

Organising and Representing the Poor in a Clientelistic Democracy: The Decline of Radical NGOs in Bangladesh

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Abstract:- This paper examines the political role of radical development NGOs that emerged in Bangladesh to challenge the marginalization of subordinate groups and strengthen democratic processes. After briefly introducing the political context of Bangladesh and its NGOs, the paper identifies and defines a radical NGO sub-sector. It then reviews the activities of these organizations during the pre-1990 military government era and during the subsequent period of electoral democracy. Some important achievements are identified, but also many failures that have led to decline, leaving behind an NGO sector dominated by credit and service delivery organizations. The paper then explains this decline by focusing on three inter-related factors: (i) an *institutional setting* dominated by clientelistic structures that have undermined efforts to build horizontal alliances among excluded groups in civil society, or links between NGOs and political parties; (ii) a shift in *donor support* from mobilization to market-based service delivery agencies; and (iii) *internal structures* that have generated legitimacy and accountability problems by encouraging elite capture, co-option and personalised leadership in the radical sub-sector. It concludes with some brief reflections on the main implications of these failures.

Introduction: Bangladesh, NGOs and democratization

In 1990 Bangladesh began its transition from a decade and half of authoritarian military rule towards the construction of a democratic state with a parliamentary system based on regular elections. This shift coincided with the rise of a diverse set of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as development actors across the world after the end of Cold War. Given the high profile and strength of Bangladesh's NGO sector, it might have been expected that NGOs that took a political approach to development - through community level organising, empowerment and advocacy work - would have thrived during the efforts at democratic consolidation that have followed. Despite Bangladesh's international reputation for possessing a dynamic and diverse civil society, organizations in the country's "radical NGO sub-sector" that focused their work on grassroots mobilization and collective action instead went into

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decline. Today, most of these radical development organizations that were once leading players in the country's NGO scene have now either changed their orientation, or faded away altogether. How do we explain the relative failure of radical NGOs whose approach had once seemed promising to build on initial signs of success and make a significant contribution to the tasks of challenging the marginalization of subordinate groups and strengthening democratic processes? This paper analyses the rise and fall of this sub-sector against the backdrop of Bangladesh's changing political landscape and institutions, the role of international funding agencies, and the complex organizational issues that characterise civil society actors.

The paper begins with a discussion of the country's political context of and the main characteristics of its development NGO sector, before defining and characterizing the radical sub-sector. The next section offers a historical overview of organizations in this sub-sector during the military government period before 1990 and the electoral democracy era that has followed. It documents a set of important NGO achievements but also analyses a series of problems and striking failures that have led to the virtual elimination of this sub-sector, leaving an NGO landscape that is today instead dominated by credit and service delivery organizations. This decline is explained by three inter-related factors: (i) an *institutional setting* that remains characterized by clientelistic structures that have undermined efforts to build horizontal alliances among excluded groups in civil society, or links between NGOs and political parties; (ii) the shifting focus of international *donor support* that once favoured forms of social mobilization and people's self-development towards the more recent preoccupation with market-based service delivery agencies; and (iii) the *internal structures* of NGOs that have contributed to legitimacy and accountability problems by encouraging elite capture, co-option and personalised leadership. It concludes with some brief reflections on the main implications of these failures.

Political context: instability, clientelism and "illiberal democracy"

When Bangladesh broke from Pakistan in 1971, the new state took shape within a macro-level power structure that rested on a fragile alliance between three urban elite groups – the bureaucracy, the military and the political leadership. The result was a coalition that depended crucially on the support of the rural landowning elite. In exchange for political support, the government rewarded rural elites with a flow of development resources primarily in the form of agricultural and other subsidies, within a controlled process of agricultural modernization that soon came to be underwritten by a substantial influx of mainly Western foreign aid (Sobhan 1982).¹ The deal was that these elites would guarantee a level of political and social stability in what remained a predominantly peasant society based mainly on traditional rural institutions. This system connected with and reinforced community hierarchies in rural areas, where patron-client relations were the dominant principle of organization. An influential local power structure study undertaken in the late 1970s in villages entitled *The Net: The Power Structure in 10 Villages* (BRAC 1980) had shown vividly how government efforts to transfer development resources to subordinate groups - such as subsidised agricultural inputs, farmer loans and emergency relief goods - tended to be captured by village landowner elite clients. As a result these resources failed to reach the poor as planned, with a proportion invested by elites in their own rural livelihoods and the rest distributed as patronage goods within village

level vertical patron-client relationships. Local elites therefore served both as clients and as patrons within this system.

Clientelism, as Gay (1998) reminds us, is not a fixed system of exchange relationships or a simple barrier to change but is instead subject to constant processes of challenge and renegotiation, particularly by civil society actors. Before examining this system in the context of Bangladesh, we need to briefly contextualise our argument within the country's recent political history. During the early 1970s the country's first Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had initially set about building a parliamentary system that could bring the military and the bureaucracy under closer political control. However, little progress was made with institutionalising the basic principles of a liberal democratic state and instead Mujib maintained a personalised and centralised political system with a high level of "cronyism". This was resisted by elements within the army that soon reasserted power and in 1975 Mujib was assassinated in a coup.

Having taken back political control the military went on to rule Bangladesh for the rest of the 1970s and the 1980s through the regimes of Generals Ziaur Rahman (1976-81) and H.M. Ershad (1982-90). During this period the country's development regime began to shift firmly towards a market-oriented development model influenced by the Bretton Woods institutions. As Hossain (2017) writes, the international donors had for some years been pressing the government for deregulation and privatization, and the new military government proved receptive and ready to compromise. Zia's 1975 Revised Industrial Policy made a decisive break with Mujib's state-led development approach, and the slow process of economic liberalization was continued under Ershad's 1982 New Industrial Policy. The military regimes advised by the Bretton Woods institutions therefore initiated the reorientation of the country's policy regime towards the market-based development path that would later gather pace during the post-Cold War period (Khatun 2016). Both these unelected leaders were also desperate to build a façade of legitimacy that could help them to sustain their regimes. They attempted to extend the relationship with rural elites and build limited forms of local democracy through sub-district level government decentralization programmes with local elections, but with relatively little success (Lewis 2011a).

Political parties operated relatively freely during the military era, but the political environment was such that democratic competition was limited and unlikely to produce viable strategies for gaining political power. By the 1980s two main opposition parties, the Awami League (AL), which had been Mujib's party and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP, established by General Zia and now headed by his widow Khaleda Zia) had helped construct and lead a broad-based national movement that mobilized popular opposition to Ershad's military rule through a series of demonstrations, strikes and rallies. Both political parties were also each beginning to cultivate a pyramidal system of pervasive patron-client relationships across the country for themselves and their allies, through which party supporters could be enlisted and rewarded. This began changing the nature of clientelism from a system that aimed to create stability to one that could now also be used to underpin a new patronage-based electoral politics in a post-military setting.

The popular movement eventually brought down General Ershad's regime in 1990 through a "people power" revolution (assisted by a change of allegiance by the main international donors from the military to a civil administration) and a new

parliamentary system was put in place. This was to be based on regular elections held every five years, conducted under a three-month neutral “caretaker government” arrangement headed by a respected non-party figurehead. Relatively free and fair elections were duly held in 1991, contested by two main political alliances led by the AL and the BNP respectively. It was the latter that formed the first elected government under this new parliamentary system. However, the patronage structures built by the political parties would now form the basis for the creation of two political party blocs that began competing for political power under the new electoral system that severely limited the emergence of more than a façade of democracy.

Beginning with the BNP administration that was elected in 1991 both party blocs would go on to alternate in winning an election and forming a government, with the exception of a failed election in February 1996 (initially boycotted by the AL and then held successfully in July) and the brief period of the “military-backed caretaker government” in 2006-7. However, despite national elections that were widely considered to have been relatively free and fair (particularly those that were held in 1991 and 1996, with less agreement in 2001) neither party chose to behave like a democratic opposition after losing an election. During what Riaz (2015, p.4) terms the era of “hope and despair”, following each election the losing party would instead refuse to take up its seats in parliament, preferring to resort to extra-parliamentary action in the form of strike, protests and political violence to further its political goals. What ensued was a turbulent cycle of “illiberal democracy” based on each party promising and then attempting to deliver resources to supporters, but which nevertheless offered a form of stability based on what has been described as a system of “rotating plunder” (Khan 2006).

