
NGOs, Civil Society, and the State in Bangladesh: The Politics of Representing the Poor

Sarah C. White

ABSTRACT

The established rhetoric of opposition between state and NGOs as development agents has shifted to one of complementarity and common interest. Along with this, the 'comparative advantage' claimed for NGOs has expanded from economic and welfare benefits to encompass also the political goods of civil society and popular participation. This paper reviews these developments in the context of Bangladesh. It argues that they need to be assessed critically in ways which are both theoretically informed and locally contextualized. While recognizing that there are, indeed, areas of common experience and interest between the state and NGOs in Bangladesh, it questions whether these necessarily coincide with the interests of those they all invoke: the poor.

INTRODUCTION

In 1974, in one of his less diplomatic moments, Henry Kissinger declared Bangladesh to be a development 'basket-case'. Twenty-five years on, case studies from Bangladesh appear frequently as examples of development success. Considering the huge amounts of aid which Bangladesh has consumed since independence this is perhaps a not unreasonable outcome. But it is not the state, which still receives over 85 per cent of total Overseas Development Assistance (World Bank, 1996: 46), which is responsible for this international acclaim. Instead it is actors outside the state, the Grameen Bank and the Non-Governmental Development Organizations (NGOs), who produce programmes that are widely praised as models to be replicated.¹

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1. The precise classification of different types of NGOs is much debated. For a summary of this, see Farrington and Bebbington (1993: 3–5). Here I employ the definition of Hulme and Edwards (1997: 21) of NGOs as 'intermediary organizations engaged in funding or offering other forms of support to communities and other organisations that seek to promote development'. In Bangladesh, most of these are established and staffed by Bangladeshis, although the national NGO community also includes the field offices of international NGOs such as Oxfam and ActionAid.

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The rise of the NGOs as the agents of development par excellence has been achieved at the cost of the legitimacy of the state. In Bangladesh as elsewhere, the state and the NGOs have defined themselves in part by difference from one another. This is not incidental. The mythic opposition of state and NGOs reflects real struggles to establish themselves as the legitimate voice of the Bangladesh people. By extension, this implies rights to the significant, but limited, resources available through overseas aid. As so often, the boundaries to these internal struggles are highly permeable, critically subject to external influences and overt intervention. A 1990 World Bank review of 'Poverty and Public Expenditure' in Bangladesh, for example, repeatedly compared NGO activities favourably with those of the state, and recommended the expansion of NGOs to supplement government efforts and provide for improvement in delivery of services through competition. More broadly, the Bangladesh picture provides a particular instance of much more general trends. These reflect the global shift of political paradigms to the right, and the latest reshuffling of the 'growth with — eventually — equity' development formula. The development apparatus which was the vital coinage of state internal and external legitimacy in the heady days of post-colonial new nationhood is now seen as debased currency. The new state role is not to lead from the front, but to remove any hindrance that it may constitute to the new harbingers of development: NGOs, 'civil society' and, of course, the market.

With the agenda for NGO involvement now firmly established, the 'NGO debate' appears in new guise. This re-figures the NGOs not as competitors to the state, but rather as potential new partners in a mutually advantageous collaborative project. Again the World Bank figures as an active, and weighty, advocate of this view. The preface to its 1996 report, *Pursuing Common Goals: Strengthening Relations between Government and Development NGOs in Bangladesh*, states that its key purpose is 'to make a difference' (original emphasis). Its success 'can only be measured by the extent to which it can convince the Government and the NGOs to bring about the necessary changes in their policies and practices so that a more fruitful partnership can be fostered' (World Bank, 1996: xv). The image on the report's front cover (as published by University Press Ltd., Dhaka) aptly expresses the vision contained within it. It shows the two parallel rails of a train-track, in perfect harmony and perfect complementarity, seeming to converge as they lead off into the middle distance, with the beams that support them appearing like the rungs of a ladder, leading onward and ever upward.

This heady vision of the mutuality of government and NGO interests complements the promise of two newcomers to the list of benefits NGOs are said to deliver — 'democratization' and 'a thriving civil society' (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 6). This adds an overtly political dimension to the established claims of the 'comparative advantage' of NGOs in the delivery of economic benefits and welfare provision to the poor. This 'new' agenda has, however, a rather familiar ring, as it echoes 1960s' concerns with 'political modernization' in which the transfer of capital and technology was to be

complemented by moves to foster 'modern', 'democratic' institutions in the recipient country. The political import of these new 'goods' is deflected, however, by their incorporation within the dominant technocratic terms in which the whole NGO debate has been carried on. They are simply the rational, necessary means for the achievement of development. A quotation from *Pursuing Common Goals* expresses this well:

Recent research has convincingly demonstrated that a country's level and dynamism of development are closely correlated with the quality and richness of its associational life. Pluralism is also important for social cohesion and can be encouraged by creating an environment where these civil society groupings (i.e. all those organizations that are neither part of government, nor part of business) can be involved in pursuing the goals of national development. (World Bank, 1996: 1-2)

It is difficult not to see such a passage as evidence for Ferguson's (1990) claim that development itself constitutes an 'anti-politics machine' which serves to secure political interests by obscuring them through the employment of technocratic discourse.

