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Civil Society and Local Government in Rural Bangladesh: The Case of BRAC's *Polli Shomaj* Programme

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ABSTRACT

BRAC's *Polli Shomaj* (PS) programme aims to bring together a critical mass of poor rural women at the community level to participate in the local power structure, ensure proper use of local resources, and prevent and protest human rights violations. This report presents six case studies on the relationship between the PS and the Union *Parishad* (UP), the lowest level of government administration in rural Bangladesh. It focuses on the space that the PS occupies in rural power structures, and the ways that it colludes with and disrupts them. Semi-structured interviews were held with BRAC Programme Organizers (PO) for the PS programme, PS presidents, UP chairmen, and PS general members from six PSs in Bogra and Jessore districts.

Stakeholders identified two main themes in the relationship between the PS and UP. Firstly, the PS lobbies the UP to grant social security resources to deserving candidates. Secondly, under certain circumstances the PS will approach the UP to protest human rights abuses and ensure that justice is served. The PS can improve resource allocation by 1) gathering information about incoming government resources, and 2) building rapport with the UP Chairman. For politically or socially uncontroversial legal issues, the PS is able to engage UP members' help to see that justice is served. PSs relationship with the UP is supplicatory and non-confrontational, combining a good relationship and persistence and normative pressure. PSs do not broach contentious issues such as corruption or the influence of power interests in the justice system. The PS operates within existing power structures, aiming to maximize their benefits for poor women rather than promoting structural change.

In three of the six PSs studied, presidents used PS to extend patron-client relationships, channelling information and opportunities preferentially. Although they appeared to be aware of such occurrences, POs did not intervene. The study's key recommendations are first, to promote transparent, inclusive and participatory decision making in the PS, and implement accountability mechanisms for Presidents; second, to improve oversight by POs and ensure that they intervene in problems of corruption, nepotism and favouritism.

INTRODUCTION

Good governance has become one of the most important developmental issues that Bangladesh currently faces. The *Polli Shomaj* (PS) programme is an effort to approach this problem at the local level by assembling civil society groups of approximately 65 members, mostly poor women. This study examines the nature of the relationship between the PS and the Union Parishad (UP), the lowest level of government administration in rural Bangladesh. In particular, it focuses on the space that the PS occupies in rural power structures and the ways in which it colludes with and/or disrupts them.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE PS AND UP

Corruption, unaccountability, cronyism and inefficacy are widely considered to be endemic in Bangladesh local government. Combined with highly patriarchal social norms, poor rural women are excluded from participating in political issues and putting their issues on the agenda. The *Polli Shomaj* (meaning “rural society”) was designed to bring together a critical mass of women from BRAC village organizations (VO) groups of poor, landless people participating in BRAC economic development programmes such as microfinance. The programme aims to empower these women to participate in the local power structure and in doing so, promote accountable pro-poor governance.

The three objectives of the PS are to inform and build awareness among the rural poor, promote democratic practices and participation of the poor in the rural decision-making process, and engage in collective action to ensure local government accountability (BRAC Social Development Programme 2008, p10). These translate into three broad types of activities. Firstly, the PS helps ensure that deserving candidates access government services. Secondly, the PS participates in local government activities. These include voting and voter mobilization, contesting elections, participating in *Shalish* (informal dispute arbitration) and the allocation of government owned land (*khas*) and water bodies. Thirdly, the PS engages in local social initiatives such as prevention of dowry and early marriage, rural infrastructure maintenance, protesting against human rights abuses, providing assistance after natural disasters, supporting children’s education, and helping families in severe economic distress (BRAC Social Development Programme 2008, p10-11).

The PS is organized at the ward level, encompassing 3-4 villages. Membership is now open to all members of the community, not just VO members. Two types of meetings are held bimonthly. The general committee meeting is a platform for discussion, raising awareness, and planning and implementing initiatives. The 11-member executive committee meetings take decisions. The executive committee includes the president, secretary, cashier, and the heads of five committees for services and resources, social injustice prevention, family development, participation in local power structure and social welfare. The executive committee is elected by the general members.

A UP covers nine wards. Although there are policies for the establishment of *Gram* (Village) *Parishads*, in practice the UP remains the lowest category of rural government. The next level is the *thana/upazila* (sub-district) parishad, followed by the *Zila* (District) *Parishad*. The UP is made up of 13 elected members: one chairman, nine ward members (one for each ward), and three women members.