The period of the military-backed caretaker government created a shift. When elections were finally held in late 2008 the victorious AL resolved to do away with the caretaker government system on the grounds that it was no longer needed to ensure fair elections, and replace it with an Election Commission. Events entered a new phase in 2013 when under this new system the AL Awami League became the first party to be re-elected for a second consecutive term. However, the opposition BNP and its allies had refused to take part in the election.²

Civil society roles in representing and organising the poor

Pluralistic democracy depends on the existence of multiple centres of organised power within a “civil society” that can enable a range of competing societal interests to influence government through formal and informal processes, in addition to formal political parties. Certain types of NGOs – along with chambers of commerce, trade unions, consumer groups and the like – are forms of organised interests that play political roles not by running directly for office or joining government, but by deploying resources such as money, support and status in order to exert political influence on behalf of members and supporters (Finer 1958).³

The effort by civil society groups to capture or influence power depends on a *collective* ability to build and sustain the political parties, pressure groups, and media outlets that are needed to win elections and participate in day to day political negotiations (Faguet, 2012; Key, 1964). Economic power gives capitalist elites a structural advantage over subordinated classes everywhere, but popular movements

and civic organizations have under some conditions also been able to play significant roles in *mobilising* the poor. With appropriate support from non-state actors the poor can begin to free themselves from direct dependence on state or dominant economic elites - but only if they can access assets, build skills, and rely on the enforcement of proper rules. For NGOs to undertake effective social mobilisation work, success will depend both on their capacity to build appropriate organizational structures and to manage risk in the wider institutional context within which they operate.

It also depends on the effectiveness of civil society groups to make claims to *represent* the poor in order to influence policy. Democratisation may offer poor people the formal right to access political markets, but their ability to exercise real political agency has always been compromised by forms of economic and social dependence, and by the challenges of building and sustaining autonomous representative organizations in civil society. While elections should enable poor majorities to make their rulers adopt redistributive policies, they may simply produce competition between political parties and elite interest groups who attempt to capture power or influence the way it is exercised. Indeed, competitive elections have often intensified adversarial conflicts and/or been manipulated and subverted by dominant elites (Geddes, 1994; Brett, 2014). If both poor and rich are each able to create strong autonomous civil society organizations then power may simply be dispersed across society, “without any one force wielding excessive authority” (Truman, 1951, cited in Held, 1987: 191). The activities of such groups turn democratic processes into “the contingent outcome of interactions among a number of claims and counterclaims” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, p.268).

Using a disaggregated approach to the analysis of democratic consolidation Schmitter (1992, p.160) argues that competition between different interest groups can produce complex transitional political regimes that are neither fully democratic nor authoritarian, since they combine both democratic and non-democratic traits. He argues that rather than understanding the challenge of democratic consolidation as the construction and identification of a single “political regime” it makes more sense to conceptualise a composite based on a fluid, shifting set of “partial regimes”, each of which distinctively organised around different sites for the representation of various social groups. Partial regimes are diverse institutions that link citizens to public authorities, each following different rules and principles - from hierarchy and collective bargaining to personal networks and patron-clientelism. Within partial regimes these groups try to resolve conflicts and issues, competing and coalescing in ways that depend on the levels of resources they can deploy in the effort to influence the political process via different forms of representation including elections, advocacy pressure and personal networks. In Bangladesh, the growth of “illiberal democracy” in the post-military era was in part a consequence of an intensification of the partial regime of “clientelism” across society institutions at different levels, from political parties to local government and village level elites. Within civil society, political parties have become structures for distributing patronage resources, trade unions have become vehicles for political party interests, and the rural poor have pursued patronage links with local elites over efforts to build horizontal ties of social solidarity and political representation.

Development NGOs and the radical sub-sector in Bangladesh

The NGO sector in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has an extensive and diverse non-governmental organization (NGO) sector that has long been active in a variety of areas and activities, and has been widely documented. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of non-state actors operate in the country, and up to 27% of the population use their services or participate in their activities, more than twice the South Asian average.⁴ The achievements of its best-known organizations - such as the Grameen Bank and BRAC - have been both celebrated and critiqued both locally and internationally (Smillie, 2009; Karim 2010). The unusually high profile of the country's NGO sector has been variously attributed to Bengal's rich traditions of voluntarism and philanthropy; to local activism generated by the political and humanitarian crises that occurred around the period Bangladesh's creation in 1971, including the November 1970 cyclone disaster, the war of liberation from Pakistan, and the devastating 1974 famine; and to donor support that was initially for relief and reconstruction and later associated with a commitment to democratisation, "good governance", privatisation and "civil society" (Lewis 2011a).

The NGO sector evolved with two main tendencies from the 1970s onwards. The majority of NGOs emerged as humanitarian and developmental organizations that were primarily focused on service delivery activities that included emergency response, health care, education, agricultural inputs, basic infrastructure provision, family planning, employment skills training, and savings and loans. There were also some organizations whose initial emphasis on relief and services began to evolve into approaches that focused on forms of political intervention including local organizing, awareness building around political rights, and grassroots mobilization which drew on both local and international traditions of organising and advocacy that aimed not only to meet needs but also to challenge the structural causes of poverty.⁵ Those who led and worked in these organizations were often drawn from the elites but were otherwise diverse, motivated by different social and political values including local or international traditions of philanthropy, and left-wing political ideologies drawn from student activism. The focus of this paper is this sub-group of NGOs, which I call the radical NGO sub-sector.

The radical NGO sub-sector

The radical NGO sub-sector in Bangladesh was composed of organizations with a political take on grassroots development work, along with campaigning agendas that aimed to influence wider structures and policy. Such NGOs can be defined as political organizations – as opposed to development NGOs that primarily focus on social welfare or service delivery - because their approach to development is driven by "a basic lack of faith in other classes and their institutions to work for the poor in a sustainable way, i.e. in a manner that changes permanently the structure of socio-economic and political relations through which poverty is reproduced", and by "a distrust of anything less than this objective as essentially charity and relief" (Wood 1993, p.1).

My use of the category of a radical NGO “sub-sector” is as a loose rather than a tightly specified category, but one that makes it possible for us to identify and analyse a distinctive radical tendency found within some of Bangladesh’s leading development NGOs. Since there are diverse NGOs working on issues beyond development such as human rights or environmental issues some might argue that my conceptualization of the radical sub-sector is too narrow. However, my focus here is on the radical *development* NGOs that operated in the countryside rather than urban campaigning NGOs - such as *Ain O Salish Kendra* founded in 1986 and focusing on human rights and legal aid - though these can also be viewed as important radical non-state actors operating within Bangladesh’s broader civil society.

The main NGOs in the sub-sector

As we have seen, a range of development NGO organizations engaged in various forms and combinations of service delivery, advocacy and grassroots organising work took shape during the early years of Bangladesh’s independence. What made the radical sub-sector distinctive were activists who made a specific commitment to forms of social and political mobilization that were directed at challenging the structural causes of poverty and exclusion, and to what has been termed “people’s self-development” (Rahman 1993). The main organizations are set out in Table 1. The evolution of this sub-sector and the main organizational players found within it can be briefly summarised as follows.

The first recognisable NGO needs to be considered as one of the earliest members of the radical sub-sector, even though it is atypical, is *Gonoshyastha Kendra* (GK) – the People’s Health Centre. This was established in 1972 by Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury, a medic and left-wing community activist who had fought in the war against Pakistan and who was now working with other radical health activists to shape the new country through the creation of a civil society organization. By the end of the 1980s GK had gained a global reputation for its “barefoot doctors” paramedic health worker programme, its public health education campaigning, the establishment of its own factory to produce a range of essential drugs locally, and a well-publicised struggle to curb the import of non-essential drugs that remained bitterly contested by the international pharmaceutical companies (Chowdhury 1995). Although different from the other grassroots development NGOs in the sub-sector in taking a sectoral approach, GK forms part of the sub-sector because it was a grassroots organization and one explicitly concerned with challenging the power of both local and international political and economic interest groups and as a result encountered political opposition and suffered its leader has political repression.