The power of an institution such as the World Bank to define the terms of debate is enormous because of the resources it has at its disposal. In this article, for example, I repeatedly refer to this 1996 report, because the sheer quantity of data it contains makes other studies seem flimsy by comparison. It is alarming, however, that such a major political intervention can be made on the basis of such apparently slight political analysis. As in much of the NGO literature, claims about the character of state, 'civil society' and NGOs reveal more about current orthodoxies in development ideology than any serious exploration of the local context. Both state and civil society are essentially political and contested domains, in both conceptual and practical terms. Not to recognize this means to rely on a simplistic deployment of totemic motifs, overlaid with moral, social and political meanings whose non-interrogation blocks mature understanding. That the state and the NGOs have mutual interests in closer collaboration is not in doubt. For the NGOs, working with the state offers an opportunity to expand the scope of their operations, broaden their influence and participate in the formulation of the national development agenda. The state, on the other hand, may see collaborating with the NGOs as a chance to gain some reflected moral glory, retrieve a hold on donor funds, neutralize potential opposition, and achieve more efficient and cost effective implementation of policy. What is open to question, however, is whether these mutual interests necessarily coincide with the interests of those whose name they all invoke: the poor.

In this article I argue that discussion of the relations between state, NGOs and civil society must be inscribed in a more adequate analytical framework which enables the specificity of the local context to be explored. I begin by describing the politics of local representations of state and NGOs in Bangladesh, and some of the tensions that underlie these. To sidestep the ideology and promote a more realistic assessment of state and NGO strengths and weakness, I follow this by a comparison between their institutional

characteristics, considering the aspects they have in common, as well as points of divergence. I then set this in a broader analytical framework, by giving a brief review of academic debates concerning state–civil society relations. Finally, I return to the Bangladesh context to consider what light the issues raised in the broader literature throw on the character of state, NGO and civil society relations in Bangladesh, and specifically the politics of representing the poor.

THE POLITICS OF NGO–STATE RELATIONS IN BANGLADESH

The relationship between the state and the NGOs is a talking point in Bangladesh. The NGOs have had a particularly high profile since the disastrous floods of 1988, when they were at the forefront of relief and rehabilitation. These floods were experienced as a national crisis, and parallels were frequently drawn with the Liberation struggle, when in a similar way differences and self-interest were forgotten in the enthusiasm to reconstruct the country after the devastation of war. This pattern was reconfirmed in 1991 when the NGOs again were amongst the first on the scene after the devastating cyclone hit the southeast of the country.

By contrast, however, in the political upheavals surrounding the forced resignation of President Ershad in December 1990, the NGOs were the subject of bitter criticism. Although since 1993 they have worked at building linkages with other sections of Bangladeshi society (Lewis et al., 1994: 18), at that time their prevarication in declaring support for the pro-democracy movement was seized as an opportunity for settling old grievances between some of the NGOs and other sectors of the middle class. The particular issue was the National Health Policy, felt by the medical profession to be contrary to their interests, which had been proposed by an NGO leader who had become adviser to the government on health issues. Subsequent moves by the NGOs to take part in the monitoring of the parliamentary elections again drew widespread suspicion: what kind of constituency did the NGOs represent; were they there to offer vote-banks — or campaign funds — to their chosen candidates? At one extreme the NGOs are thus seen as embodying the best of Bangladesh society, at the other they are factions working against the national interest. This apparent anomaly is not coincidental: it is indicative of the contradictions inherent in the NGOs' position in Bangladesh society.

The flavour of one view of the NGOs common in middle class circles in Bangladesh is conveyed in this statement made to me by a Bangladeshi journalist:

If you want to understand the NGOs, listen to this. I knew a man who after Liberation decided to be a magician. A great magician came from India and he watched him and saw how much money he made, and thought he could do the same. But after a few years his skills weren't quite that good, so he gave up magic and started a rubber plantation, which at that time was all the rage. But again, a few years later he wasn't prospering too well, so he came

back to Dhaka and set up a private health clinic for fat ladies to slim down their figures. The other day I went round to his office and saw a new signboard over the door: '*Shodesh Ummayan Songstha* — Own Country Development Organization'. Now, he says, he has set up an NGO. (personal communication)

The NGO debate, which seems a recurrent feature of national news media, circles around a number of issues. A typical survey, in the periodical *Muldhara* in January 1990, selects three questions: are NGOs effective; are they dedicated; how should the government regulate them? As in other countries, the debate swings between extremes and seems to feed on misinformation: the NGOs make a popular target, because they (a) make claims to higher virtue and (b) are evidently prospering. Polarization in the debates is very acute. Thus the NGOs are characterized as either selflessly dedicated to the poor or self-interested charlatans; supporting where government provision falls short or agents of foreign powers; able to act effectively with a minimum of bureaucracy or a bunch of amateurs with funds far beyond their managerial skills. These concerns are not, of course, the priorities of the poor. By and large, they have a much more down-to-earth approach to NGOs: what do they have to offer and what will they want in return?

The heat and prominence of this debate reflects the centrality of aid to state finances, and the ongoing ambivalence regarding national identity. The early euphoria of independence, and the first President, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's declaration of the 'four pillars' of the Bangladesh state — nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy — soon gave way to internal fragmentation and external pressure. After more than a quarter century of independence, the Bangladesh state is still engaged in the continual quest for self-definition: Bengali but not Indian, Muslim but not Pakistani. Continuing dependence on aid from ex-colonial powers ensures ongoing tensions regarding national sovereignty; until the 1991 elections, the military basis of the state raised fundamental questions about its internal legitimacy. In this context, the development of the NGO sector is inherently controversial. They are Bangladeshi but foreign-funded; they claim to speak for the poor majority in a way that potentially threatens the scope and legitimacy of state aspirations to embody the nation.