The UP’s responsibilities include collecting demographic information for development planning, planning natural resource management and development, supervising primary education institutions, awareness raising for education and healthcare, maintaining law and order, encouraging participation in development projects, and supporting non-government organizations (NGO) and co-operatives (UNESCAP [undated], p9). UPs also operate a number of poverty alleviation and social security programmes, including food aid through Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards, old age, widow, freedom fighter

and disability allowances, other stipends, food-for-work and 100-day employment programmes, warm clothes, tubewells, latrines, and agricultural and educational equipment grants. These resources come from the *Upazila Parishad* for the UP to distribute.

RURAL POWER STRUCTURES

Any attempt to understand the relationship between PS and UP must consider the dynamics of rural power structures. These frame the opportunities and limitations that the PS faces in pursuing its objectives. Firstly, it is important to note that there are many more players in rural power structure. It is beyond the scope of this paper to map out the power structure in each of the communities surveyed. A limitation of this paper is, therefore, that it does not capture the influence of other actors on the relationship between PS and UP.

The process of resource distribution is the main heuristic used for understanding rural power structures. BRAC's first study in this field was 'The net: power structure in ten villages'. It documents how "resources were not reaching the poor and landless but instead were being controlled and enjoyed by a small number of powerful men, who had developed good connections with the local government officers" and who resorted to other violent and illegal methods (BRAC 1983, p1). Lewis and Hossain argue that The Net was written in the agrarian structuralist tradition of the 1980s, and does not account for subtler, more reciprocal power relations, nor the instances of coexistence and cooperation that obtain between rich and poor (2008, p34). They claim that elites have diversified their strategies into a "politics of reputation", entailing activities such as political party manoeuvring, patronage and creating local NGOs (Lewis and Hossain 2008, p48).

Naomi Hossain's work on the VGD card programme provides an example of the broader set of considerations that influence the UP's allocation of government resources. The VGD card programme distributes food aid to vulnerable women via cards allocated by the UP. A study on the leakage of programme resources found that contrary to fears of endemic corruption, 94% of the cardholders met at least one of the five selection criteria for the programme (Ahmed *et al.* 2004, p90), 8.1% of the recipients reported of paying bribes (p94) and the average ration was 8.01% smaller than expected, but partly for legitimate reasons (p131).

Hossain explains that while the distribution of VGD cards is filtered through rural power structures, these do not prevent resources from mostly reaching the intended beneficiaries. VGD cards strongly lend themselves to patron-client relationships, partly because the UP must choose beneficiaries, and partly because bringing state resources to the community makes one an important figure (Hossain 2007, p8). But as demand for cards far outstrips supply—90% of eligible women cannot get cards (Hossain 2007, p15)—there is plenty of scope for UP members to favour clients without subverting the VGD programme's objectives. Rather, Hossain attributes the programme's relatively low level of corruption to the fact that it fits into and supports existing power structures (Hossain 2007, p15).

Matin and Hulme held focus group discussions (FGD) with BRAC VO members on how VGD cards are distributed. They found that the "knee-jerk" explanations—elite capture, corruption and nepotism—fail to capture the normative considerations that influence allocation: namely, providing for widows and abandoned wives with young children, households that have recently experienced major financial shocks, and chronically poor households (Matin and Hulme 2003, 658). Participants highlighted sympathy, social networks and personal agency as determinants of whether one could procure a card. In a parallel with Hossain's findings, UP Members allocated cards preferentially, but still to deserving candidates: "villagers did not feel that patronage led to benefits going to ineligible households. What concerned them was the unfairness of the process when ward members could allocate cards to their personal networks" (Matin and Hulme 2003, p658).

This emerging picture of rural power relations reveals that the poor are not completely dominated by a "net" of established interests, but have certain structured forms of agency. For example, they can establish patron-client relationships, put normative pressure on elites, build social networks and acquire resources through sheer persistence. What opportunities, then, are there for civil society organisations such as PS to intervene on their members' behalf? This question need not be limited to matters of resource allocation; this study also focuses on how the PS can improve its members' access to justice.

