the same sample of respondents at successive points in time) has it

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is based most immediately on work done for DFID in Bangladesh during December 2002 (see Blair 2003) but draws on field experience in that country dating from 1973. I would like to thank other team members Mary Hobbey, Stanley Kochanek, and Mick Moore for their insights and help during the fieldwork, also Chris Murgatroyd of the DFID office in Dhaka for his support, and Mahabub Hossain of the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines for sharing recent research results. Ideas expressed in this paper, however, do not represent any official views of DFID, and neither these individuals nor DFID are responsible for any errors or misinterpretations in the paper.

become possible to track particular households over the years and thereby establish a dynamic understanding of how many households experience favorable and unfortunate shifts in their well being. The picture emerging from these studies is interesting indeed.

Binayak Sen's (2003) panel survey for 1987-88 and 2000 gives us the data shown in Table 1, using the standard headcount measure for household poverty. The overall changes portrayed in Sen's sample of 379 households from 21 villages basically parallel the national trend in household poverty. Nationally, rural households under the poverty line declined from 49.7% in 1988/89 to 43.6% in 2000, a drop of just over 6%, while Sen's sample households in poverty fell from 57.3% in 1987/88 to 49.1% in 2000, a bit more than 8%. This trend by itself was certainly noteworthy for a country that only by the late 1980s had recovered to the poverty levels it had attained back in the mid-1960s (Sen 1995: 46-49).

**[Table 1 about here]**

But looking at the interior cells of Table 1 allows us to see this shift in a quite different way. About one-quarter of the families stayed above the poverty line in both surveys (the "sustainers" in Table 1) and just over three-tenths remained below it both times (the "submergees"). However, we also see that almost 26% (the "gainers") climbed out of poverty during this time, while not quite 18% (the "descenders") fell into poverty. The difference is the same 8% characterizing the overall sample but the number of households moving up and down is far larger; altogether the gainers plus the descenders amount to almost 44% of rural households — a much bigger proportion of the rural population than most outside observers (certainly the present author, at any rate) had realized. And when we add in the numbers of households that briefly climbed out of but returned to poverty during the dozen year time frame comprised by the panel study (the "usually poor" identified in Hulme and Shepherd 2003), those who temporarily fell into poverty but recovered (their "occasionally poor"), and those who bobbed up and down around the line several times (their "churning poor"), the aggregate economic movement becomes quite remarkable. Undoubtedly well over half — likely even more than three-fifths — of all the sample households experienced some shift in category over time.<sup>2</sup>

These impressions are confirmed in Tables 2a and 2b, which presents similar panel data from a 62-village survey taken in 1989 and 1994,<sup>3</sup> but employed a self-perception of household economic position and a taxonomy with four rather than two categories. Again, gainers outnumbered descenders, but in this case by a much larger margin (38% to 10%, or almost four times), and those who moved either up or down came to just over 48% of all households. The large proportion of gainers is all the more noteworthy, inasmuch as the rural economy in the

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<sup>2</sup> These Bangladesh patterns find resonance in American "Five Thousand Family" panel surveys carried out on a year-by-year basis in the 1960s and 1970s. Over the 1967-75 period, the study found that while fully 38% of those surveyed were below the US poverty line in at least one year, only 5.9% were in poverty during all the years covered. See Coe (1978); also Hill (1981). Clearly a great deal of churning was taking place. Later panel research, covering a 25-year span through 1992, found that by age 40 over one-third of Americans experienced poverty at some point during their adult lives, while by age 65 the figure had increased to more than half. Moreover, some 18% had entered "dire poverty" (falling below one half of the official poverty line) at some point below age 40 and about 30% by age 65. The churning, in short, appears to be even greater than the earlier studies indicated. For Black Americans, the figures were all predictably less favorable. See Rank and Hirschl (1999).

<sup>3</sup> For an account of the survey and its methodology, see Rahman and Hossain (1995a: 28-38).

early 1990s was not improving nearly as rapidly as it did in the latter half of the decade. The implication is that self-perceived upward mobility may be greater than improvement by more objective standard.<sup>4</sup>

**[Tables 2a and 2b about here]**

Other evidence has emerged as well. Hossain et al. (2002b), employing a dataset collected in 1987 and 2000 from the 62-village panel, again found more gainers than descenders in terms of self-perceived economic condition though the margin was not as great as that noted in the example just above. In the later study, more than 46% of respondents reporting their economic condition improved over the period, while slightly more than 30% reported a decline. So the precise findings differ from one analysis to another, but whatever criteria are used, there were more gainers than descenders during the 1990s.

Poverty and even extreme poverty persist in rural Bangladesh. Sen's data in Table 1 indicate more than 31 % of rural households below the poverty line both in 1987 and 2000, and though Hossain et al. found only about one-eighth of their rural household sample perceiving themselves as extremely poor in both 1989 and 1994 (146 out of 1166 in Table 2), fully 34% saw their status as either extremely or moderately poor in both surveys. But the facts that many improved their situation and that gainers outnumbered descenders would appear to reflect a more general economic improvement that will have an effect on the potential for civil society activism — an effect that I will argue is basically positive.

What is driving this improvement in the rural economy? Overwhelmingly, the answer appears to be the agricultural expansion of the 1990s, particularly in the latter half of the decade. Overall output grew quite rapidly, especially for the dry-season *boro* rice crop, which in 1998-99 passed the historically dominant wet-season *amon* crop for the first time in terms of production. This growth has exhibited all sorts of forward and backward linkages in the rural economy, many of which have been very succinctly captured the 1987-2000 panel studies reported on by Hossain et al. (2002a and 2002b).<sup>5</sup> The most salient findings in their report show several trends of profound dimension to longterm observers of the Bangladesh scene:

- Adoption of modern varieties and irrigation inverse to farm size, despite their capital-intensive qualities.
- Smaller operators farming more land as larger landowners rent out land instead of farming it, turning themselves more to off-farm economic opportunities. In the process, those taking in land are able to leverage better terms, eschewing sharecropping in favor of fixed rental rates.
- Rising demand for labor, stemming from an expanding off-farm economy and leading to:
  - increased rural wages in the agricultural sector;
  - a smoothing out of demand for labor over the year; and
  - piece-work rates replacing seasonal or daily work contracts, to the benefit of the laborers.