Foreign donors have played a contradictory, but vital role in this. As Sanyal (1991) makes clear, the relationship of the state and NGOs in Bangladesh cannot be understood simply as a one to one: it is always conducted in the shadow of a triangle with the donors, alternately posing as matchmaker, confidant or rival. Foreign aid has undoubtedly helped to stabilize the state in Bangladesh. Aid can ease the need to extract domestic revenues and provide resources to neutralize potential opposition (Hossain, 1979). Post-liberation suspicions in the Planning Commission that aid was likely to compromise Bangladesh's independence quickly gave way to the recognition that the state could not function without it (Faaland, 1981).

On the other hand, however, some of the main challenges to the Bangladesh state have also been external ones. Donor 'target group'

ideologies, for example, aim to combat the tendency for aid to be used as patronage and to use the administrative system to effect (limited) redistribution of resources (Jahangir, 1989: 72). In addition, particularly since the 1980s, the OECD development agencies have — somewhat contradictorily, since they are public corporations themselves — put consistent pressure on the government towards privatization. Further funding commitments from the World Bank have been made conditional on the implementation of policies aimed at structural adjustment.

Most crucial to the argument of this article, the donors' advocacy of the NGOs has challenged the state's monopoly as development actor, with far-reaching implications for its funding base, sovereignty, and internal legitimacy. NGOs are now estimated to work in 78 per cent of the villages of Bangladesh (World Bank, 1996: 5). The Government NGO Affairs Bureau, with which all NGOs receiving funds from outside the country are required to register, notes an increase of foreign-funded NGOs in Bangladesh from 494 in 1990–1 to 986 in 1994–5 (*ibid.*). By far the greatest increase within this is the number of local NGOs, rising from 395 to 848 over the same period, from 80 per cent to 86 per cent of the total number (*ibid.*). Perhaps even more tellingly, NGOAB figures show that the disbursement of Official Aid to NGOs as a percentage of total Overseas Development Assistance has risen from 8 per cent in 1991–2 to 14 per cent in 1994–5, a rise in real terms from US\$ 120m to US\$ 188m, and this does not take into account all forms of foreign assistance (*ibid.*: 45–6). Concentration within the NGO sector means that it now contains a number of very large organizations which can rival some government departments in size. Precise figures on this are hard to come by, but one study quoted by the World Bank calculated that ten leading NGOs spent 68 per cent of the foreign funds released through the NGOAB in 1993–4 (*ibid.*: 45). This would amount to US\$ 115.6m.

Tensions between the state and the NGOs are most clearly evident in government moves to tighten control of NGO activities, and particularly their access to foreign funding. By 1989 the system for approval of projects had virtually broken down. Structurally, state suspicion of the NGOs was expressed in a highly complex and inaccessible bureaucratic procedure; less formally, state–NGO tensions found expression in the demand amongst government officials for extra payment if applications were to be processed. In a survey of fifty-one NGOs by the NGO co-ordinating body, ADAB (Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh) in August 1989, of 162 projects submitted to the government over the previous two years, only 44 had been approved (D'Rozario, 1989). It was in response to this crisis that the NGO Affairs Bureau was set up in June 1990. Initially relations were much improved, as the first Bureau Director was university 'batchmate' of several NGO leaders, and therefore easily established more friendly relations (Lewis et al., 1994: 17). This personal dynamic did not provide a sustained reversal of the structural tensions, however. Conflicts re-emerged and intensified under the following NGOAB Director (*ibid.*). These are noted in

a somewhat different guise by the World Bank (1996: 31) as ‘institutional weaknesses of the NGOAB’.

Outside the NGOAB, resistance by the state to NGO expansion is also evident in the plethora of ordinances and regulations governing the registration of NGOs and their work, and within the tax system. The publication of *Pursuing Common Goals* reflects the importance which the World Bank accords these issues. Its primary purpose is a piece of advocacy. Its main target is the government, to which it represents the NGOs as partners rather than competitors in the business of development. As already noted, its aim is ‘to make a difference’. The key difference that it hopes for is that the government will transform elements in the planning, legislative and fiscal structures to promote a more enabling environment for the NGOs.

The feeling that NGOs are the darling of the foreign donors is obviously one that brings its own tensions. On the one hand, some state officials recognize that their agencies have something to learn from NGO methods and understand donor frustrations with the state bureaucracy. On the other hand, government employees can find it hard to have their departments’ programmes compared, almost always unfavourably, with those of NGOs. There is also without doubt both envy and distrust amongst higher government officials of the economic resources and increasing political influence wielded by senior NGO leaders. Ironically, this has also shown itself in the practice of government officials setting up their own NGOs. While some of these may be bona fide, they have been widely suspected of being merely a front for access to foreign funds.

Lower down the hierarchy too, government employees can feel resentful at seeing staff at a comparable level in the larger NGOs having greater flexibility in working, more chances for foreign travel, generally better salaries and a higher budget for office support, vehicles, and so on. None the less, for the majority of Bangladeshi graduates, government service would still be the first choice of career as it offers higher social status and longer-term security. There is also some reciprocity. Posted to a rural area, government officers and NGO salaried staff often find that their social backgrounds and career orientation give them more in common with each other than with the local population. The dynamics of their social lives can thus reinforce the judgement that good relations between them are an essential precondition for success in their work. This blurring of boundaries finds material expression in informal arrangements for (private) sharing of (public) resources such as office vehicles and other assets.