Proshika is perhaps the best known of the development NGOs that characterise the rest of the sub-sector, founded by two young middle class student development workers, Qazi Faruque Ahmed and Rahat Uddin Ahmed. R.U. Ahmed had been vice president of his college student union, a member of the Biplobi Chattra Union, the student wing of the Workers Party, and after a spell at BRAC was now working for the CUSO Training Centre. Q.F. Ahmed had gained a Masters degree in chemistry, had taken the civil service exams but while waiting for the results was now working with CUSO as a project officer. He had taken leave to work with Oxfam providing relief during the 1974 famine, and had become further radicalised – as we

will see below- by the experience of encountering mass starvation as an outcome of the structural causes of poverty.

Table 1: Main NGOs of the radical sub-sector

Name	Founding Date*	Main leader	Focus
<i>Gonoshyastha Kendra (GK)</i>	1972	Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury	Radical health activism, rural paramedic services, local essential drug production, advocacy.
<i>Proshika MUK</i>	1976	Q.F. Ahmed	Group formation, social mobilization, popular education, legal aid, credit and services.
<i>Saptagram</i>	1976	Rokeya Rahman Kabeer	Group formation, popular education, legal training for building a social movement against gender injustice that prioritised.
<i>Samata Samaj Samity</i>	1976	Abdul Kader	Mobilizing the rural poor to access rights to unoccupied <i>khas</i> land, and lobbying government to better meet their needs.
<i>Association for Social Advancement (ASA)</i>	1978	Shafiq Choudhury	Initially established as a social activist organization, but moved to credit service delivery using Grameen model.
<i>Nijera Kori (NK)</i>	1980	Khushi Kabir	Initially established with a welfare focus, but shifted to approach aimed at transforming underlying structures of inequality, injustice and exclusion based on indivisible rights.
<i>Comilla Proshika</i>	1981	R.U. Ahmed	Group formation, social mobilization, and service delivery.
<i>Gonoshahajjo Sangstha (GSS)</i>	1983	Mahmood Hasan	Social mobilization and popular education to empower the poor to establish class-based organizations that could compete for political power.

*The date given here is the formal establishment of the NGO, not the earlier initial group formation that subsequently evolved into the formal NGO.

Formally inaugurated in 1976 as an NGO Proshika began initially as a Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) project under the Ministry of Agriculture. It combined service delivery work with educating, organising and mobilising of groups of landless rural men and women in pursuit of their rights, following a local variant of the Freirean approach to “conscientization”. Its name combined three Bengali words, *proshikkhan* (training), *shikkha* (education) and *kaj* (action). Q.F. Ahmed later reflected on the formative experience of being involved in local level relief work during the 1974 famine in which he experienced the exploitation of the poor by the rural power structure at first hand when he saw wealthy landowners withholding food to landless peasants:

We confronted them with hundreds of hungry people. They had allowed people to starve when the go-downs were full. This made me realise that

organization was the most important thing to fight the structure of privilege, its power of life or death over people (Seabrook 2001, p.11)

Proshika diversified its funding to include Swedish and Canadian government's bilateral donors grew into one of the largest of the country's NGOs.

Differences of approach between the two founders of Proshika were gradually becoming apparent as the organization grew. In 1981 Proshika split into two groups, ostensibly because the two founders were disagreeing over whether a credit and savings strategy should be deployed alongside empowerment and mobilization work (Smillie and Hailey 2001, p.98). The result was the creation of two entirely separate organizations - Proshika MUK (or "Dhaka Proshika") led by Q.F. Ahmed and "Comilla Proshika" led by Rahat – which agreed to operate in different areas of the country, with CP in the South and east and DP everywhere else (Smillie and Hailey 2001). The split was reasonably amicable, and the precise differences of approach were never particularly clear and may have had more to do with leadership style than ideology.

The origins of Samata Samaj Samity (usually just known as Samata) go back to 1976, but it became a formal NGO in 1983. It was initially established as a local youth association that was concerned with social work activities. Its staff gradually became more interested in political and social mobilization approaches, and the NGO began to focus on problems of landlessness, helping the poor access rights to unoccupied *khas* agricultural land, and persuading the government to better meet people's needs and rights in its working areas (Devine 2002).⁶ It was initially established in the North west of the country as a youth club in Jaybash village that was called Jaybash Jubok Samity (JJS). The local youth who founded the group were motivated "a desire to compete with the privileged youth of Kurigram", the local town, who had privileged access to local resources such as the playing field, and the group also began undertaking small scale local relief and welfare activities.

By 1978 this had morphed into a development group named Samata Samaj Kallayan Samity, led by Abdul Kader, a local schoolteacher. This was a local grassroots development organization that began to work towards transformation of Jaybash into a model village based on building local cooperation and modernising agriculture. However, in the attempt to link with the government's rural cooperative programme the group soon realised that the resources available were captured by local elites. This experience, alongside contact with some Oxfam workers, helped shape a more radical activist emphasis on redistribution and the need to challenge local elites. In 1983 it became a formal registered NGO as Samata – led by Kader - and over time it developed an approach to organise and settle landless people on *khas* land, along with provision of training credit and savings. For example 1400 landless households were settled on land in Pabna district in 1997 (IPS 1997, Devine 2000).

Women's rights were critical to the founding ideologies and approaches of several organizations in the sub-sector. For example, Saptagram was established in to empower "rural women through a social movement against gender injustice that prioritised, but was not limited to landless women". It focused on group formation, popular education and legal training to strengthen women's "capacity to analyse, question and act on the structures of gender injustice in their lives" (Kabeer and Huq

2010, p.81). Saptagram was set up in Faridpur in 1976 as an organization run by and for women, which was unique for the time. A feminist and class perspective informed its founding principles and it aimed to organise women, provide legal training to promote action on gender injustice (as well as savings activities to improve economic security). Charismatic and able to infuse the organization with power to challenge power holders in government and in the local community this proved double-edged such that "the failure to build a second line of leadership to take over the directorship was widely attributed to the force of her personality" (p.82). Nijera Kori (NK) – which means “we do it ourselves” – also began as a welfare-orientated women’s NGO during the early 1970s, but by 1980 had evolved into a political organization of “men and women working with both men and women”. Its aim is to transform underlying structures of inequality, injustice and exclusion and asserts the indivisibility of economic, social and political rights (Kabeer, 2003, p. 9).

Finally, GSS was established in 1983 by activists who had been shaped by Bengali nationalism and concern for human rights of poor. The early focus by its founders was to build relationships with the rural poor men using adult literacy classes, and later for women. Gender and class issues were raised through the use of specialised content, often using night schools. There was a focus on the causes of poverty, an analysis within local and international structures, and a critique of top down state policy and elites, etc. (Wood 1993). GSS also had a charismatic leader in the form of Marxist activist Mahmood Hasan who aimed to build an organization that could support and empower the poor to establish class-based organizations that could eventually compete for political power. Like some other radical development NGOs (such as NK) it viewed micro-credit organizations negatively as offering an individualistic approach to social change that only served to undermine solidaristic horizontal forms of grassroots social mobilization (Hashemi 1995).

Operating primarily in rural areas in village settings, many of these organizations promoted a “social mobilization” approach that was influenced not just by left politics and peasant struggle but also by the radical educational ideas of Paolo Freire and Ivan Illich.⁷ These ideas centred on processes of “self-reflected learning” rather than teaching (Rahman 1993, p.5) and the need to re-conquer knowledge and build pro-poor organization to overcome the “structural ignorance” that stopped assetless people from acquiring any knowledge of their rights (Nebelung 1991). The aim was to generate an interactive process of reflection and action between peasants and NGO workers to understand and transform the status quo. Q.F. Ahmed (1992: vi) executive director of Proshika, explained this as:

a process of heightening their consciousness about the forces of underdevelopment, developing their material autonomy, and increasing their participation so that they assume more control of their life and livelihood.