METHODS

The study was carried out in six PSs in Bogra and Jessore districts. Research Assistants for the Active Citizens and Accountable Local Government (ACALG) Project, of which this study is a component, had already conducted most of their field work when the time arose to select cases. The Research Assistants were therefore asked to recommend PSs that had particularly active relationships with the UP, the objective being to study the richest possible case studies.

Semi-structured interviews were held with four stakeholder groups BRAC Social Development Programme Organizers (PO), PS presidents, UP chairmen, and PS general members. Speaking first with POs and PS presidents made interviews with UP chairmen more fruitful: as chairmen were often not forthcoming with information, it helped to have information about past encounters between the PS and UP on hand. PS general members were interviewed at last.

FINDINGS

Stakeholders identified two issue areas where the PS approaches the UP. Firstly, the PS lobbies the UP to grant social security resources – VGD cards etc. – to deserving candidates. Secondly, when conflicts or human rights abuses occur, the PS may approach the UP to ensure that justice is served.

ACCESSING GOVERNMENT RESOURCES

Discussing the factors that determine the flow of resources to the UP, POs, some UP chairman and some PS presidents acknowledged that higher levels of government and political parties can interfere with the distribution of resources. If a chairman is affiliated with the ruling party, he tends to receive more resources. Party officials may demand cards from UP chairmen, which they distribute to their allies and supporters. If a UP chairman is non-cooperative or affiliated with a different political party, he can be bypassed. One chairman, an opposition party supporter, stated that because local elections were approaching, the *Upazila* Nirbahi Officer (the chief government official at the *upazila* level) was deciding directly who would receive government social safety net resources.

All stakeholder groups except UP chairmen stated that UP members systematically favour family, friends and allies when selecting beneficiaries. According to some PS presidents and general members, these resources sometimes go to relatively well-off people. POs and PS presidents also stated that UP members tend to withhold information about what, how many, and when resources will arrive, thus making it easier for them to allocate as they wish. Most POs and PS presidents also reported that decision-making power and access to information was centralized in the chairman, who divide and share it with other members as he deems fit. Some PS presidents and PS members from Bogra district reported that UP members would only give cards against bribe – usually Tk. 1,000 to 2,000.

What proved most interesting was the question of how the PS attempts to procure cards for its members. Stakeholders gave similar descriptions of the basic process: the PS would formulate a list, then take it to a UP chairman or member and discuss it. Sometimes the PS goes to the UP office as a group; at others, the PS president goes alone. Individual members also go separately from the PS. Beyond this, each stakeholder group gave conspicuously different accounts. In the differences between them, a striking picture emerges on the relationship between the PS and UP and the dynamics within each.

BRAC POs gave the most optimistic accounts of the relationship between PS and UP. Their accounts tended to echo the “official line”, and sought to emphasize the positive impact of their PSs.

POs identified access to information as an important success factor for accessing resources. Several POs stated that if the PS could not get information about upcoming opportunities from the UP, it went to *upazila* (sub-district) level officials such as the *Upazila* Nirbahi Officer (UNO), Project Implementation Officer (PIO), Livestock Officer, Agricultural Officer, Women’s Welfare Officer and Social Welfare Officer. POs also collected information from these sources and shared them at PS meetings. POs reported that these officials tended to be helpful and forthcoming with information, explaining that they were supportive of BRAC and its mission, and that POs worked to build a good relationship with them. One PO and PS president from the same UP claimed that establishing ties with *upazila*-level officials (i.e. UP members’ superiors) had in turn made UP members more friendly and forthcoming.

This observation supports the findings of a study conducted by Ahmed *et al.* (2008) on targeting in the old age and widow allowance programme. It found that all the respondents (99%) knew about various government social security programmes, but those who were successful in

obtaining cards and they tended to have better sources of information. Of those who were currently benefiting from an allowance, 56% received information about upcoming government resources from UP members or chairmen, and 29% heard from neighbours. Of the non-beneficiaries, 54% heard from neighbours and 32% heard from UP members or chairmen (Ahmed *et al.* 2008, 17).

POs described the rapport between the PS and UP members as another key success factor. UP members and chairmen often serve as resource persons at PS meetings, where they provide advice and disseminate messages about human rights, women's empowerment etc. At Union *Shomaj* meetings, representatives from all the PSs in a UP will meet with the chairman and members. These interactions build relationships with UP members and sensitize them to PS's aims. They are also an opportunity for PS members to procure information. One PO stated that if a PS president did not have a friendly relationship with the UP, she would have very little success getting information from him.