NGOs AND THE STATE: INTERNAL DIVERSITY AND POINTS IN COMMON

In the discussion so far I have generally talked as though the NGOs and the state were clearly defined, homogeneous entities. This is not, of course, the

case. An important part of NGO mythology is the range and diversity found among NGOs, the value they place on finding local and specific programmes to fit local and specific problems. NGOs in Bangladesh are no exception to this. They differ from one another in terms of size, structure, location, and orientation. They differ tremendously in scale, from small local groups working in just one cluster of villages, to national organizations with a number of regional offices. They differ also in their origins: 14 per cent are still directly operational foreign NGOs (World Bank, 1996: 5), while others began in this way but have since become autonomous. Some grew out of local clubs and associations that already existed, others were set up from the start by individuals or small groups with a particular vision. Some have an explicit missionary agenda, others are committed to a secular approach. While some operate in very close association with the state, others are more autonomous. Amongst the largest NGOs there is a gathering trend towards greater professionalization, but some still retain a very clear commitment towards more of a volunteer ethic. Some see themselves as service organizations, others quite explicitly aim to work for social change.

The NGOs are also divided hierarchically. There is first a division between the NGOs according, broadly, to size. This is reflected in office-holding within ADAB, and prominence in negotiations with the government. Links across the different levels may take the form of particularistic patron–client ties. Smaller local NGOs may receive funding through, or on the recommendation of, or as a result of advice from, larger NGOs; and this relationship may continue with broader ties of reciprocal (unequal) exchange.

In addition, there are clear divisions by hierarchy within each NGO. This takes place within the idiom of participation, which is a dominant motif in the NGO sector. Whereas male superiors in government offices are addressed as ‘Sahib’ or ‘Moshai’ (‘sir’, Muslim or Hindu), those in NGOs are addressed as ‘Bhai’ or ‘Dada’ (‘elder brother’, Muslim or Hindu). Interestingly, the government–NGO distinction does not hold for women, who in both cases are called ‘Apa’ or ‘Didi’ (‘elder sister’, Muslim or Hindu). The use of family terminology accurately suggests the relatively personalized, charismatic character of NGO leadership, compared with the more formal systems of government bureaucracy; but it also expresses the embedding of NGO staff interactions within a broader culture of kin and clientelist relations (Wood, 1997: 87–9). For the idiom of family does not suggest equality, but rather a degree of informality within a hierarchy of reciprocal responsibilities, in which everyone knows their place.

The state, similarly, is far from a simple unit. At both national and local level there are the inevitable tensions between the politicians and the government officers. There is also competition between different ministries, departments and state corporations, again not least for aid resources. Hierarchical differences are clearly demarcated, with stylized subservience to cloak the considerable tensions this engenders. There is diversity by region, particularly across the urban–rural divide. Perhaps most significant is the

division between the local level administration and the headquarters in Dhaka.

While these horizontal and vertical differences within the NGOs and the state are highly significant for the outcomes of development policy, there are also many characteristics which the state and the NGOs have in common, which the rhetorics of both opposition and complementarity between them similarly suppress. The most significant characteristic that the state and the NGOs in Bangladesh share is a populist approach. As a movement, populism seeks a superordinate authority which is responsive to people's needs and intervenes in their interest — but not too much (Robertson, 1984: 225). Populism of states is a counterpart to this: 'it also craves consensus and is embarrassed by politics' (ibid). In Bangladesh, both the state and the NGOs claim to be the authentic voice of the people. With a few exceptions on the NGO side, both the state and the NGOs lack explicit ideological allegiance, appealing instead to 'the people' and notions of 'community'. In the state, this is evident in the trend of successive governments towards closer identification with Islam: it is a way of mobilizing a constituency and claiming legitimacy, appealing above all to the Islamic value of *umma*, an undivided community with a common purpose and moral commitment.

The rhetoric of the NGOs tends to be more radical, stressing the importance of participation and self-development by the poor with slogans like 'it is the members' NGO' and 'the poor must be the subjects, not the objects of development'. The community here is differentiated, with a more or less clearly defined 'target group', usually delineated by economic status and gender. The ways that this works out in practice differ from case to case. It is, however, extremely difficult for NGOs to break out of the patron role. In part this may be attributed to institutional interests against divesting themselves of a loyal client-base built up over the years, especially where both donors and the NGO peer group are heavily into the numbers game. It is also due, however, to the local culture of power more broadly, which forms the day-to-day reality for the operations of both state and NGOs, but is worlds away from the open culture of 'pluralism' imagined by the World Bank report.

In its more malign forms, this culture is often dismissed by outsiders as a form of bureaucratic corruption. Ironically, it may also be seen as the manifestation of the 'popular will'. Fundamental to it is a prioritizing of the personal over the impersonal, of the particular over the categorical case. For the one in the position of power, this means that an appeal made either in the office or the home is heard as seeking favour, and the response — if positive — is a gesture of personal largesse. This is true for quite routine use of office resources, as well as for things (like lending an office vehicle for a family occasion) which lie outside the strictly official. Those seeking support, similarly, aim to contrive a personal relationship, in the context of which they can advance their specific claim. This may be made clearer by a practical example. As I sat in the area office of an NGO one day, a woman came in with a problem about her savings account. The default response of the

worker, and the one for which the woman was looking, was not to advise her to tackle it herself, or encourage her group members to work on it with her, but to assure her that he would sort it out. The distinction between the state and the NGOs in such cases is not so much in the character of interaction between them and their clients, but that at least in the larger NGOs, the workers may more often be in a position to deliver.