Such ideas complemented other influential “alternative development” approaches that were emerging at the time, including gender activism and women’s rights, participatory action and reflection (PAR), participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and rights-based development (Lewis 2014).

Another key motivation among NGO activist leaders in the sub-sector was the strategic adoption of the NGO form rather than that of other kinds of civic organizations, which they believed would enable them to escape the limits imposed on open political competition by the military regime. They believed that direct involvement in competitive party politics would not promote poverty-focused social change, because mainstream parties had been compromised both by their links to the military and increasingly by their reliance on vertically integrated patronage systems for their operation. They hoped to generate a non-party, but politically-engaged, development practice that would strengthen grassroots organizations, build bottom-up demand for better services and political inclusion as well as the formation of social and political, or class, consciousness. As Hashemi and Hasan (1999, p.130) put it, these activists

upheld the vision of the political left, but with the necessary caveat that the leftist organizational form was inadequate, and that left-wing political parties were unable to deliver ... [and] alienated from the everyday problems of the poor.

This led to the adoption of three inter-related approaches - grassroots mobilization, where NGOs formed and worked with village level groups of mainly landless men and women⁸; followed by a bridging approach linking such groups into wider networks and federations in order to facilitate coordinated action within civil society; and “policy advocacy” where the NGO itself tried to influence government policies in favour of the poor. For example, Proshika MUK’s work included mobilising landless groups of men and women to secure contested rights over land, raising awareness to resist the practice of dowry, and providing support to labourers to manage collective negotiations for fairer pay for contract labour (Kramsjo and Wood, 1992).

The sub-sector was a diverse group, and contained organizations that over time changed their approaches dramatically. For example, the Association for Social Advancement (ASA) had initially been set up in 1978 with a radical social activist focus but by the late 1980s was on a trajectory that led it away from the sub-sector towards the mainstream. Finding limited success with its social mobilisation work it began a tilt towards microfinance activities centred on an approach to lending that its leadership began adapting from the Grameen Bank’s model. This organizational journey was primarily driven by the NGO’s own organizational imperatives rather than by the donors (Rutherford 2009). Nevertheless, most of the mainstream international development donors were more comfortable with supporting development NGOs focused on service delivery than those in the radical sub-sector.

In the next section we consider the shifting fortunes of these organizations in the context of Bangladesh’s changing politics.

The record of the radical NGO sub-sector

Experiences during the military period

The radical sub-sector came into existence during the military government period, which was an era characterised by uneasy coexistence between government and

NGOs. By the end of the 1980s the government had created an NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB) to control flows of foreign funding to NGOs and coordinate and control their activities. Relations with government veered between periods of partnership, tension and conflict. However, there were periods of relatively stable collaboration in service delivery and Bangladesh's NGO sector expanded and became more established. Blair (2001) commented that NGOs generally "concentrated on their developmental work rather than outright political agendas, partly owing to what was surely a well-founded fear (particularly during the Ershad years) that political involvement would bring repression from the regime" (p.187). The mobilization approach was discouraged through the political efforts of the Ziaur Rahman and H.M. Ershad regimes, and by the policies of the mainstream international donors who generally favoured economic growth, infrastructure support and agricultural modernization over social justice agendas ([Kabeer 2003](#)).

The efforts of citizens to build organizations to contribute to development work, and the availability of resources from international donors were key drivers of NGO emergence during the 1970s and 1980s. But NGOs – even those of the radical sub-sector - also grew during this era in part because the military hoped to use them to legitimise itself ([Wood 2009](#)), and assist in efforts to bypass excluded elites and limit the growth of local-level political opposition. Both Ershad and Ziaur Rahman (his predecessor) had made efforts to create a transition from military regime to more legitimate civilian governments, and both created new political parties that they hoped would further this aim. Even radical NGOs were in some cases tolerated during the military period helped by personal networks among reform-minded elites like the close friendship between the head of a local NGO and the Ministry of Land chief, and by the government's occasional attempts to build support by attempting high profile "populist" reforms.

Organizations such as Proshika continued to pursue radical grassroots approaches despite the unpredictability of government attitudes to the development NGOs (Wood and Kramsjö 1992). Samata too was beginning to have some success with its social mobilization approach, concentrating on addressing landlessness among the rural poor by organizing around the need to secure the rights to local unoccupied agricultural *khas* land. The government had in theory allocated this land to local landless farmers, but it was frequently illegally occupied by local elites who undermined attempts to develop horizontal forms of collective resistance by providing workers with jobs on this land in return for political loyalty that strengthened patron-client relationships. During local elections held under military rule in 1985 Samata, which had 12,000 members at the time and was seen as a potential source of votes by political candidates, refused to endorse the ruling party candidate who had "won" the election and as a result was subjected to serious reprisals ([Devine 2006](#)).

By the end of the 1980s evidence was leading some to question the idea that NGO mobilisation strategies were achieving their political goals at the grassroots level. It was difficult for radical NGOs to build and sustain horizontal ties within rural societies that were primarily vertically structured, and when groups were successfully created, it was even more difficult to deal with the violent repercussions that sometimes followed from confrontation with the local power structure. For example, during the late 1980s in Tangail District, Proshika MUK's efforts to organise and mobilise marginalised rural women in forest dwelling communities in order to

challenge corrupt government Forest Department officials and their local intermediaries in order to gain access to local forest resources resulted only in confrontation. The local power structure easily asserted itself over these local claims and this led Proshika to reflect and reconsider its strategy that evolved eventually into a “social forestry” approach that was less confrontational, based around protection of the forest against illegal felling in collaboration with officials (Khan et al. 1993).

The continuing strength of rural elites and their control of local resources gave a resilience to existing structures and institutions that limited the ability of the mobilization approach to challenge “the net” and achieve the ambitious empowerment agenda that motivated its founders (Hashemi 1990). As Nebelung (1987, p.133) wrote from a field study of social mobilization NGOs undertaken during the mid-1980s in northern Bangladesh radical NGO impacts tended to be piecemeal and easily contested: “From time to time one may find holes in it; scattered holes that can at present be easily mended because they do not jeopardise the very existence and unity of the net”. When it came to conscientization impacts, Hashemi (1990) reported that while peoples’ awareness had often been increased through NGO efforts around health and nutrition issues, there was little evidence that NGOs were succeeding in engaging assetless people in discussions about the roots of poverty and inequality.

While such NGOs had initially encouraged their grassroots groups to confront and challenge local vested interests, S.A. Khan (1989) observed that some were now gradually moving towards forms of “reformist activism” that no longer centred on structural change. Instead there was emphasis on lobbying for stronger rights to allocated resources and services:

It has been extremely difficult to organise landless groups and to encourage them to maintain their class solidarity, and there are no signs of spontaneous reproduction of such groups (Khan, 1989, p.55)

Such experiences led some organizations to make drastic reassessments of their approach. For example as mentioned earlier the initially radical NGO ASA made an abrupt break with mobilization and collective action approaches in 1991 after “local staff reported that members find financial and employment problems much more pressing than political ones, and constantly ask for loans” (Rutherford 2009, p.74). As a consequence, Rutherford reports – perhaps somewhat dismissively - that ASA “stopped pretending to be a ‘people’s organization’ and settled down as a conventional NGO” (p.77). Today ASA is regarded as one of the world’s leading microfinance institutions.

Perhaps surprisingly, there were nevertheless some radical NGO advocacy successes in terms of representing the poor and influencing government policy at the centre. This arose from forms of “top down” NGO advocacy and reformist elite networking rather than social mobilisation. For example General Ershad’s 1987 Land Reform Action Programme (LRAP) created a mechanism for NGOs to be represented in a *khas* land reform policy coalition. This made it possible for landless farmers to take possession of land allocated to them by government and “retain ownership and use of that same land” (Devine 2002, p.406):

Having assumed power in 1981, Ershad spent the best part of his time desperately trying to win legitimacy and credibility for his regime both at home and abroad. The [Land Reform Action Programme] initiative was one of the many attempts engineered by Ershad to win popular support. For NGOs therefore, the opportunity to participate in the [Land Reform Cell] was embedded in very specific conditions of co-optation.