Access to information and a good rapport with UP members gave the PS more leverage in asking for UP resources. Here it is worth mentioning that Ahmed *et al.* (2004, p96), Hossain (2007, p15) and Matin and Hulme (2003, p659-60) identified persistent lobbying as a key determinant of whether one will acquire a card. As Hossain argues, these reflect "a politics of claims – most likely framed not as rights but as moral and customary obligations" (2007, p15). In other words, access to information does not improve accountability in the distribution of government resources, but makes the PS a more effective petitioner.

Polli Shomaj presidents play a crucial role in accessing government resources. All the presidents in the study were clearly rich and influential people in their communities, especially within the PS. As someone with the influence to gain UP members' attention, the president is the PS's primary point of contact with the UP.

PS presidents' accounts were similar to POs' in most respects. Like POs, they strove to emphasize the activity level and positive impact of their PS. All presidents agreed that the UP tended to withhold information, and received useful information from POs. Some reported that they went to *upazila*-level officials to procure information. Like POs, PS presidents (with one notable exception) stressed the importance of maintaining a friendly relationship with UP members. Consequently, they reported that interactions with the UP tend to take the form of lobbying and rapport-building rather than vocal mass mobilization. One president explained that while a friendly rapport prevents the PS from broaching deeper issues such as corruption, antagonizing the UP will only cause the PS to lose the limited concessions it gets from a friendly approach. As will be discussed below, other PS presidents had political connections with the UP. They, therefore, enjoyed good access to resources, and no interest in broaching controversial issues such as corruption.

One PS, made up of a community of refugees from India, presents an informative exception. Its members claimed that they were seen as "not fully Bangali" and excluded by greater society. The PS president state that the PS had great difficulty accessing government resources, more so than any other PS president reported. She described her rapport with the UP chairman in more combative terms than other PS presidents. For example, she stated had "lots of quarrels" with the chairman, whereas other PS president described interactions in terms of lobbying. She also reported that she raised large groups of members to accompany her. (People in the community in question seemed much more close-knit than others). When she did so, she claimed that the PS was able to gain minor concessions from the UP, for example, one or two VGD cards.

There was a notable discrepancy between how PS presidents and UP chairmen understood the intensity of the relationship between their respective organizations. For example, while one PS president described at length the initiatives she had pursued with the chairman, the chairman was unfamiliar with the term *Polli Shomaj*. When prompted with the name of the PS president, he recalled a few relatively superficial encounters. Most UP chairmen required some prompting to recall the PS or its initiatives. UP chairmen had an interest in minimizing the role of the PS, as they would not acknowledge most of the PS's mandate (e.g. corruption or misallocation of resources). For their part, PS presidents tended to exaggerate their accomplishments.

INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF THE *POLLI SHOMAJ*

While the focus of this study is on the relationship between the PS and the UP, it quickly became apparent that the internal dynamics of the PS play a role in this relationship. In particular, it shed light on the role of the PS president in targeting beneficiaries, procuring resources, and regulating the participation of general members. All PS presidents stated that PS meetings were regular and well attended, and portrayed members as engaged, cohesive and willing to mobilize en masse for the group. But evidence from PS general members presented a more conflicting scenario, one marked by the dominance of the PS president, and divisions along the lines of kinship, neighbourhood and political allegiance.

The first interviews with PS general members were held with people recommended by the PS president, who also supervised the meetings. These proved highly unsatisfactory, as the members appeared to have little understanding of what the PS is and how it works. One member, for example, was unaware that she was the PS cashier until prompted by the president. What members did say came off as unconvincing efforts to put the PS in a positive light: for example, a member stated that she joined the PS “to learn how to defend her rights”, but could not provide concrete examples of how she or the PS had done so. Given that these members were close neighbours to the PS president and were clearly friendly with her, these interviews gave a strong sense of being staged.