The importance of the NGOs as patrons is also seen in more structural ways. A group of fishermen formed a co-operative to replace the middle-trader on whom they had until then been dependent. The trader concerned was understandably hostile, and the support of the NGO as financial guarantor, social and political backstop and mediator/broker was vital to their success. Similarly, the moves by NGOs (following international concerns with ‘empowerment’ and ‘sustainability’) to withdraw from established areas of operation are often resisted by their members. It may be, in fact, that the guarantee of a relationship with a strong and committed partner, which may serve as protection in times of crisis (*viz.* the way that relief goods are distributed first through NGO networks) is a key part of the appeal of NGOs for the poor (White, 1991: 110).

A high degree of personalism, focusing on a key charismatic figure, is also characteristic of populism. Under President Ershad, this was evident almost to the point of caricature — he was the star of every television news broadcast, the capital city was festooned with his poems on monuments or across bridges, his picture was the hallmark of official space. With less celebration but more substance, many of the NGO leaders also perform a critical identity-giving function.

The formal procedures of the state and the NGOs also have more in common than the rhetoric might suggest. Planning is common to both, and this introduces a very robust dynamic of its own (*cf.* Biggs and Neame, 1995). Planning presumes that the popular will is expressed in bureaucratic actions (Robertson, 1984: 151). Even the NGO that is most committed to ‘responding to the will of the people’ finds that donors require time to process applications, that the people’s will may not last the course if some preparatory work has not already been done by the NGO. Pressures on NGOs towards more formal procedures — complex accounting, for example — are likely to increase as the official donors look towards direct funding of national NGOs. Alongside this, as they develop into institutions, NGOs almost inevitably take on some of the conservatism, the measures for self-protection and perpetuation, that are characteristic of state agencies. Finally, whatever the official rhetoric, NGO fieldworkers in confrontation with the local power structures tend to find — as do the state officials — that they usually come off worst. In the majority of cases, NGO staff therefore modify their aims and programmes so as to accommodate the existing power structures, rather than attempt to challenge them.

A further point, which is fundamental to the way that both the state and NGOs operate in Bangladesh, is the international climate. Both the NGOs

and the state are, in a critical way, outward-looking: their key points of reference lie in the international arena. At one level, of course, this common context makes the NGOs and the state competitors, as they vie for favour with foreign patrons. It also means, however, that they have a great deal in common. There is undoubtedly a process of endogenous change and reflection within Bangladesh government and non-governmental institutions. The larger NGOs, for example, form quite a tightly bound peer group and have considerable influence on each other, with key individuals performing a visionary role at times.

The dynamic towards change, however, does not take place in a vacuum. In the first place, it participates in the apparent convergence of economic thought at an international level. This is mediated through schemes such as scholarships for Third World bureaucrats to donor countries and the dominance of institutions like the World Bank and the IMF. More immediately, the range of options open to poorer states and NGOs is also limited through the power relations implicit in a donor–recipient relationship. Particular words push the buttons on the donors' cash register, as it were, and the till springs open. 'Credit' is the current favourite, even upstaging 'women' and 'the environment'. While at one level this may constitute a game for policy makers, it also has some reality in terms of shaping thinking on development and excluding alternative directions.

Last but not least, ordinary people may see more difference between themselves and the 'officers' than between representatives of the state and the NGOs. Thus a poor woman member of a village NGO savings and credit group explained to me that they would have to keep up regular repayments 'in as much as we have become bound by the government'. The notion in peasant societies of all officer-type outsiders as 'the government' is one that is well established in social science literature (cf. Bailey, 1971). This does not imply, of course, that 'the people', all have the same interests and agree on the points at which they would wish to limit outside interference. Intervention by different NGOs, and different branches of the state, may be welcomed by some groups and resisted by others. Overall, however, there are some interesting parallels in the ambivalent relationships of both the NGOs and the state with the rest of society. Both wish to occupy the moral high ground, to be above society and its factionalism; yet both wish to establish a strong constituency amongst 'the people' — who, for their part, receive them with both interest and suspicion.

THEORIZING STATE AND SOCIETY

This is not the place for a lengthy discussion of theories of the state. It is, however, important to sketch a very basic outline of the key analytical approaches to the liberal-democratic state, in order to ground the present discussion. One reason for this is that so-called theories of the state are in fact

theories about the relationship between state and society, which is very much the terrain of contemporary development debates.²

In liberal theory, the state appears as neutral arbiter, embodying the 'national interest' and mediating between contending interest groups. It is a 'good thing', ensuring law and order, a democratic political process, and external security, as well as fulfilling certain economic regulation and welfare functions. The New Right, by contrast, maintain a deep-seated distrust of the expansion of state bureaucracies which they see as very quickly becoming a threat to the public interest, encroaching on 'liberty' and the proper territory of 'civil society'. In practice they tend to be rather contradictory with respect to the state, advocating the extension of 'law and order' measures (though with parts perhaps under private franchise) yet seeking to minimize welfare provision and exercise only selective economic intervention.

At the other end of the political spectrum is Marx's well-known statement in the Communist Manifesto: 'The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie'. Later Marxists have modified this rather stark identification of the state with a particular class interest to introduce the notion of 'relative autonomy'. This recognizes that the state may at times act against 'bourgeois' interests in the short term, but ultimately serves to ensure the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole. Hamza Alavi's (1972) notion of the 'post-colonial state' proposed a variation of this thesis, with the idea that colonialism had resulted in an 'overdeveloped' state relative to a comparatively 'underdeveloped' local bourgeoisie. To limit one's analysis within national borders was thus to miss the main class interest served by post-colonial states: that of the metropolitan bourgeoisie.