A second example was GK's work in the health sector, where it drew on academics and activists on an advisory committee to persuade the military government to initiate a National Drugs Policy. This was progressive in that it emphasised generics, regulated imports, eliminated unnecessary combinations of drugs, and restricted pharmaceutical advertising. The policy was briefly celebrated internationally as an example for the rest of the developing world. However, political pressure from hostile national and international interest groups first diluted then side-lined the policy (Chowdhury 1995). Finally, a third case was when Nijera Kori and other groups played a leading role in resisting the donor-driven top-down Flood Action Plan infrastructure initiative that had been launched in 1988. This technocratic mega-project was widely opposed on technical, political, social and environmental grounds by many non-governmental groups. The project was abandoned during the early 1990s following action from a broad coalition of local activists, national civil society organizations and international groups (Blair 2001; Kabeer 2003).

However, personalised NGO strategies for policy advocacy and engagement with government also carried significant risks. GK's leader took up an advisory position within the Ershad military government in an effort to further the essential drugs strategy, when the mass movement for democracy was at its height. He suffered reputational costs when he was roundly criticised by former colleagues in the NGO community, especially those in the radical sub-sector. This was a sign of things to come. Despite operating in a democratic environment that might have been expected to favour civil society activism there was more tension during the 1990s between NGOs and government than there had been in the 1980s.

From 1987 onwards, Ershad's government increasingly began to face broad-based unrest around the country. Political parties, student groups, public sector employees and professional associations grew into a broad-based popular opposition movement (*gono andolan*) to military rule. Military rule in Bangladesh was peacefully overthrown in 1990 when the movement for democracy brought the authoritarian government of General H.M. Ershad to an end and replaced it with a parliamentary system with regular elections. During these events the development NGO community had largely remained in the background without playing a major role in the movement, and their position received criticism from some quarters. Only shortly before Ershad's regime fell in December 1990 did some of the development NGOs join, briefly opening up a broader political civil society alliance.

Experiences during the electoral democracy period

New elections were held in 1991 under a neutral "caretaker government" arrangement, and Bangladesh entered what many people hoped would be a period of democratic renewal. It began well with relatively free and fair elections that produced a BNP government, followed by elections in 1996 that led to a government being

formed by the opposition Awami League. What Sobhan (2004) terms a “bipolar” political system had become established which ensured that both main political parties were able to secure power after general elections held every five years, at least up until 2007, “ensuring both competition as well as unpredictability in the outcome of the next election (p.4102).

However, as we have seen, this was a system that rested on political parties investing in patron-client relationships that produced the instability and violence that led Bangladesh’s political system to be termed an “illiberal democracy”. This has endured as a duopolistic system that carries a severe cost in terms of the two main parties’ insensitivity to smaller political parties and to accountability to voters. It is one “that has eroded pluralism as well as challenge within the political system which has contributed to the emergence of structural weakness within the two parties as well as reduced the choices available to the electorate” (p.4103). Each successive elected government has – in the words of Quadir (2015) “concentrated on consolidating their power base by defying the procedural norms of liberal democracy” (p.7). What might have been expected to be a positive environment for the radical NGO sub-sector to take forward a civil society based project for grassroots democratization and social justice turned into a far more complex and difficult set of challenges.

During the 1990s use was made of the recently created NGOAB to manage the NGO sector politically, by encouraging apolitical development activities and punishing NGOs that had displayed signs of supporting the opposition or alternative policies. In 1992, for example, the NGOAB field a report to the Prime Minister asserting that NGO activities were “anti-state and dangerous” and attempted to cancel the operating license of the NGO umbrella organization in the country (Hashemi 1995, p.104). This was an uneasy period for the radical NGO sub-sector, as the neo-liberal development paradigm gained ground and mainstream NGO microcredit and service delivery work became the predominant approach supported by both government and donors (Muhammad, 2015).

The post-military and post-Cold War era also created a more complex international aid environment that impacted upon the NGO community. On the one hand, the “new policy agenda” (Edwards and Hulme 1992) that was now being pursued by the mainstream donor community claimed to place civil society and democratization at its centre, alongside economic liberalization, seeking “to define NGOs through a lens of democratic governance with a neoliberal market philosophy” (Mannan, 2015, p.7). This served to “depoliticise” development with reforms that aimed to reduce the role of the state, and strengthen the role of autonomous for-profit and civic organizations as service-delivery agencies. It led to increased financial support for development NGOs through the creation of new forms of government “contracting” arrangements, often funded extensively by donors and in sectors such as family planning services and agriculture. This contributed further to the marginalisation of political grassroots organising by NGOs. Paradoxically, electoral competition also increased the potential political influence of some radical NGOs, who became more involved in voter education, rights awareness work and even supporting and preparing local candidates from among marginalised groups to stand in local elections (such as GSS in 1992, see below).

There was also in some quarters lingering suspicion of NGOs among the new political leadership who believed that some civil society leaders had become too close to the earlier military government (Hashemi 1995). They set about “reassessing” NGO relations guided by a new mainstream policy discourse that involved terms like government-NGO “complementarity”, and “collaboration”. This was primarily motivated by bureaucratic imperatives and the need to maintain political control. For government and for donors the vogue for NGO “partnership” mainly took the form of sub-contracting relationships in service delivery in keeping with the neoliberal vision of functional division of labour between government and NGOs, rather than one embodying creative synergy. For example, the government’s Fifth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) enshrined the idea of NGO-government collaboration in a range of sectors, including health, nutrition and family planning. The implementation of the Bangladesh Integrated Nutrition Project (which was supported by World Bank and UNICEF) was typical of this new approach to formal partnership between the government and NGOs. This produced a more conventional accommodation – or perhaps a “reluctant partnership” (Farrington and Bebbington 1993) – between NGOs and government that was to some extent at least intended to demobilise the activities of the radical sub-sector.

The return to democracy should have ushered in a new golden age for NGO political activity, particularly since it resonated with this new international post Cold War policy agenda that emphasised “good governance” and “civil society”. However, this was not to be the case. For example, while had GSS begun positioning itself at the forefront of the radical sub-sector and was eager to embrace opportunities to engage with democratization from below, its strategy did not go according to plan. In 1992, around 400 GSS members ran for posts in local sub-district council elections and over 250 were elected (Fernando 2011). However, many were immediately subject to harassment. For example, GSS supported members drawn from the poorest landless class in the local sub-district council elections in five areas of the Northern district of Nilphamari. GSS candidates stood on an independent “organizations of the poor” ticket, rather than for a political party (Hashemi 1995). The elections were staggered over several days. The NGO candidates won seats in the first of these elections, but these gains produced an immediate backlash when local elites hired violent thugs to attack the NGO’s members and its property. The government failed to defend them and even instructed the police to file charges against some of the NGO members and staff.

Challenging the power structure, as research findings of *The Net* (1980) had predicted, therefore posed significant problems for radical NGOs. Elites continued to tolerate NGOs only up to the point that they became involved in formal political processes and party politics. Such incidents as Nilphamari persuaded some of the NGOs in the radical sub-sector to “sanitise their activities (if not their rhetoric)” (p.107) by concentrating more fully on the delivery of economic assistance. GSS continued to operate and had received more than US \$25m from international donors between 1995 and 1997. However, a state investigation claimed to have found evidence of financial irregularities and misuse of donor funds, though this was never completely substantiated. The government took over the organization after complaints from its employees were made to the NGO Affairs Bureau, and it lost its status as a major NGO player and began a slow decline.

As the profile of development NGOs increased, this period also saw growing criticism of NGOs in the local media. These criticisms centred on allegations of wastefulness, a perception of lavish donor-funded lifestyles led their staff, and in some cases of outright corruption. The “political” NGOs were also accused of “crowding out” other forms of radical politics. Left political parties had long suggested that NGO work was damaging the efforts of radical political parties to build rural social movements and political organization and this was seen as having depoliticising effects on rural peasant struggle. In 1989, The *Dhaka Courier* weekly had begun a critical debate on the NGO phenomenon that included this and other critiques. The left’s agenda was slowing fading as the neoliberal model of development was asserted during the post-Cold War years. Fernando (2011: 219) goes as far as to suggest that during the 1990s “the entire political left was absorbed by the NGO sector”.