We returned to the village later that day, and sought out a poor PS member living relatively far from the president’s house. She confirmed the suspicion that the PS president and her clique had given a staged account of the PS. According to the poor general member, the PS president withheld information about incoming social security resources, sharing them only with her friends. The president also discouraged the poor member from participating in meetings. The poor member further reported that the PS president, who was also a UP female member, was giving out VGD and VGF cards in return for bribes of Tk.1,000. The member had attempted to procure a card from her, borrowing the Tk.1,000 from others in the community. The PS president accepted the money, but the poor member did not receive a card in the following round of allocations.

The member complained to a UP member, who merely told her that he would have been more trustworthy, and took no steps to change the situation. The member then asked the president to return the Tk.1,000, which she did. The poor member also complained to the PO, and confirmed that he was aware of this state of affairs. She suggested that he did not intervene because he and the PS president have a good relationship: the president/UP member helps him by dealing with much of the trouble of organizing the PS, and even serves meals to him after hosting PS meetings at her house. The poor member furthermore suggested that the PO did not consider such problems to fall within his responsibilities.

This case proved not to be an exception. In three of the six PSs studied, certain PO general members reported that presidents were sharing information and resources preferentially. Presidents presented a positive picture of their PSs’ internal dynamics. They furthermore attempted to sit in on interviews with general members, thus putting them in a situation where they might not feel able to speak freely. However, when poor and marginalized PS members were consulted, unflattering accounts of presidents’ irregular conduct sometimes emerged. While this study takes seriously the reports of PS members that “blew the whistle” on their presidents, it is also important to acknowledge that they may have been biased by personal dislike for the president, bitterness over failing to access government resources, etc.

In a third PS, we interviewed two poor members who were also BRAC microfinance holders. They stated that they had joined the PS because the president had said she could help them access social security resources. This promise had not materialized. The president constantly said that opportunities were on the way, but never gave a specific date. They did not know whether the president favoured her friends and neighbours, as they had no idea how they had been distributed. They confirmed that the PO was aware of their situation, but had not intervened. They could not offer any explanation for why she had not done so. When asked why the president encouraged them to join meetings if she did not intend to help them, the members answered that the president wanted her PS to appear busy and therefore successful.

From the same PS, a poor member was interviewed as she repaired a road for a food-for-work programme. She reported that she had gotten the opportunity through the PS. She found the opportunity at a general meeting, and was referred to by the president to make her case to the UP chairman. He agreed, and recommended her to the *Upazila Nirbahi Officer* (Executive Officer). On the subject of other resources such as VGD cards, the member presented the common view that the mode of distribution is very corrupt. But she affirmed that her food-for-work posting had been straightforward and transparent. When asked about the nature of her relationship to the PS president, she revealed that they were cousins and neighbours.

In the three other PSs, PS general members did not identify any corruption on the part of their presidents. In the first one, a general member who was also a TUP programme participant was interviewed. She had received an old age allowance and her daughter had received a VGD card. She was the UP chairperson's aunt, and had procured these resources by approaching him directly rather than going through the PS. Several other poor members – those without powerful family connections – were also interviewed. They stated that their president shared information and opportunities equally. The second PS was comprised of the refugee community described above. Its members showed a striking degree of solidarity, and unanimously spoke well of the president. It later came out that certain PS members lived on the outskirts of the village. Interviewing them may have provided a valuable outsider's perspective, but unfortunately was not possible due to time constraints. The third PS was in an area that had been rezoned as an urban area five years ago. As it was now administrated by a *Upazila Pourashava* (the urban branch of local government), resources such as VGD cards were not available.

Case study: Politicization of the *Polli Shomaj*

Towards the end of an interview with a PS president, the president's son arrived and began answering questions on the presidents' behalf. He then insisted on accompanying us on our interviews with poor general members in spite of our protests. In the first interview, a member began to describe how she had requested a VGD card, but had not been put on the list submitted by the PS to the UP. The son interrupted her, saying that she had been on the list, and that the UP had simply not chosen her from it. The general member then revealed that the son had written the list rather than the PS members, which he confirmed. Further questioning quickly became unproductive due to the son's interference, which, combined with his body language, gave the impression that he was intimidating the member. (This impression was enhanced by the fact that he was over six feet tall and very strong.)