The Marxist stress on continuities between state and society is taken up in rather different ways by Foucault and feminist writers. Foucault took as his problematic not the 'unity of state power' but the 'complex strategical situation in a particular society' (Foucault, 1979: 20). He sees power as coming from below, with the state not the source of power, but a particularly dense knot or coagulation of power relations, not something with coherence or intentionality, but erratic and disconnected. Feminist approaches to the state explore, in very diverse ways, how patriarchal interests are expressed within state structures. Analyses of this range across the political spectrum, from the liberal search for reform of the state, to a Marxist emphasis on the primacy of class, through 'dual systems' views in which capitalism and patriarchy may alternatively reinforce or contradict each other, to radical feminist assertions of the primacy of patriarchy (see, for example, Pringle and Watson, 1992; Savage and Witz, 1992).

Taking a rather different starting point, Joel Migdal (1988) analyses relations between 'strong societies and weak states'. State capabilities are

2. My thanks go to Jude Howell for help and advice on this section.

analysed as weak or strong according to their capacity to: *penetrate* society, *regulate* social relationships, *extract* resources, and *appropriate* or use resources in determined ways' (ibid: 4, emphasis in original). Society is analysed as 'a melange of social organizations' made up of heterogeneous groups organizing social control, meaning that social control overall is disbursed. The state is thus simply one set of institutions amongst others which seeks to exercise control, operating in an 'environment of conflict' (ibid: 28–9).

There are strong arguments for seeing Bangladesh as a weak state in a strong society. As Blair argued in 1985, successive governments since the 1960s have sought to 'penetrate' society through the re-organization of local administration, and this has continued until the present. The fact that these systems do not last beyond the end of the regime that initiated them certainly points to a weak institutionalization of the state, in the failure to establish any independence between the executive and administrative arms. Inability to regulate relationships is shown in the successive failure of measures to prohibit dowry, enforce minimum ages of marriage, effectively re-distribute *khas* (government) land or indeed provide an independent judicial system. The tax raising powers of the Bangladesh state are notoriously weak, and the 'leakage' of resources to purposes other than those for which they were intended seems almost more the rule than the exception. Rather than an expansive state endangering civil liberties, this suggests chronic encroachment *on the state* of 'civil society', such that the state is unable to guarantee the basic rights of any who do not have the power to seize them for themselves. To suggest in such circumstances that what Bangladesh needs for its development is a stronger society, seems to be rather extraordinary. It reminds me of an occasion at which a representative from a British business school said that they were holding a training course in Bangladesh on the spirit of enterprise. Whatever might be lacking in Bangladesh, entrepreneurial initiative had never struck me as being part of it.

At this point, it is clearly necessary to review briefly the concept of civil society. This is understood very variously, from a highly inclusive definition of all that is not state or market, as in the quotation from the World Bank above, to a much more restrictive view, as the arena of political association. Along with these substantive differences, the term is associated with very different moral values. In current development usage, civil society appears as an unqualified 'good', the guarantor of political democracy and equitable development. This clearly chimes with New Right orthodoxies on 'rolling back the state' and ironically also finds an echo in some early civil rights advocates (Keane, 1988). Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, Kant, and Fergusson saw citizens' associations as a means to guard against despotic government. Thomas Paine saw his own society in eighteenth century England as uncivilized because an overgrown state was infringing on citizens' rights. Hegel, however, took a much gloomier view of human nature, and thus human society, maintaining that the state was needed to intervene in the

competition of 'universal selfishness' and promote the common good. Gramsci famously questioned the notion of civil society as innocent of state power, seeing its institutions as fundamentally implicated in the construction of hegemony, and so dominion.

The present concern with civil society is positive in bringing attention to the potentially oppressive character of the state and placing importance on issues of human rights, citizenship and accountability. On the other hand, the worldwide rise of fundamentalist religious and ethno-nationalist groups cautions against too benign a view of civil society. New groups and associations may certainly be thrown up by the realignment of interests following the redistribution of resources away from the state. There is, however, no reason to assume that these will be progressive forces. On the contrary, as in the case of Ershad's fall from power, the retreat of the state may leave space for forces of reaction to assert their interests in resisting change to the status quo.

There is also reason to question whether the 'rolling back' of the state is the natural counterpart to the strengthening of civil society. Alex de Tocqueville considered that a 'democratic revolution' would lead to a broadening of demands for state provision in the areas of education, health and infrastructure. A strong state was required to ensure democracy, while at the same time posing a potential threat to civil liberties. To counteract this danger there was need for as wide as possible a distribution of power. This meant there should be clear divisions between legislative, executive and judicial functions of the state; mechanisms for citizen participation such as regular elections and jury service; and the growth of autonomous civil associations (Heywood, 1994).

THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTING THE POOR

What does all this mean for the Bangladesh context? The first issue is the relation of the NGOs to 'civil society'. In the Bangladesh literature, as more widely, there is a degree of slippage here. At times the rise of NGOs is itself held as an indication of a strengthening of civil society: NGOs stand as examples of the citizens' associations which will guarantee civil liberties and a broader distribution of basic rights. At other times, the NGOs are seen as conduits, 'honest brokers' between state and society, which will foster broader based social and political participation. This slippage is also evident in other areas of NGO discourse. It is quite common, for example, for NGO workers to use the terms 'target group' and 'beneficiaries' interchangeably, so eliding the difference between the poor at large and that relatively small section of them who are their own group members. It is, however, important to stress the distinction between these two views, and to consider each in turn.