The mainstream parties were also feeling threatened by the some forms of radical NGO mobilisation, fearing that NGOs might come to play greater political roles in society and even become a new political force, and a threat to their ability to retain control. As Hashemi (1995: 105) has argued:

Most development NGOs have been explicit in foregoing the roles of political parties – i.e., competing for political power at the level of state authority. However, when NGOs analyse poverty in terms of structural causes and define their objectives in terms of structural transformation, they intervene directly within the political space that defines the status quo. In doing so, development NGOs are clearly “political”.

In 2001, for example, Proshika MUK was successful in helping to build a left alliance involving trade unions, the press, and women’s organizations that had succeeded in mobilizing more than half a million people in support of democratization, poverty reduction and human rights in a “United Civil Society Movement” (*Oikabaddo Nagorik Andolan*), during a brief period of successful political coalition building.

The decline of the radical sub-sector and the NK “exception”

Today’s NGO sector in Bangladesh bears little trace of the radical NGO sub-sector we have discussed in this paper. These types of large scale radical development NGOs as “social mobilisation organizations have all but disappeared” (Kabeer 2010 et al: 47). What happened? In this section we briefly update the organizational histories of the key NGO actors.

The first of the radical development NGOs to experience problems was Comilla Proshika, already struggling by the late 1980s. At its height in the mid-1980s Comilla had employed over 200 field staff and worked with 1200 rural groups comprising 65,000 people in the eastern region of the country (see Lewis 2017, forthcoming). By the late 1980s the organization had expanded and power had become further concentrated in the hands of its charismatic, non-accountable executive director. There was only weak formal accountability to the board in the form of a fourteen-person Governing Body that only had seven members, five of whom were staff who also sat on the Management Committee. A key senior manager resigned in 1988 in order to stand as a candidate in local elections for the ruling military party, which was controversial for many others in the organization. There were also reports that

financial inconsistencies were discovered in office accounts, suggesting that resources might have been misused to support political activities like siting tube wells on the land of local elites.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Comilla Proshika's main donor, carried out a major evaluation that produced a damning report (CIDA 1990) that was impossible to ignore. The report stated that "leadership within the MC and the GB appears to be largely provided by one person – the ED" (p.12). It also suggested that the organization's often proclaimed radical edge had now become blunted. The dual approach described as "mobilization with services" was now described as amounted to little more than a traditional training and credit provision programme. Despite the NGO's leadership rhetoric, there was "little evidence that groups are nowadays actively seeking to identify the causes of their poverty" (p.111). Most damning perhaps was the suggestion that the NGO now "follows an elitist rather than a participatory model of development" (p.119). CIDA made several attempts to persuade the organization to reform, but then eventually withdrew its support. Comilla Proshika had therefore lost its major source of funding and alienated the government and sections of the development community. The authors of the report were also concerned about these problems being compounded by authoritarian leadership, weak administration and the fact that of the leadership were developing dubious political linkages. On a smaller scale, Saptagram had also fallen into decline by the late 1990s for mainly organizational reasons. The charismatic leadership style of its founder made it difficult to build second tier leaders, tensions among staff and members coming from very different backgrounds, and increase donor funding generated by its success that produced disruptive pressures caused by rapid organizational growth (Kabeer and Huq 2010).

The challenges of implementing a radical civil society strategy in the wider context of a partial democracy that relied on forms of political patronage were most clearly exposed by the decline of Proshika MUK. By the 1990s Proshika had become Bangladesh's second largest NGO (after BRAC). Its leader had long taken a tough anti-fundamentalist confrontational line with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), and its alliance with the *Jama'at-i-Islami* Islamists, and its president had become associated with the Awami League party. The *Oikabaddo Nagorik Andolan* coalition that Proshika had helped assemble in 2001, as we saw, had unsettled the government. When a BNP coalition government was elected in late 2001 several NGOs including Proshika began to pay the price for what had been viewed as political partisanship in the period running up to the election when it had advised its members not to vote for the BNP alliance. The new government began to pursue what its staff felt was a vendetta against the organization, blocking funds that were due from donors and arresting some of its senior staff following accusations of financial irregularities.

The allegations began to affect Proshika's relationship with the donors as well, some of whom complained that it had infringed the "no party politics" rule that tacitly underpinned donor relationships with NGOs (Lewis 2010). Perceived closeness to the AL also began to undermine its leader's status among the wider NGO community. The Proshika President's term as chair of the Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB) had further contributed to the NGO's problems. He was accused by government (and some NGO members) of politicising ADAB - supposedly an impartial NGO network for coordination and exchange of ideas – by

splitting it along partisan lines, and of favouring certain client NGOs with ADAB funding and capacity building support. Finally, the political ambitions of Proshika's President, who unsuccessfully stood for election as an MP in 2008 following the military-based caretaker government, further contributed to the organization's problems. By the end of the decade, Proshika had lost much of its funding, split into opposing and sometimes violent factions, and entered a long period of decline.

Samata, despite meeting with the resistance to its land occupations discussed earlier, managed to grow during the 1990s. It continued to settle landless people on *khas* land, but also attempted to secure better representation and fairer outcomes for women in dispute settlement through its work with local institutions such traditional village courts (*salish*). By the middle of the 2000s there was evidence that such efforts were gaining traction in some local areas where Samata had been particularly active, such as Faridpur and Rajbari districts (Lewis and Hossain 2008). However, Samata too fell prey to problems of alleged malfeasance among its leadership in 2008 when it lost its bilateral funding from UK, Norway and Sweden following an independent forensic audit that showed evidence of misuse and misappropriation of funds. Today the organization continues to operate on a reduced scale and faces a highly uncertain future.

As the AL government has consolidated its power in government it has become less tolerant of a diverse development NGO community. Recent years have seen a narrowing of civil society space in Bangladesh in the mainstream as well as the radical sub-sector, with even the internationally celebrated Grameen Bank facing problems in its relations with the government.⁹ The radical NGO sub-sector mainly survives today to support rights-based development and gender empowerment. Nijera Kori remains the most significant player in the sub-sector. It has built an effective system of internal democracy into its organizational structures and systems, avoided the pitfalls of charismatic leadership, and resisted donor offers to support unrealistic expansion and/or to shift its focus away from mobilization work.

Kabeer et al (2010, p.45) found that social mobilisation NGOs such as NK could still produce positive political effects and change women's lives despite earlier setbacks. The evidence shows that NGO strategies had played an important role in politicising their members and building "their willingness and capacity to engage actively in the domain of policy and politics" and that "development NGOs expand the sphere of chosen rather than given relationships in the lives of sizeable numbers of poor women and men in Bangladesh. This is of particular significance for women who are far more likely than men to be confined to the ascribed communities of family and kin".

Such approaches have strengthened women's capabilities including their "analytical skills, dignity and sense of worth" and "knowledge of rights, awareness of social injustice and the collective willingness to challenge it on behalf of self and others":

In building these capabilities, social mobilisation organizations have helped to transform their members from the clients of the rich and powerful into citizens willing to engage with the structures of power and to stand up for the rights of the poor. If the abysmal quality of governance in Bangladesh is to ever improve, it will be through the

construction of these kinds of citizenship, these “habits of the heart”, on a national scale.

The experience of NK can be understood as representing what Gerring (2007) calls a “deviant case” because it offers insights into factors that have determined outcomes that are significantly different from the broader population of radical NGOs. In another study of the same organization (Kabeer *et al.*, 2009), the authors are able to marshal convincing qualitative and quantitative evidence that its work has not only achieved valuable progress, but that its experience can also offer a model for rethinking mainstream approaches:

NK members were more likely than others in our study to know their constitutional rights, to vote, to campaign in local and national elections and to interact with locally elected representatives and government officials. They were more likely to be elected to informal village committees, to be called to participate in *shalishes* [informal village councils] held by local elites or the *upazila* chairman as well as to initiate their own *shalish*.