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<sup>4</sup> Though we cannot say for sure, because not only were the time periods different between the two studies, but the categories employed (e.g., extremely and moderately poor vs. below the poverty line) also differed.

<sup>5</sup> Some results from these studies were reported in the Dhaka press by Bayes (2003).

All these factors have considerable significance for civil society activism.

### **Rural concerns for security and development**

Our four groups will have different needs and wants in terms of protecting themselves against vulnerability and seeking to maintain or improve their present situation. But all four types continue to fit into the traditional patron-client system that has long characterized the Bangladesh countryside and continues to do so.<sup>6</sup> The constantly poor need it to survive, and the newly poor find themselves grasping for it to avoid falling into irremediable destitution.<sup>7</sup> But our gainers recently emerging from poverty find they need it as well to assure that their escape will last. And the continuing non-poor sustainers also rely on it as clients if they are only a short distance away from poverty, while they use it as patrons to protect their position if they are themselves among village elites. When it comes to establishing and using links to the outside world, all those who can do so function as clients vis-à-vis external patrons (or those they would like to have as patrons).

These observations also find support in the work undertaken by Hossain and colleagues, who conducted extensive focus group sessions to supplement their panel survey. When asked to rank their assets in order of importance, focus group members from the hard-core poor category (12% of total sample size) put good health first, followed by “trust of the employer” and “social network.” The moderately poor (31% of the overall sample) ranked social network fourth, after rented land, house and good health, while the non-poor (57% of the total sample) also put social network in fourth place, following owned land, house and education.<sup>8</sup> Even the most casual student of South Asia would identify both “employer trust” and “social network” as virtually synonymous with patron-client relationships.

The concerns people bring to the patron-client system fall into two basic categories. First come the more existential worries relating to one’s day-to-day survival and, once that is secured, one’s physical and material position. The closer one is to the bottom of the income distribution, the greater one’s worries on these matters, but even those better off are hardly free from anxiety. All feel the need for patrons in some sense.

These *security concerns*<sup>9</sup> are summed up in Table 3, which portrays four fairly distinct types. Most can be alleviated through a patron’s largesse or intervention. Some security concerns can be ameliorated by the state, or by the market, or through service delivery NGOs, or democratic processes, primarily civil society advocacy, as shown on the right side of Table 3. In the past decade, as indicated by the arrows in Table 3, several of these concerns have abated somewhat,

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<sup>6</sup> The patron-client system has been analyzed in much detail in many accounts of rural Bangladesh. A particularly good one still in print is Hartmann and Boyce (1983). For more recent analyses, see Bode (2002), Hulme (2003), Barenstein (2000).

<sup>7</sup> Matin and Hulme (2003) provide insights into how Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) card distribution fits into the patron-client system.

<sup>8</sup> Hossain et al. (2002a: 14). Interestingly, non-poor respondents “political affiliation” in fifth place, while the other groups did not mention it at all, giving additional credence to the idea that political patronage favors those better off to begin with.

<sup>9</sup> Matin and Hulme (2003: 3) would label them as “protectional” concerns.

owing to progress in economic growth (increased food production) or state capability (responding to floods, public health system). As a consequence of all these improvements, people generally live longer and enjoy better health than was the case a generation ago.<sup>10</sup>

**[Table 3 about here]**

In other areas, security has deteriorated, because of increased criminal behavior (more violence, extortion from *mastaans*)<sup>11</sup> and state misbehavior (police abuse, systemic venality). Corruption in Bangladesh has now been ranked as the worst in the world (among 102 countries) by Transparency International – surely an exaggeration, one thinks when contemplating various countries in Africa, but whatever its exact relative position should be in the index, it must rank very far down in the list of corrupt states (see Transparency International 2002).

A second kind of concerns relates to *developmental* issues<sup>12</sup> – enhancing material fortunes for self and family. Whereas the security concerns focused largely on preventing the immediate situation from getting worse, the developmental concerns look to makings things become better. The lower part of Table 3 presents the more salient priorities under this heading. Some of these issues have a clearly pro-poor content, such as those connected to agricultural equity (e.g., agricultural wages, access to water bodies and *khas* or publicly owned “surplus” land), while others like education and health would be seen by virtually all rural households as critical to their improvement. The family concerns noted in Table 3 apply to virtually all households as well.

Some of these developmental concerns now appear to be taking on quite interesting new dimensions, particularly in agriculture. The “growth” issues in Table 3 would in the past have been of direct interest mainly to the better-off farmers, who would benefit from more plentiful or cheaper inputs, higher prices, etc. The studies undertaken by Hossain and colleagues (2002a and 2002b) mentioned earlier, however, indicate that smaller and more marginal agriculturists are now very focused on these matters. In short, a significantly wider spectrum of the population, including many under the poverty line, now have a material interest in matters that were earlier the preserve of their economic betters.

### **Limitations of the patron-client system**

For many of the concerns depicted in Table 3, people have traditionally relied on the patron-client system for both refuge and advancement.<sup>13</sup> Submergees and descenders look primarily for

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<sup>10</sup> The crude death rate, for example, which hovered around 40 per thousand at the time of the partition in 1947 and had gone down to about 20 per thousand at the time of Bangladesh's independence in 1971, had fallen to just under 5 per thousand by the end of the 1990s (BBS 2002: 37).

<sup>11</sup> Sobhan (2001: 95-98) provides evidence of a deteriorating crime picture through the later 1990s. The Police Directorate's statistics show slightly more than a doubling of crimes reported over the 1987-1999 period (BBS 2002: 577). These data cover only reported crime, and in all likelihood as in most countries the true incidence has been and is much higher. Even so the reported increase reflects the popular perception of rapidly increasing criminal behaviour. For an update, see Sobhan (2003).