Once we managed to escape the supervision of the president's son and sent the BRAC PO on an errand, we interviewed a poor woman listed as a PS member in the Registration book, but who did not consider herself so. She stated that she would like to be a member of the PS but had not been invited, and did not feel comfortable inviting herself. She suggested that she had not been invited because the PS is based in another para (neighbourhood) and that the members dislike her because she is poor. She also stated that the President is connected to the Awami League, and that as a BNP supporter she was all the more unwelcome. She suspected that the PS president only shared information and resources with Awami League supporters, but did not know definitively.

We then returned to speak with the first general member, who, to her credit, was still forthcoming with information. She revealed that the PS president's son was an organizer for the Awami League, and had been an employee of one of the party's MPs. She had joined the PS to get access to social safety net resources, but was not put on the list submitted by the PS to the UP. She explained that when the President's son writes up the lists, he channels resources to supporters of the party only. Because she is not a supporter, she is excluded. The member furthermore stated that the president only shares information about incoming resources with Awami League supporters. She did not know how many resources the president had managed to procure, and could not therefore comment on precisely how they had been distributed.

All the POs except one denied that there were issues of corruption or favouritism in the PSs they supervised. One reluctantly acknowledged that sometimes PS presidents put their relatives on lists to be submitted to the UP for resources. He stated that he found such cases from other members. For the first offence, he reprimands the president. If the problem continues, he may call a PS meeting and ask the general members whether they want the president to continue in her function. The PO also noted that he has limited influence over the PS president because he only

serves in an advisory role – he cannot fire her, for example. He also noted that because he oversees 24 PSs, he has only a limited ability to monitor presidents' conduct.

In the PS dominated by the Awami League party organizer, the PO was available after the general members had been consulted, and was confronted with their testimony. He acknowledged that he knew about the politicization of the PS, and had not attempted to stop it. He stated that while it was admittedly exclusionary, it was on balance a positive thing because the president's son made more resources available to PS members. He also argued that he only has the power to advise the president; because the PS is an autonomous organization, he does not have the power to interfere in its affairs.

Two POs claimed that PSs were held back by lack of strength and solidarity. They suggested that if members were more vocal and mobilized en masse more often, they would have more leverage with the UP. Given the findings of this study, this appears to be insensitive to the power structures in which poor PS members live and the internal dynamics of the PS.

ADDRESSING CONFLICTS AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

Many general members' stated reason for joining the PS was to learn about issues such as early marriage, gender violence, domestic disputes and divorce, etc. For PS members that did not intend to apply for government resources, this was the main activity they pursued in the PS. According to PS presidents and general members, the PS played a role in sharing information and mediating small disputes. Many identified the PS's role in preventing early marriage specifically. Once members discovered that an early marriage had been planned, the PS went as a group to the child's parents and attempted to dissuade them. Presidents and members reported that sometimes they were successful, sometimes not. If not, they did not press the matter further, for example, by informing the police or UP chairman. Seeing the marriage as inevitable, they saw no value in fomenting conflict over it. PS members and presidents also mentioned that the PS would mediate disputes between husbands and wives.

One PS president claimed that the PS independently organized *Shalish* for divorce-related issues, dowry, and marriage registration. However, she gave an unreliable impression, claiming, for example, that she was able to arrange VGD cards and the like for 8 out of 10 PS members. Upon following-up with several of these members, that reported that they had not received anything. (In fact, this was the PS in the area that had been rezoned as a Union *Pourashava*, therefore VGD cards had not been available for the last five years.)

The PSs surveyed appeared to play a relatively minor role in the informal and formal justice systems. Although PSs would sometimes bring issues to the attention of UP chairmen, chairmen tended to find out more quickly by other means. Most PS presidents mentioned that representatives of the PS would attend *Shalish* organized by *Matbars* (village elites), usually defending the victim (i.e. the wife) in domestic disputes. Sometimes only the president would attend. In one PS in Bogra, this was the case because it was considered inappropriate for women to participate in *Shalish*. At other times, presidents stated that they and several other PS members would participate. PS general members never mentioned that they or the PS were involved in *Shalish*. It therefore appears to be an activity restricted to presidents and socially influential members, who have the social status for their opinions to carry weight.

UP chairmen appeared to have varying roles in the justice system as suited their preference. Most reported that they regularly participated in *Shalish*. One chairman, discussing a recent attempted rape case in his UP, described himself as having a hands-off relationship with *Shalish* and the justice system. Another stated that when he learned of an issue, he would bring both parties into his office and mediate a solution. He described this process as an "unofficial court", and that his decisions were legally binding. If the parties could not come to a solution, he would refer the case for *Shalish*, which would in turn send it to the courts, if necessary.