Members were also more likely to be consulted by other people within their community to get advice or for their opinion. Drawing a direct link of continuity back to the earlier emphasis of the radical NGO sub-sector in the 1970s and 1980s, it was also found that NK members were more likely to have taken part in forms of collective action for themselves and/or others, including to protest the unfair distribution of government social resources, to contest land rights, to protest against violence against women, and to engage in collective wage bargaining. The evidence suggested finally that those who were members of NK “were more critical of both traditional power structures as well as corrupt local officials” (p.46).

Thus while most radical NGOs did not justify their claims, we should not write off the NGO contribution altogether. As Mannan (2015: 39) has suggested “NGOs have clearly contributed to the changing of hierarchical and community values in rural Bangladeshi society, but not without considerable resistance.” Committed and well-managed agencies could “make a difference” despite the difficult political environment in which they operated.

Explaining the decline

The next section explains the general decline of the sub-sector by focusing on three inter-related factors: (i) an *institutional setting* dominated by clientelistic structures that have undermined efforts to build horizontal alliances among excluded groups in civil society, or links between NGOs and political parties; (ii) a shift in *donor support* from mobilization to market-based service delivery agencies; and (iii) *internal structures* that have generated legitimacy and accountability problems by encouraging elite capture, co-option and personalised leadership in the radical sub-sector in particular.

Institutional setting: the challenge of clientelistic democracy

A deeply entrenched system of clientelistic institutions exists in Bangladesh that Wood (2003), following Goffman (1961), describes as a “total institution”. This system constrains most people within enclosed, tightly structured lives where participation in the patronage system over-determines everyday struggles over identities, rights and livelihoods. This perspective perhaps over-states the rigidity of the system, since as Gay (1998) has argued, clientelism is not fixed or static but subject to continual change and renegotiation. Yet while NGO attempts to “represent the poor” challenge the dominant political elite’s claim to represent all its citizens, they also led poor people to treat their relationships with NGOs as an instrumental rather than ethical relationship, determined by what “they have to offer, and what will they want in return” (White, 1999: 311). At the same time, NGOs’ ability to mobilise aid and deliver pro-poor services earned them the tolerance of the military regime since they did not threaten its political authority (and may have even occasionally helped to legitimise it), but later on their ability to mobilise support and influence elections posed a greater threat to the competing elites that controlled the bi-polar political system based on the two dominant political parties and their shifting coalitions.

Competitive clientelism therefore created a political settlement based on a pyramidal structure threatened by antagonistic competition between party elites and their supporters (Khan 2000). The parties did not offer distinct political agendas but operated as vehicles for elite competition by distributing resources and enforcing loyalty to their patronage networks using strategies of co-option, violent intimidation and vote buying (Lewis 2004). NGOs, trade unions, activist groups, social movements, think tanks and donors needed to distance themselves from these structures if they were to create a pluralist civil society envisaged by neo-Toquevillian theorists. However, they mostly lacked internal democratic decision-making structures, and none could retain their autonomy by escaping the demands of the dominant elites. Even apparently radical interventions by labour unions were undermined by these tendencies, so:

union members become entangled in promoting the priorities of this or that party by supporting its *hartals*, attending its rallies and intimidating opposition candidates and voters at election time. In return, they are rewarded with patronage jobs in the party and trade union movement. (Stiles 2002: 841)

Thus NGOs in Bangladesh operate in what Douglass North called a “natural state”, where “organizations are not free of the state, whether represented by key overbearing individual rulers/personalities, or by a more generalized social persona or political class—or more likely a mix of both” (2015, p.21). They cannot escape local cultures of power or the tendency for their own leaders to use their resources to create their own clientelistic networks in which “those seeking [their] support ... aim to contrive a personal relationship, in the context of which they can advance their specific claim” (White 1999, p.315).

These dysfunctional relationships do not rule out all possibilities of positive engagement, and effective action as we have seen, but they do expose the serious limitations imposed on the impact of democratic reforms in clientelistic states.

Resource flows: donor dependence and changing priorities

The salience of formal NGOs as development and advocacy organizations during the neo-liberal era is heavily dependent on attempts by foreign donors to find non-state and non-partisan agencies to implement their pro-poor policy agendas. This has enabled activists to overcome the budget constraint that usually undermines the activities of radical organizations, and did enable some of them to play a positive role during the military and early democratic eras. However, the subsequent decline of such organizations also raises difficult questions about the role of aid and donor interventions in contested political contexts.

“Progressive” donors have been attempting to support participatory development and empowerment since the 1990s. Their interventions do not raise heavily contested issues when they are focused on services and livelihoods, but they must do so when they include an overt political agenda since donors are not supposed to participate in partisan political processes. The absence of a strong domestic social democratic party in the country meant that radical NGOs also needed to distance themselves from national parties and electoral processes, but this also limited their ability to promote the political interests of their beneficiaries. [Lavalle et al \(2005\)](#) found that citizens in Brazil could only influence politics when they participated in civil society organizations and not as individuals. But they also found that these civil society organizations could only generate transformative actions when they were linked to political parties, rather than by remaining independent from them as much mainstream civil society theory assumes. In Bangladesh attempts by radical NGO leaders to enter mainstream politics, or by activists to contest local elections not only intensified opposition from competing local elites, but also undermined relationships between donors and the state.

These problems together with a decline in radical politics in the Western donor countries in the 1980s and 1990s also produced a shift in support from mobilization to development NGOs ([Stiles, 2002,](#)) but this does not explain their long-term decline. Instead, some donors like the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in the UK actually wanted them to “scale-up”, and increased funding to levels that produced problems of rapid organizational growth that not only affected Proshika, GSS and Samata, as we saw, but also the UK voluntary sector more widely ([Billis and McKeith 1995](#)). However, these organizations need not have given way to these pressures. Nijera Kori *did* resist donor demands to shift towards a service delivery approach and what became referred to locally in pejorative terms as the micro-credit “*paisha*¹⁰ capitalism”. NK stuck instead to a strategy to keep working on a “shoe string budget”, to avoid the major large funding agencies, and to secure a series of smaller grants from non-mainstream donors such as international solidarity-focused NGOs in order to build like-minded partnerships that served the interests of NK and its members ([Kabeer 2003, p.3](#)).¹¹

Donor funding also diluted NGO accountability to their beneficiaries by providing their leaders with a secure income and privileged lifestyle and the ability to build clientelistic networks of their own. These leaders were not subjected to elections or to market completion, so only the donors could monitor and evaluate their actions and sanction poor performance, which they were usually unable to do very effectively

(Brett, 1993). The donors did eventually desert GSS, both Proshikas and Samata, but only long after these organizations had lost their credibility and legitimacy.

Internal structures: authoritarian leadership and elite capture

Leadership problems are endemic in NGOs but are particularly acute in radical organizations. Leaders are expected to identify with the poor but NGOs are managed by privileged elites that lead separate lives, have levels of education and income that differentiate them from their beneficiaries, and must manage complex processes that force them to make difficult compromises with governments, donors and private firms. Even leaders that are driven by ethical obligation rather than self-interest often make unpopular or ineffectual decisions, while opportunistic leaders can easily exploit their privileges for personal gain. Critical theorists have attempted to overcome these problems by “putting people in control” but even radical organizations depend on centralised control and informed leaderships, and participatory management tends to impose impossible costs on staff and demands on the poor (Brett, 2003).

The gap that exists between leaders and beneficiaries creates real possibilities of elite capture, co-optation and corruption which clearly existed in Bangladesh, apparently confirming the existence of an “iron law of oligarchy” identified by Michels’ (1915/1962) in his classic study of left-wing political parties. Michels’ argument was that leaders’ ability to control information and patronage and to use their charisma to retain their loyalty enabled them to capture organizations, divert them from their original goals, and disempower and marginalise their members. During a more optimistic era Julie Fisher (1994) made the argument that participatory leadership in parts of the development NGO sector around the world was challenging and even eliminating the “iron law”. Yet the evidence for such a claim has proved difficult to find. Houtzager and Lavallo (2010) report from Brazil that political NGO legitimacy tends to be undermined because these organizations offer only “assumed representation” (since their leaders are not usually selected by members) and a “subject commitment” to their constituents (since there are few mechanisms to make formal accountability possible). Authoritarianism, opportunism and corruption have been common features of the Bangladesh context, allowing local researchers such as Mannan (2010) to attribute the decline of NGOs such as GSS primarily “to poor management and leadership”.