<sup>12</sup> These parallel the “promotional” issues in Matin and Hulme's (2003) analysis.

<sup>13</sup> Some would argue that I have understated the relevance of patrons to the issues listed in Table 3, saying that rural people of whatever station depend on patrons for virtually all these concerns. Given the immense role corruption and increasingly criminality plays in Bangladesh, it may well be that patrons are seen as necessary for

security and hope in time to seek development, while for gainers and sustainers the first priority is the latter, but they continue to worry about the former. Different constituencies show different needs, in other words, but all feel they need patrons to help them negotiate these needs. For submergers and descenders, this has meant seeking patrons within the village context, while for the gainers and sustainers it has meant finding them both inside and outside in the world beyond. In the past, patron-client systems have met these needs in the sense that they have protected large numbers of people from outright destitution, albeit at very low levels of subsistence for the vast majority and at sub-poverty levels for a large minority, while providing unearned income or rents and power to patrons. To ensure their survival, the poor in particular, but to a lesser extent those at higher levels in the economic spectrum as well, trade away their ability to exercise their own agency to change their lives, in the “Faustian bargain” depicted by Wood (2003).

The fundamental problems with the patron-client system that rural people rely on so much are that:

- Though it has its base in a widely shared “moral economy” (Scott 1976), it operates through the caprice of the patron rather than by any objective or transparent standard, leaving the client at the patron's mercy. The result is a profound and self-perpetuating inequality between patron and client.
- It performs its functions in many ways by diverting public funds from their ostensibly intended purpose to one of lubricating the patron-client structure through corruption at all levels.
- The consequent rate of human capital development and economic growth is significantly less than if public funds were invested in these processes rather than squandered through patron-client ties.
- Between elections (and often at election time as well), political leaders (who are most generally also patrons or in any event are channeling state resources to local patrons) are essentially unaccountable to their constituents, who in turn have no real voice in public policy making. Thus people in general, and poor people in particular (since they come at the tail end of the patron-client system) have no redress against the state's failures to provide essential services or its violations of human rights and no way to press it into meeting its obligations outside of infrequent general elections, which in any event amount to such blunt instruments for expressing people's policy preferences that they have little value in instructing officials to pursue particular objectives.<sup>14</sup>

### **Replacing the patron-client system**

One powerful challenge to the patron-client structure in Bangladesh has been built through the NGO community, with its service delivery systems targeted on the poor, and in particular its microcredit operations. The big NGOs like BRAC and Proshika, with their millions of members

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gaining access to even the most rudimentary government services, for example. For examples, see Bode (2002) and Hulme (2003).

<sup>14</sup> Another way of stating this is to say that Bangladesh can be classified as an “electoral democracy” that has regular elections that are more or less free and fair and do result in regime changes, but it is not yet a “liberal democracy,” in which “freedom, fairness, transparency, accountability, and the rule of law [are extended] from the electoral process into all other major aspects of governance and interest articulation, competition, and representation. See Diamond (2002: 35).

and borrowers, along with the quasi-NGO Grameen Bank (now at 2.4 million borrowers), have made great strides in helping the poor attain a significant degree of self-reliance economically, and many of them have also done remarkable work in providing essential services neglected or abandoned by the state, especially in the education sector. In the process, through mechanisms like BRAC's Village Organization structure, they have built significant stocks of social capital in the countryside. These NGOs well deserve the accolades (and imitators) they get in the international development community.

But for all their successes, service delivery NGOs do not deal with two critical aspects of the development process. First, they cannot hold the state accountable for its misdeeds of commission and omission, nor do they provide or facilitate citizen inputs to policy making. In short, they do not engage in advocacy, which is the province of civil society; to put it another way, service delivery organizations per se are not civil society organizations (CSOs).<sup>15</sup> Secondly, while assisting the poor in general terms, the service delivery organizations have tended to exclude the ultra-poor, in both microcredit and social programmes (Rahman and Razzaque 2000; also Matin and Hulme 2003).

Remedies to this second shortcoming can be addressed within the service delivery sector. Some NGOs have begun to move in this direction, as with BRAC's initiative in Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction (see Matin 2002). And expanding and redirecting other efforts like CARE's and WFP's food-for-work programmes can strengthen the safety net for the ultra-poor. But to strengthen citizens' input to public decision-making and increase their ability to hold the state accountable, other approaches are called for, which leads us to civil society institutions.<sup>16</sup>

### **The role of civil society**

What is it that CSOs might be expected to do in Bangladesh? Let us move back to our earlier considerations about security and development concerns. For the security concerns, in addition to patrons there are four channels through which amelioration can be expected, as indicated in the right side of Table 3. For destitution and disaster issues, where things have for the most part improved over the last decade, further advancement can come from several quarters. More

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<sup>15</sup> There has been and will surely continue to be great debate within the international development community as to defining NGOs and CSOs. For our purposes, let us say that the NGO sector includes all organizations that are: not public or profit-oriented or familial, voluntary in terms of participation in them, and independent of outside control (particularly by the state). Any particular NGO can be engaged in service delivery (provision of goods and/or services, including credit) or advocacy (attempts to influence public policy decisions on behalf of an NGO agenda), or some combination of the two. Civil society organizations constitute a sub-group of NGOs engaged in advocacy, though they may involve themselves in service delivery as well. For a more extended discussion of these issues, see Blair (2002: 2-4). It should be noted that a number of Bangladesh NGOs began as CSOs in the 1970s, but then changed their strategic approach to service delivery in the course of the ensuing decade. See JNPD (n.d.: 7-9) on this.