To identify the rise of the NGOs too simply with the rise of 'civil society' is quite problematic in contemporary Bangladesh. It may be that this is an

accurate depiction of their roots in the heady early days after liberation. Clearly at that time there was a tremendous surge of 'public spirit', people wishing to 'do something' for the fledgling nation, and it was this that inspired the founders of many of the foremost NGOs of today. Taking a rather different perspective, it is likely that at least some of the NGO leaders would in different political conditions have gone into politics. With successive regimes dominated by the military, the NGO world offered a relatively open space in which people with a progressive vision could operate, and see concrete results which the formal politics of the time did not offer.

Twenty-five years on, however, the situation looks rather different. Some at least of the NGOs have grown into formidable institutions, very far from the citizens' associations of classical civil society theorists. Increased size has inevitably meant increased distance from the grassroots, and the early pioneering vision has been replaced by an ethic of efficiency and professionalism. The access to donor resources has itself been responsible for increased autonomy of the NGOs from 'civil society'. From villagers' perspectives, they can thus seem like a hybrid of state or market, so that they describe them either as new additions to the 'officer class', or — with more disillusionment — simply as a particularly lucrative type of business. Perhaps most crucial, however, is the issue of accountability, one of the chief areas of complaint against the NGOs from state and 'civil society', as well as external analysts (Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Hulme and Edwards, 1997). Whatever the limitations of representative democracy, the state is at least nominally accountable to its citizens through the process of elections, and even law. Businesses are more immediately accountable: their success depends on satisfying their customers, and more directly they have to report to their shareholders. Classically, the NGOs have been accountable to their donors, who have insisted on certain mechanisms of monitoring and evaluation, as well as accounting and auditing. However, one of the by-products of the push towards 'sustainability' — yet another icon in the pantheon of development virtues — is to temper this accountability to donors, whose primary logic was financial dependence.

As the largest Bangladeshi NGO, BRAC may serve to illustrate some of these issues. At present, BRAC generates 31 per cent of its income from its own business sources, and is seeking to consolidate this with the recovery of 'user costs' from its group members. Its size means that it is effectively independent of any single donor, and the scale of some donors' commitments to BRAC mean that a break-down in that relationship would be as much a disaster for the donor as it would be for BRAC itself. In addition to a network of offices with all the accompanying hardware throughout Bangladesh, BRAC has constructed a new multi-storey office on a prime site in Dhaka. Who owns BRAC? To whom is its executive of the 'great and the good' accountable? Nominally the NGOs are accountable to their members — the Grameen Bank, for example, states that its members are its 'stakeholders' — but it is not clear that there are any institutional

mechanisms to ensure that this nominal 'stakeholding' is transformed into an effective 'shareholding' which guarantees members a real say. Ironically, the technocratic logic that says there should be less duplication of work between competitor NGOs may reinforce this tendency. In Manikganj, a district close to Dhaka which is particularly densely inhabited by NGOs, village groups have exercised a certain consumer power, transferring their membership elsewhere when their present NGO did not respond to their demands.

The current push towards greater state-NGO collaboration is, on the face of it, unlikely to increase pressures for downward accountability as the state, rather than the people, would seem likely to become the key reference point. This places the claim that NGOs themselves represent civil society in further jeopardy. It also has implications for the second aspect of linkages between NGOs and society, the claim that they will foster increased popular participation in the body politic.

Again it is important to be aware of the local context, and the particular meaning to 'participation' which it gives. Observation of one of the largest Bangladeshi NGOs revealed a large, complex organization, held together by a powerful institutional culture and a series of supervisory checks and balances. In one way it was highly participative, with a formidable system of reporting, backed up by monthly meetings at all levels which serve as refresher training sessions, times to identify problems, and to monitor progress. The tenor of relationships was hierarchical, but benevolent: 'We don't blame our workers'. If things are not going according to plan, the response was to identify the problem, not rebuke the workers. With group members, too, correction took the form of explanation when people had not understood. Crucially, coming together on a regular basis also served to build group cohesion, reinforcing workers' identity as part of the 'company', which for the village level workers in particular was an important foundation for enhanced status outside.

Education and training was in a corporatist style, common to the school context, of structured question and collective answer sessions. While this gave no scope for group members' initiative, it was a form of participative process, at once validating as it reinforced both group cohesion and their NGO given learning. The downside here is that even in relatively informal contexts, there was a sense of an underlying script, from which people felt uneasy about deviating. The danger of this is that it simply overlays a level of formal 'knowledge' which leaves undisturbed (and undiscovered) other kinds of 'knowing', from which people continue to act. Where this relates (as in this case) to health beliefs, this both cuts off the NGO from important insights which the villagers have to offer, and may mean that group members continue with practices that are harmful to them. The style of participation practised therefore clearly excluded many alternative forms. In line with this, the model which workers expressed was of ignorant villagers who needed to be taught enlightened ways. Not surprisingly, the participation of group

members to programme development was limited, in practical terms, to their being a source of concerns which are filtered up the hierarchy.