While the leaders of these agencies that set out with such progressive ideals do have much to answer for, these limitations cannot simply be attributed to personal failures but also to the need to manage the complex demands of external donors and the dysfunctional conflicts and risks generated by a weak and predatory state and a deeply divided, clientelistic and often violent civil society. Privileged access to resources, weak accountability and an authoritarian cultural environment not only undermined democratic processes and collegiality inside these organizations, but also increased the temptation to exploit the patronage system. NK’s persistence suggests that although the odds are heavily stacked against NGOs in the radical sub-sector, and NGO survival is a matter of both structure and agency, it might be possible for an organization with integrity to nevertheless successfully negotiate the complex environment in which political development work takes place in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The analysis of the radical NGO sub-sector in Bangladesh leads us to two main conclusions. First, after a promising start for radical NGO work under Bangladesh's military governments the emergence of an era of fragile parliamentary democracy did not offer these NGOs the political opportunities that were expected. We have analysed three main sets of reasons for this. The malign influence of international donors, problems of weak management and leadership, and a range of societal factors that included the persistence and evolution of strong vertical patron-client relationships each intervened as factors that undermined the potential of this sub-sector to catalyse democratic political change. During the period from the late 1990s when civil society support was in fashion with donors such as the UK's DFID, large grants were offered to organizations such as GSS and Samata that they were unable to absorb. Too rapid scaling up placed pressures on those organizations that lacked strong management systems and internal democratic decision making processes and contributed to organizational failure. If donors for a brief period were guilty of "killing with kindness", this was not the case was not for very long. Neoliberal development policy took a turn away from the "good governance" agenda that saw a role for radical civil society towards a more managerialized vision that placed the private sector and NGOs as private service providers at its centre. At the same time, some of the NGOs in the radical sub-sector were characterised by dysfunctional and/or compromised organizational systems. There were charismatic individual leaders that mitigated against the emergence of strong second tier leaders and managers, a prioritisation of radical development rhetoric over "nuts and bolts" organization and management, and vertical accountabilities that left leaders vulnerable to co-option into patronage politics.

The decline of the radical NGO sub-sector highlights the role of clientelism in restrictively shaping political participation. Radical NGO mobilisation approaches attempted to challenge local level patron-client relations by building horizontal solidaristic groups and confronting the local power structure. But there were flaws in NGO leaders' political strategies for social mobilisation that severely underestimated the fact that efforts to challenge "the net" would inevitably meet with strong resistance from entrenched interests at the local level (Engberg-Pedersen and Webster 2002). Furthermore, the dominance of clientelistic parties in Bangladesh restricted opportunities for NGOs to create political space in which horizontal forms of social capital could be created, or to evolve organizational structures that are more democratic in terms of leadership and decision making, and in terms of their capacity to represent the poor. In most cases, these democratic forms of leadership and representative structures simply failed to emerge. The intensification of political patronage under electoral democracy also made NGOs more vulnerable to allegations of co-option and malfeasance, which also contributed to the decline of the radical sub-sector.

While the inadequacy of the state's response to problems of poverty and inequality continues to provide a viable space for various types of development NGOs to operate, such work now takes place in a neoliberal policy environment that increasingly favours private sector responses to development problems. This has

contributed to a depoliticization of the NGO sector, many of whose organizations have now become vehicles for corporate interests rather than for consolidating democratic structures by confronting local power structures or challenging the state. The environment favours organizations that move away from earlier concerns with democratization to concentrate instead on market-based activities. This has served to produce a more narrowly defined NGO organizational legitimacy that is focused on “organizational longevity and competitive edge in securing scarce resources” (Feldman, 2001, p.242) rather than on the consolidation of democratic political processes.

The second main conclusion is that there is nothing inevitable about the failure of the radical NGO sub-sector as a strategy for representing and mobilising the rural poor. Contradictions persist between NGOs and the state, and the people whom they claim to represent (White, 1999; Feldman, 2001). The findings set out here do not negate the critical role of effectively led radical organizations in helping subordinate classes to escape the constraints imposed their ability to participate in public politics, nor the need to give their leaders the authority and resources that enable them to perform their tasks. The population of organizations in the sub-sector may have declined since its 1990s heyday, but an organization that makes the “right” decisions within this complex environment *can* maintain a radical approach, as Nijera Kori, a survivor from the radical sub-sector, shows. Beyond the world of development NGOs, other forms of civil society actor also offer positive examples, such as the more recent generation of small radical campaigning NGOs centred on workers’ rights or environmental action, or the emergence of informal trade unions and “unruly” forms of resistance among women garment workers (Hossain 2017b). More than two decades of rapid economic restructuring and unequal growth in Bangladesh continues to feed popular demands for democratization in the form of movements and confrontations that urge government to better respond to peoples’ needs. Radical civil society has now diversified into other forms. The performance of such organizations depends on the need to create accountability and incentive systems that oblige them to maximise the interests of their members rather than themselves, and perhaps, on their capacity to identify new spaces in which new forms of clientelism can be harnessed to pro-poor agendas.

Notes

¹ The influx of foreign assistance during 1970s shaped the incipient NGO sector and this continued to be case into the 2000s, after which the influence of aid declined. This was because it became proportionally less significant to the country's improving financial position as it experienced steady economic growth. Although aid had been received in the Pakistan period, it increased significantly after 1971 and led to what Sobhan (1982, p.8) termed the country's "crisis of external dependency". A total US\$612m was committed in the six months following the end of the war, while another \$886m was received in 1972-3. The bulk of foreign aid was in the form of governmental bilateral and multilateral food aid, grants and loans. This mainstream development assistance provided a high level of support to NGOs as service delivery organizations and contributed to the rise of mainstream NGOs as development actors during the 1980s and 1990s. But there was also a small component of non-governmental foreign assistance from outside the mainstream – provided by international solidarity type organizations/funders such as NOVIB and Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO). This played an important role in helping to shape radical NGOs.

² With the brief exception of an eighteen-month period in 2006-7 when a military-backed "caretaker government" took power and oversaw new elections.

³ The demands of political competition can easily blur the lines between pressure groups and political parties, and individual leaders can change from being outsiders to insiders. This leads to boundaries that can become unclear and shifting (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001; Lewis 2011b).

⁴ The *State of Democracy in South Asia* report (2006).

⁵ Not all NGOs fell into one or other camp - NGOs such as Proshika aimed to combine social mobilization with credit services.

⁶ In Devine's doctoral thesis and subsequent publications on Samata, the NGO was given a fictional name, Sammo, to preserve anonymity. However, the NGO's staff subsequently made it known that they would prefer the organization to be named in future publications (Joseph Devine, personal communication). I have therefore followed the author's advice on this point.

⁷ Paolo Freire, 1972, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*; Ivan Illich, 1971, *Deschooling Society*.

⁸ With over half the rural population considered landless in a society that was predominantly rural and agricultural, poverty and landlessness were combined in the NGO view of its "target group" (Lewis 1993).

⁹ Grameen Bank, the leading micro-credit organization, was affected when Muhammed Yunus, its founder, attempted to form a new popular grassroots-based political party in 2006. The plan led to immediate resistance from the other political

parties and was soon abandoned, perhaps in recognition of the high costs of entry to competitive politics that included coercion and violence. The AL Yunus then subjected Yunus to a process of political victimization that led eventually to his removal from the organization on the spurious grounds of being over the retirement age. The most likely explanation was the threat posed by the Grameen Bank's alternative nationwide patronage network of grassroots lender groups that might have posed a threat to the Awami League's own parallel patronage system.

¹⁰ The word *paisha* here refers to small change. Paisha is a fractional unit of cash in South Asia. In Bangladesh there are 100 paisha to one taka, the local unit of currency. One UK pound is approximately 100 taka.

¹¹ Some NGOs, notably BRAC, have successfully reduced donor dependence by establishing market-based enterprises that have generated significant income, but this strategy has contributed to the organization moving away from radical political work.

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