<sup>16</sup> Enthusiasm for civil society organizations as the engines of activism and advocacy should not obscure the valuable contribution that service delivery organizations often make to civil society by building social capital in the course of their work, i.e., accumulating and strengthening the social glue holding groups together that can later on become a critical ingredient in CSO advocacy. This can compensate powerfully for the tendency of service delivery NGOs to reduce poverty alleviation to a technical issue, i.e., to depoliticize it (see Hopley 2003, sect. 2.3.10 for more on this).



effective state intervention encourages higher food production and consumption by making inputs more available, allowing international trading, etc. (see Ahmed et al. 2000). In addition improved state machinery can continue earlier progress in responding to natural disasters (as with the 1998 floods, for example), and can do better in dealing with health epidemics such as cholera outbreaks. CSOs can press the state to be more equitable in allocating safety net mechanisms such as Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) ration cards.<sup>17</sup> Service delivery NGOs can improve on their past achievements in all the destitution/disaster areas shown in Table 3. And market forces, which have responded favorably to restructured incentives in the agricultural sector, can help significantly in improving availability of food, shelter and clothing among the poor, even the poorest strata of society.<sup>18</sup>

For security concerns dealing with civilian crime and the state, however, where we have noted that matters have materially deteriorated over the last decade, most of these avenues have little to offer. The state, being the source of police misbehaviour and the principal partner in corruption, can scarcely be expected to become the source of amelioration in these spheres. And with its history of ignoring or abetting civilian crime, the state cannot be looked to for much help here either, certainly not on its own initiative.<sup>19</sup> Nor can service delivery NGOs or the market be expected to provide much help here.<sup>20</sup> Civil society, in contrast, does offer a real potential for dealing with security concerns stemming from criminal and state institutional behavior, for CSOs through advocacy can press the state to fulfill its responsibilities to protect citizens from civilian crime, as well as from its own organs (police, corrupt government servants).

To meet developmental concerns such as education and health, service delivery NGOs will continue to be critical, as indicated in Table 3. There will continue to be an abiding need for NGOs to provide education and personal health services,<sup>21</sup> as well as assisting the agricultural sector with microfinance, extension and the like. But NGOs clearly cannot carry the entire

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<sup>17</sup> See Bode (2002) on their misdistribution.

<sup>18</sup> Higher food production, particularly in the boro season, along with an expanding non-farm economy, has evidently increased demand for rural agricultural labour (traditionally the employment of last resort) to the extent that agricultural wage rates have increased significantly in the last several years. This pattern, in combination with falling rice prices as a result of increased availability, means that rural well-being for the poor has improved. See Deb (2002). Also see Our Correspondent, Barisal (2002).

<sup>19</sup> Some might argue that by mobilizing and directing the Army to reduce violent crime in Operation Clean Heart during the fall of 2002, the state has shown it can deal with threats to public security. But with the end of the operation and the return of authority to the police, it is widely expected that the crime situation will soon return to its previous high level. And the operation's sharp downside evidenced in deploying the Army to harass political opponents, NGOs and intellectuals indicates that on balance the enterprise's temporary benefits may well in the long run not have been worth the tradeoff.

<sup>20</sup> Over the longer term the market might well help curb corruption, to the extent that business firms collectively decide they would be better off refusing to bribe the state (e.g., firms preferring to pay the full rate for electric energy in return for a regular supply, as opposed to bribing officials to secure a supply that at best is irregular and unpredictable). Part of the strategy being pursued by Transparency International Bangladesh is to conscientize and energize business interests in this direction not just at national but also at local levels, as with the upazila corruption "report cards." Thus the entry in Table 3 for the market sector as a possible source for future progress in dealing with corruption.

<sup>21</sup> The health services noted here as "developmental" are those relating to individual and family health, as opposed to those relating to epidemics like malaria and cholera, which are considered under the "disaster" heading in connection with Table 3.

developmental load for rural Bangladesh in these sectors.<sup>22</sup> The state itself will have to assume the greater share of it by providing a closer approximation of the quality services that it should have been offering all along.<sup>23</sup> And while the electoral process may produce some progress on this front by impelling candidates for office to promise state institutional upgrading and then holding the winners to account in the next election for delivering on their promises, this classical mode of electoral accountability has not performed very well at such a task in the past.<sup>24</sup>

The reasons for the failure of state institutions to deliver services effectively lie partly in their weak capacity, to be sure, but also significantly in the historical function of local governance, which has been more to support patron-client networks than to promote development. And given the importance of finding and maintaining patrons for all the categories across our vulnerability spectrum in Tables 1 and 2, such a pattern cannot be unexpected. The focus of local politics has been largely on patronage, not on performance, and the result is that funds and working time which could (and should) be devoted to promoting development are instead squandered in significant measure on lubricating patronage linkages. The central development challenge at the local rural level, especially now that basic food production has improved, is to redirect local resources to productive activities, especially efforts that will benefit the poor.

What this means in practical terms is that schoolteachers should instruct their classes rather than spend their government-paid time on private tutorials, health officials should provide needed drugs and medical assistance rather than selling their government stocks on the black market and directing patients to private clinics, roads should be built and maintained to specification rather than constructed so far below requirement (because so much of the funding has been siphoned off) that they disintegrate at the first monsoon, police constables and their officers should preserve public order and security rather than shaking down citizens for protection money and protecting (even assisting) local gangsters, and so on. Such a list could go on endlessly. And if we assume that (a) the state bureaucracy itself has little incentive and even less interest in undertaking what would be the major administrative reforms needed to effect such action, and (b) elected officers are more concerned with patronage than with development,<sup>25</sup> then the impetus will have to come from elsewhere, which means civil society.

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<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to estimate the actual coverage of NGOs in Bangladesh. Landell-Mills et al. (2002: 60) estimate that "NGOs have a strong presence in less than half of all villages," while Thornton et al. (2002: 2) put the figure at 80% of villages and 35% of population. Crook and Manor (1998: 102) estimate that grassroots NGOs have "reached no more than 20 percent of the rural population." Speaking only of credit programs, Hossain et al. (2002b: 15) state that they include over half of the country's functionally landless households. By any of these measures, the coverage is impressive indeed, given the huge rural population (20 million households and 99 million people in 87,000 villages, according to the 2001 census). But the number of people left uncovered by NGOs remains also huge by any accounting, and even if NGOs expand greatly in the future, most of these people will have to be served by government programmes if they are to be reached at all.