In terms of organizational effectiveness, this style of participation has much to recommend it. It is, however, rather different from the self-propelled, 'active citizenship' envisaged by civil society rhetoric. The point here is not to condemn the NGO, but rather to draw attention to the fact that being good at one thing does not necessarily mean that it is good at something quite different. More critically, perhaps, the culture that it has developed for one purpose may actually inhibit it from doing something else.

This notwithstanding, there are some signs that broader political participation is taking place. *Pursuing Common Goals*, for instance, notes cases of Grameen Bank members standing successfully in local elections (World Bank, 1996). While this seems a positive move, it is important to point out that it is not unknown for poor people to be elected to local councils even without NGO backing. In the village where I did my original fieldwork,³ one of the poorest men had long enjoyed the honorific title of 'member', since his participation in the *Gram Sarkar*, the local government initiative of the 1960s. There are, however, some signs that the importance of this dimension of the NGOs' influence may have declined over time. In the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, concerns with 'conscientization' and a more openly oppositional political vision were the hallmark of the NGO sector in a way that programmes for savings and credit have now become. It is interesting to note that this opposition was not primarily against the state, but against the entrenched interests of 'civil society'. An influential document of that time, BRAC's (1978) *The Net*, was not primarily aimed at the state at all, but was an analysis of stranglehold on the poor of village level exploitations.

In its characterization of the NGO sector, the World Bank (1996: 2) draws a rather dubious distinction between: 'organizations concerned mainly with welfare (i.e. not challenging the status quo) and ... those concerned with social change and development (i.e. bringing about a positive change in the lives of the poor)'. It then rather disingenuously claims that the report 'deals principally with the latter' (ibid). Aside from the fact that it might well be claimed that increased welfare would constitute a positive change in the lives of the poor, the irony of this statement is that almost all the examples given of successful state-NGO collaboration are in fact in the welfare sector. There is a (welcome) claim that one aspect of state-NGO collaboration should be support of state agencies to NGO members who take on vested interest groups. The example of SAMATA's struggle to gain land for the landless under the Government's land reform programme is cited as an instance where this took place (ibid: 17). It has to be noted, however, that this was after years of very costly struggle, in which state officials had been less than supportive. None the less, this could serve as an example of a point where the

3. This fieldwork is presented in White (1992).

interests of state, NGOs and the poor genuinely converge: where the courage and stamina of the poor with the support of the NGO enable the state to fulfil its own core functions, to provide an independent judicial system, and implement its stated policies.

Other examples of 'the threat of a positive example' exist. After BRAC's Health and Population Division set up satellite clinics in the villages for primary health care and family planning, they found that this generated pressure on state health care workers to operate the clinics which had been only nominally held before. Overall, however, there are serious questions whether the primary outcome of increased state-NGO collaboration will be the upsurge of popular participation. If the earlier analysis of Bangladesh as a weak state encroached on by a strong society is right, it is difficult to see the state having the power, even if the government has the will, to act in a sustained way against the dominant interests. The scale of resources available through national collaborative projects will offer a powerful incentive for the NGOs to shy away from more controversial approaches and settle in the safe waters of welfare provision and infrastructural expansion.

Indeed, as Geof Wood (1994: 541) warns, the franchising out of state functions may erode mechanisms of accountability, rather than strengthen them. If the state is no longer even nominally responsible for guaranteeing a minimum level of welfare to its citizens, to whom should they complain when provision falls short? There are real dangers of conflict between the institutional interests of NGOs in expansion, which to some extent are predicated on the presumption of state 'failures'. Current moves by the NGOs to extend their work in health care offer an instance of this. It could be that if the NGOs succeed in providing a better standard of care in their clinics this will lead citizens to demand similar performance from state institutions. On the other hand, particularly if (and it is a big if) this becomes a self-financing intervention for the NGOs, there will clearly be institutional interests associated with retaining and increasing the number of clients they serve, rather than encouraging patients to seek treatment elsewhere. The danger of NGO expansion, even under franchise, is that it may lead to bypassing of the state, and the further erosion of state services. The fragmentation of provision that results may not necessarily afford the best long-term public interest, let alone meet the needs of the poor.

In conclusion, then, there needs to be much more critical analysis of bland statements of common interest between 'the state', 'civil society', and the NGOs, and in particular the unproblematic identification of these with the interests of the poor. Instead of the assumption that 'one ideology fits all' there needs to be careful exploration of the particular context, what works how and why, what is and is not realistic for whom. As Pearce (1997: 268ff) points out, behind the NGO debates there are conflicting models of how state-society relations should be structured. 'Civil society' concerns may represent a Trojan horse which gains entry for its progressive livery but carries quite a different cargo within. The danger is that what appears new,

democratic, and people-friendly is in fact the rehabilitation of an old and discredited agenda: the presentation of development as a techno-bureaucratic project realized by specialist agencies, rather than a highly contested terrain in which social, economic, personal and political interests are sought, compromised, denied and achieved. As van Schendel (1995: 224) argues, the urgent need, if development is to come, may not be more 'developmentalism' but *political* changes, with respect to taxation, social security, military spending, monetary policy, commodity pricing, and political accumulation. This raises an ironic echo with Marxist theories of the 'relative autonomy' of the state. While aspects of these 'new' moves to stress the importance of the people's voice may be welcome, there is clearly a danger that the overall outcome will be to ensure systemic reproduction: the entrenching of dominant interests through the de-politicizing of development and the representation of poverty — and the poor — as a technical problem.

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Sarah White teaches sociology in the School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK. She is at present writing a book with the working title *Gender, Race and the Social Production of Development*.