<sup>23</sup> That the state defaulted so badly in doing so, of course, constituted a large part of the impetus for NGOs to have engaged in service provision in the first place.

<sup>24</sup> There is some evidence of voters disciplining local officials. Crook and Manor (1998: 120-121) report that in the 1990 upazila chairman elections, for a sample of 30 incumbent chairmen, only two were returned to office. All the others were either defeated or chose not to run, knowing they were likely to face defeat from angry voters. It would be most interesting to look for re-election data regarding union parishad officials in the 1990s.

<sup>25</sup> It is unfair to say that elected officials in Bangladesh have no interest in promoting development, for they do see themselves engaged in this task. For example, in a recent survey of 20 unions, some 63% of a union parishad member sample saw the main service they rendered as economic development functions (Landell-Mills et al. 2002:

## A locus for action

If the local governance structure that has been promised by successive ministries ever since the restoration of democracy in 1991 had ever been put into place, a roadmap for local civil society activism to promote pro-poor development would be relatively straightforward to draw up (if admittedly nonetheless still difficult to implement). Elected bodies would exist at the village (perhaps ward), union, upazila/thana, and zila/district levels, all of which would presumably receive some government funding and all suitable venues for civil society advocacy. Of these, the most promising would be the upazila parishad (UZP), the lowest level where ample technical resources and programme funding would come together.

As things have turned out, however, successive governments elected to office in 1991, 1996 and 2001 have all thus far notably failed to implement any elected governmental tiers outside of the UPs already in place, and – despite continued pious affirmations<sup>26</sup> – current indications (as of February 2003) are that no new tiers will be added in the foreseeable future, particularly at the upazila level. Resistance from Members of Parliament (MPs) motivated by turf concerns has proven too great to overcome. So local civil society initiatives will be confined to the union level, where there has so far been little funding and less technical capacity. UP budgets have run on average around Tk 2 lakhs annually (less than £2200), the great bulk of which consists of central government grants (most of which are allocated to specific sectors), and the UP establishment has consisted of a secretary to manage records and several village constables — not many resources for CSOs to try to redirect to the public good.<sup>27</sup>

Even so, there remain several avenues to pursue. First, at the **union** level, where directly elected *union parishad* (UP) bodies cover territories include about 23,000 people on average, there is considerable scope. The Awami League ministry in the late 1990s launched a "UP complex" initiative, in which the goal was to construct a headquarters building complex at each UP headquarters in the country and to staff it with a small cadre of technical experts. Collectively these officers would make a far smaller presence in the union than their counterparts at the upazila level, but they would bring a real degree of technical competence in such sectors as health and agricultural extension to the union level for the first time. As of the end of 2002, one estimate had it that as many as 1200 such complexes had been constructed, perhaps half by donors and half with government funds.<sup>28</sup> This would represent a bit over 25% of the country's 4484 unions.

Supporting civil society advocacy activities at the UP level would then amount to a viable option for the unions that have already (or will soon be) upgraded to UP complexes, for they will have

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62). The problem is that the need to build and maintain patronage networks far outweighs the call to undertake serious development work, so government funding ostensibly intended for the latter goes instead to serve the former.

<sup>26</sup> For example, for the present government, see GOB (2002: para. 3.9), which was printed in September; for the previous ministry, see GOB (1997: 10-13).

<sup>27</sup> The Tk 2 lakh figure is the one most widely quoted. See e.g., Aminuzzaman (2000: 9). The UP has much influence over how other moneys are spent as well, as with the various winter season infrastructure projects like Food for Work, distribution of Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme cards, and the like. See Hobley (2003: pp 17-20) for more.

<sup>28</sup> Estimate from USAID.

available a new technical expertise resource as well as the additional funding that is supposed to become part of the ADP.<sup>29</sup> This newly augmented governmental resource will take some time to attain an enhanced capacity, to be sure. The mere combination of personnel and funding is not per se going to make things much better right away. But the way seems open for donor-supported programmes involving 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.<sup>30</sup>

A second possible front appears at the **upazila** level, even if the long-promised upazila parishad never becomes a reality. Federations of UP grassroots organizations can be formed, perhaps using the approach developed by Nijera Kori, to act as advocates at the upazila level, pressing line ministry officers and the UNO to work more effectively in the public interest (see Kabeer 2002). They could be materially assisted in this task by TIB's efforts to set up upazila-level chapters focusing on corruption. For example, the TIB "report card survey" on eight upazilas in greater Mymensingh indicated considerable corruption within the primary education system in terms of admission fees, examination fees, the Food for Education Programme intended for functionally landless families, etc. Analogous exercises would doubtless reveal equal or greater levels of corruption in the health, police, land records, or tax collection offices.<sup>31</sup> Local civil society federations could then use the TIB evidence to demand greater probity in the delivery of these public services, first at the upazila level, and then if necessary at higher levels. It would be better, of course, if these CSOs could pressure publicly elected officials at the upazila level, but government bureaucracy is not impervious to public pressure, especially if CSOs become adept at publicizing their demands and linking them to demonstrated evidence of corrupt behavior.

A third option is to accept the **primacy of the MP** as the main political link between village and capital and to strengthen the capacity of local CSOs to work directly with MPs. Current indications are that each MP will be allocated something on the order of a Tk 1 crore (roughly £105,000) annual discretionary fund to distribute within his/her constituency.<sup>32</sup> The temptation for the MP will be to use the money as a patronage slush fund, but this new setup also provides civil society the opportunity to demand some real accountability. Why shouldn't the MPs be required to report publicly how they allot their discretionary funds, and why shouldn't they be pressured to allot a good portion of those funds toward projects that will benefit the poor? A second reason to work with the MPs comes from recent changes giving them the power to pass on UP budgets. The potential (even the need) for civil society advocacy is clear. Whether or not the UZP ever comes into being, civil society efforts to lobby MPs on spending their discretionary

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<sup>29</sup> The Annual Development Plan is supposed to contain additional funding for the UPs, but this apparently has not become a reality as yet.

<sup>30</sup> It would not be unreasonable to fear that any additional resources coming to the UP would simply be commandeered by the gangster-types who already have so much influence at that level, often as elected officials themselves. The challenge to CSOs will not be light. One interesting avenue to think of pursuing here is suggested by Barenstein (2000), who urges that instead of trying to replace or oust the *mastaans*, a more feasible strategy would be to co-opt and domesticate them through accountability mechanisms that would render them more amenable to serving the public good.

<sup>31</sup> See TIB (2001). National surveys by TIB have gauged the levels of corruption in many sectors, including the judiciary, police, land administration, public transport, etc. See Survey and Research System (n.d.) and Thampi (2002).

<sup>32</sup> This has become a common practice in South Asia. Indian MPs are allocated Rs 2 crores annually for local capital development activities, while their counterparts in Nepal receive Rs 1 million. See Shotton and Boex (2002).

funds should be pursued. If the UZPs do come to life, then there will be two channels for civil society to work through in endeavoring to affect public funding patterns, and if they don't at least there will be one.<sup>33</sup>

### **CSO strategy — programmes for the poor vs. aiming more broadly**

What should be the focus of pro-poor civil society activism at local level? More specifically, to what extent should CSOs press for public policy decisions benefiting the poor exclusively? There are basically two choices available here. First, CSOs can advocate the pro-poor cause directly, pressing local governmental units in such areas as distributing *khas* land, guaranteeing access to water bodies like tanks and *jheels*, enforcing minimum wage regulations and assuring a fair allocation of VGF cards. This has been the agenda pursued most notably by Nijera Kori, and it has attained some successes in these spheres. Secondly, CSOs can channel their efforts toward goals desired by non-poor elements as well as the poor, making common cause for larger alliances with other groups pursuing similar ends.

Pulling together our earlier analysis, Table 4 attempts to lay out the various public policy desiderata for different elements of the rural population.<sup>34</sup> Some of the issues presented here (e.g., destitution and agricultural equity) can be expected to have high salience for submergees and descenders but only low importance for gainers and sustainers. Other issues (e.g., those connected with agricultural growth) should have more relevance for gainers and sustainers than for the two lower levels.<sup>35</sup> Some like individual health, will be highly important to rural people in all our status groups.<sup>36</sup> Others like education may have two levels of relevance, with those at the lower end of the income spectrum more focused on primary education, while those further up think that secondary schooling is at least as important. The question for pro-poor CSOs, then, is whether to involve themselves in agendas tailored more exclusively to the needs of the poor or to work with these more "universalistic" endeavors that would benefit the entire population.

### **[Table 4 about here]**

To the extent that my earlier observations were essentially correct regarding the continuing domination of elites in rural affairs, it will be difficult — and in all likelihood impossible — to cobble together a constituency large and powerful enough to realize the pro-poor agenda on any exclusive basis. There are possibilities, to be sure, as with Nijera Kori's approach focusing on grassroots mobilization, especially in regard to the three women members of the UP, but it is very management-intensive in terms of NGO resources, as well as time consuming. And it is

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<sup>33</sup> Bolivia offers an example where multiple channels exist linking citizens to higher governmental levels. See Blair (2001).

<sup>34</sup> The priority levels indicated in Table 4 are essentially impressionistic, based on my experience, reading and observations over the years. It would be highly worthwhile to obtain some good empirical data on how people actually do prioritize their concerns about public policy issues. In the meantime, the impressionistic assertions presented in the table could use some fine tuning and adjustment.

<sup>35</sup> As noted earlier in the paper, many among the lower socio-economic strata are likely coming to have more interest in agricultural policy issues, owing to current economic growth in the countryside.

<sup>36</sup> It might seem at first glance that crime and illegal state behavior would have a high salience for all levels, but a good many village elites are the beneficiaries (even the perpetrators) of criminal activity and corruption, so would have little interest in curbing such illegalities, while other elites are victims of these malpractices — whence the "some" entry in Table 4.

difficult to see how it could be expanded to a large area except over a very long period of time. The approach should be supported and nurtured as a laboratory for learning what are very likely to become critical lessons in promoting social change from below, but probably should not be thought of as a template for a nationwide programme.

On the other hand, if pro-poor CSOs ally themselves with others to pursue a broader agenda, two things can happen. First, the universalistic goals are more likely to be realized, bringing benefits to all strata of the citizenry;<sup>37</sup> and second, in this process these CSOs will accumulate the experience and skills they can then use to add pro-poor elements to wider agendas, particularly in allying with local elite factions as the ebb and flow of local politics create opportunities.<sup>38</sup>

Another way to look at the strategic options is laid out in Table 5, where elites and non-elites are shown each to have two basic strategies with respect to local policy making. Elites can either be open to initiatives from below or can repress them, while non-elites can either advocate their own policy preferences or comply with decisions rendered from above. The archetypal situation in today's Bangladesh village is elite repression and non-elite compliance, which produces the present patron-client system, or alternative (d) in Table 5. If non-elites should mobilize and advocate change and elites react with repression, the result is conflict, or alternative (c). There are certainly examples in recent Bangladesh history. When NGOs like Gono Shahajjo Shangstha (GSS) have pursued advocacy initiatives in the past, (c) has often been the outcome (see Hopley 2003: sect. 2.3.11). Even much milder pro-poor initiatives such as human rights literacy campaigns and girls education efforts have at times drawn violent reactions from fundamentalists and village elites.<sup>39</sup> Even today higher governmental levels harbor suspicions that NGOs may upset the status quo in the countryside.<sup>40</sup>

The challenge is how to induce elites to adopt openness rather than repression as their response to non-elite initiatives, so that pluralism – alternative (a) – will ensue, in which the political arena accepts policy proposals from all sides. And one very good path to (a) would be to have non-elites initially advocate universalistic agendas in such areas as primary education and health, enabling them to become players in the local political dynamic, building experience that they can then use to further their more particularistic agendas later on. Recent economic improvements should make rural people, including many among the poor, a bit more willing to undertake the risks involved in advocacy, but such risks would probably be easier to bear if more universalistic agendas were pursued initially.

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<sup>37</sup> Survey research by Naomi Hossain (1999) implies that broad alliances between poor and non-poor may in fact prove somewhat easier than elsewhere. Hossain found in a survey of urban Bangladeshi elites a considerable sympathy for the poor, whom they thought should be assisted through development programmes benefiting all strata, especially in education. Interestingly, these elites did not evidence the sort of fear of and anxiety about the poor that is often found the West. Hossain's sample was an urban one, but insofar as such attitudes extend across rural elites as well (admittedly a matter difficult to gauge), they augur well for the kind of universalistic agendas urged in this paper.

<sup>38</sup> My thinking here is indebted to William Julius Wilson, who has advanced similar strategic ideas for pro-poor activism in the United States. See Wilson (1996), and Blair (2000b) for more detail.

<sup>39</sup> On human rights literacy, see Rafi and Chowdhury (2001); on the backlash against female literacy programmes in the mid-1990s, see Anderson (1994), Crawley (1996), and Valley (1995).

<sup>40</sup> The current GOB concern about NGOs engaging in "political" activity offers evidence that these concerns continue to have significance, e.g., the proposal to have district deputy commissioners clear all NGO funds to be spent within their territory. See for instance Staff Correspondent (2003).

[Table 5 about here]

Good openings for launching such efforts will surely arise often, for at least two reasons. First, the competition between Bangladesh's two major parties has long ago seeped down to the village level, so that rival local factions align themselves with the parties, thus replicating the divisions so rampant elsewhere in society (e.g., in professional associations, trade organizations, labour unions, the bureaucracy).<sup>41</sup> Second, the personality-driven and basically agendaless differences between the parties means that at village level they are scarcely distinguishable on any ideological or programmatic basis, and that consequently it is eminently easy to switch opportunistically from one party to the other. Party loyalties, in short, are extremely fluid, giving pro-poor CSOs frequent chances to change their own alliances with one or another elite faction, as the occasion arises. In this kind of milieu, the scope for defecting, allying and making deals is large indeed, presenting many opportunities to trade support for an elite faction in return for that faction's backing at first a universalistic agenda and in time a more pro-poor one. Thus the seeming disadvantage faced by local CSOs which cannot remain neutral amid an increasingly polarized environment could well turn out to be a benefit in that they can easily shift political sides as opportunities arise.

We should also ask what kinds of groups are likely to form as CSOs in the countryside and who they might represent. One notable absence among civil society players in Bangladesh thus far has been any kind of organized farmers' associations. Unlike India, where *kisan* organizations have exercised a powerful influence in politics for at least a couple of decades, with their steady din of demands for lower input prices, higher state procurement prices and the like, Bangladesh has seen virtually nothing of such groups.<sup>42</sup> But the agricultural boom of the late 1990s can be expected to give rise to groups of market-oriented farmers, hoping to consolidate their position and gain access to new largesse from the state.

In previous decades, the emergence of an organized peasant constituency would have spelled trouble for the rural poor as it lobbied for state assistance to agricultural production. But the recent economic growth that has led to growing numbers of small and tenant farmers and to increased use of new technologies among them means that farmer CSO agendas will bring benefits to lower economic strata as well as (perhaps even more than?) upper levels. Such developments would contradict much of the criticism directed at the Green Revolution, holding that its benefits served largely to exacerbate rural inequalities. These speculations are of course only conjecture at this point, but they are provocative and deserve further scrutiny as any local level civil society initiative is designed.

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<sup>41</sup> For two good recent analyses of this dynamic at work in local politics, see Siddiqui (2000: 285&ff.) and Bode (2002).

<sup>42</sup> The only instance of an agricultural movement to date has been the ill-fated *tebhaga* agitation of the late 1940s, when many sharecroppers joined to demand a reform of the traditional 50-50 split between owner and sharecropper in favor of a one-third/two-thirds division in the latter's favor. Lost in the larger confusion of the partition and repressed by authorities, the *tebhaga* movement petered out. For an excellent analysis of the rise of "bullock capitalist" pressure groups in India — and an account of scenarios that may well play out in Bangladesh in the near future — see Rudolph and Rudolph (1987).

Two agendas in particular that offer potential for alliances are what I've labeled in Table 4 as "crime" and "family" concerns. The criminal concern is domestic violence, while the family issues are dowry and purdah customs, as well as general gender biases that discriminate against women so pervasively at village level. Though often lumped in with pro-poor issues, most of these issues in fact have great salience across the entire social spectrum. Women from elite households as well as poor ones suffer domestic violence. Elite women are dehumanized by dowries and purdah restrictions perhaps even more than are poor women, in that the dowries demanded are greater and they tend to come under greater pressure to observe purdah than in poor households that cannot afford either high dowries or to keep potential income earners indoors. And while elite women may be less subject to rape and other violence from outside the household than poor women, such violations are scarcely unknown in rural Bangladesh. In sum, there are many good reasons why all four of our social status groups from Table 1 should make common cause on family issues.

All these approaches will take a good deal of time to develop and bring to enough maturity to think of replicating them. None of them will lead to quick impacts (at least of any meaningful type) that can be gauged with the quantifiable results-focused approaches that became popular with the donor community over the last decade. For rural Bangladeshis to change from being clients to becoming citizens will not occur quickly, but if Bangladesh is to transform itself from the electoral democracy that it became in the 1990s to a true liberal democracy which encourages public policy inputs from all its citizens including its poor and which has a government genuinely accountable to them, such fundamental changes are necessary. To embark on them is to think of minimal five-year timeframes or starters and in all likelihood considerably longer ones to see any real results.

Moreover, the approaches laid out here are all subject to risk and change. Among the pitfalls that could occur, the following pose real dangers:

- The agricultural boom of the past several years may fade, undermining the base attained by the gainers, and generating larger numbers of descendents, throwing them back to the mercies of the patron-client system. For example, the high-yielding rice cultivars now adopted by more than 80% of marginal (under one acre) farmers (per Hossain et al. 2002a) could put them at great risk if diseases or pest resistance develop. Or two bad flood years in a row could severely diminish the government's capacity to deal with disasters.
- Pro-poor CSOs following universalistic program agendas may still provoke hostility from elites obsessed with zero-sum games. Attempts to move the dominant political mode from a patron-client structure to the pluralism noted in Table 5 may instead simply shift it to a conflict relationship.
- Pro-poor CSOs may get co-opted by predatory elites more skilled at playing the political game, so that in Table 5's terms, the political discourse never really leaves the patron-client cell. Decentralization initiatives have a long history of being taken over by local elites (see Manor 1999, Blair 2000a), and it will take great effort to avoid such outcomes in Bangladesh.



I have sketched out a scenario of opportunity for local pro-poor activism, enhanced by an agricultural expansion that has improved the economy, created more gainers than losers among the poor, and should be enhancing people's willingness to take the risks inherent in compromising their places in patron-client relationships and undertaking the collective action of CSO advocacy. But the poor may really have little choice in leaving their patron-client ties, as the market economy increasingly displaces the moral economy that had earlier reinforced the patron-client nexus and leads patrons to cut the poor off from dependent relationships. As the rural economy moves from a feudal to a capitalist order, Geof Wood's Faustian bargain that linked the vulnerable client to the controlling patron will get sundered from Satan's side. This, after all, has been part and parcel of the shift from feudalism to market economy elsewhere; similar patterns must be expected to affect rural Bangladesh. It behooves those being cut off to begin making alternative arrangements.

**Table 1. Changing rural well-being in rural Bangladesh as objectively perceived, 1987/88-2000**

(numbers in parentheses indicate percentages)

		<b>Headcount status in 2000</b>		
		Poor	Non-poor	Total
<b>Headcount status in 1987/88</b>	Poor	119 (31.4) Submergees	98 (25.9) Gainers	217 (57.3)
	Non-poor	67 (17.7) Descenders	95 (25.1) Sustainers	162 (42.7)
	Total	186 (49.1)	193 (50.9)	379 (100.0)

Source: Sen (2003).

**Table 2a. Mobility of Households by Self-Categorization of Household's Economic Position, 1989 and 1994**

Self-Categorization (1990 Survey)	Self-Categorization (1995 Survey)					Total n	Percent
	Extremely Poor	Moderately Poor	Self-Reliant	Solvent	Total n		
Extremely Poor	146	76	38	13	273	23.4	
Moderately Poor	69	254	202	55	580	49.7	
Self-Reliant	1	28	111	60	200	17.2	
Solvent	1	9	9	94	119	10.2	
Total n	217	367	360	222	1166	100	
Percent	18.6	31.5	30.9	19.0	100		

**Table 2b. Dynamic analysis of mobility data**

Dynamic category	n	Percent
Submergers — stayed the same (extremely and moderately poor)	400	34.3
Sustainers — stayed the same (self-reliant and solvent)	205	17.6
Gainers — moved up by at least one category	444	38.1
Descenders — moved down by at least one category	117	10.0
Total	1166	100.0

Source: Hossain et al (2000)

**Table 3. Security and developmental concerns in rural Bangladesh, 2003**

	Main type	Subtype	Progress in last decade	Resources for improvement				
				Patrons	State	Civil society	Svc dely NGOs	Market
Security concerns	Destitution	Food	↑	x	x	x	x	x
		Shelter, clothing	—	x			x	x
	Disaster	Environmental (flood, cyclone)	↑↑	x	x		x	
		Health (epidemic)	↑		x	x	x	
	Crime	Violence, extortion from <i>mastaans</i>	↓	x		x		
		Domestic violence	—			x		
	State	Police (esp. violence, extortion)	↓	x		x		
		Corruption	↓			x		x
Developmental concerns	Agriculture	Growth (inputs, prices, extension)	↑	x	x	x	x	x
		Equity ( <i>khas</i> land, wages)	—		x	x		
	Human resources	Education	↑		x	x	x	
		Health (individual & family)	—		x	x	x	
	Family	Gender issues, dowries	—		x	x		
	Infrastructure	Roads, transport	↑		x	x		
		Energy	↑		x	x		

“Progress” indicators:      ↑      significant improvement  
    ↑↑      even more improvement  
    ↓      significant deterioration  
    —      little change

**Table 4. Household status and types of concerns: levels of priority**

		HOUSEHOLD STATUS			
		Submergees	Descenders	Gainers	Sustainers
SECURITY	Destitution	High	High	Low	Low
	Disaster	High	High	Some	Some
	Crime (civilian)	High	High	High	Some
	State illegalities	High	High	Some	Some
DEVELOPMENT	Education (primary)	High	High	High	High
	Education (secondary)	Low	Some	High	High
	Health (indiv)	High	High	High	High
	Agr growth	Some	Some	High	High
	Agr equity	High	High	Med	Low
	Family	High	High	High	High
	Communication	Some	Some	Some	Some

**Table 5. Elite and non-elite strategies on policy making at local level**

		NON-ELITE STRATEGY	
		Advocate	Comply
ELITE STRATEGY	Be open	(a) Pluralism	(b)* n.a.
	Repress	(c) conflict	(d) Patron-client system

\* In theory, elites could be open to policy input from below and non-elites could be compliant — cell (b) in the table — but it is difficult to imagine such a situation in rural Bangladesh (or elsewhere for that matter), so this cell is unfilled.

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