When disputes did not involve powerful people, PS presidents and members generally believed that they could work productively with the Chairman to ensure that justice was served. Two UP chairpersons and all other stakeholder groups stated that the outcomes from *Shalish* or the courts could be unfair if they involved power interests. In these cases, both UP chairmen and

PS presidents stated that they did not have the power to protest or overturn these decisions. At best, POs and PS presidents reported that influential PS members might complain during a sitting of *Shalish* or speak with a UP member informally, but these acts failed to change unfair outcomes. Some POs, some PS presidents and one UP chairman stated that if *Shalish* or UP members' decisions were unfair, the PS referred the case to BRAC HRLS.

One PS president gave an example of an attempted rape case (the same as mentioned above) in which the accused was the member of a rich family. The *matbors* organized a *Shalish* and attempted to broker a financial settlement. The PS protested, and managed to ensure that the matter was taken to the courts. The accused then bribed the magistrate and offered the victim a large sum of money to drop the case. After she did so, he only gave her a part of the money he promised. At that point the PS dropped the issue, the president explaining that the matter was finished, and that nothing more could be done.

The PS president that was also a UP woman member recounted the story of a land dispute between two brothers, one rich and the other poor. The rich brother had encroached on the other's land, provoking him to file a court case. As the dispute dragged on, the *matbars* called a *Shalish* in which the president/member participated. The rich brother offered the other a lump sum in return for the poor brother's dropping the case and allowing him to keep the disputed land. The poor brother accepted. The president/member acknowledged that the outcome was not fair, but said that because the rich brother's family was close with hers, she left the matter alone.

Because *Shalish* is a process of informal dispute mediation, it is illegal for it to arbitrate matters such as land disputes or criminal cases. Nevertheless, it appears to still be common practice, UP chairman arguing that otherwise such issues may never be settled or turn violent. The continuing prevalence of *Shalish* may, therefore, be a reflection of the slow pace and difficulty of navigating the formal justice system.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It appears that the PS has some degree of influence over how the government resources are allocated. Two successful strategies are 1) gathering information about incoming government resources and using it to petition UP members; and 2) building a rapport with the UP chairman, which improves access to information and opportunities from him. PSs' relationship with the UP is supplicatory and non-confrontational, combining a good relationship, persistence and normative pressure. For politically uncontroversial issues, the PS is able to engage UP members' help to see that justice is served. PSs do not broach contentious issues such as corruption or the influence of power interests in the justice system.

The PS does not appear to undermine the patron-client relationships that operate in rural power structures. In practice, it aims to maximize the benefits that these relationships can procure for poor people, by improving their bargaining power with UP chairmen and engaging the support of influential people to act as PS presidents. These findings are consistent with the literature on rural power structures, in that they demonstrate certain opportunities to engage elites' support for poor people. But it does not appear that organizations such as the PS have the leverage to change the terms of this relationship, for example, by pressing for increased transparency or reduced patronage and nepotism. In that sense, the conclusions of *'The net'* continue to be relevant. On the other hand, it is worth noting that increased political participation by poor, marginalized women may promote change from within rural power structures: as organizations such as the PS become more engrained in power structures, they will have more influence over the political agenda. Nevertheless, it remains to be seen whether such a development would tend towards pro-poor governance, or merely benefits for the participants' networks.

The PS's current method of operation gives some unscrupulous PS presidents the opportunity to use the PS to extend their power, using their influence to procure resources for friends, neighbours, relatives and/or political supporters. It is possible that this arrangement may divert resources to poor people that would otherwise be unable to access them. But it also excludes those that do not have a good relationship with the president. The question therefore arises whether the PS helps channel resources to the most deserving.

This issue has been addressed by Alim and Sulaiman in their study of the PS's impact on beneficiary targeting in the government of Bangladesh's 100-day employment generation programme (EGP). Alim and Sulaiman found similar problems in the allocation of programme benefits: UP chairmen selected close and distant relatives, friends, neighbours, and people who campaigned for them or donated money for elections; non-existent people frequently appeared on beneficiaries lists: in one case 18 out of 60; in another, 20 out of 80; and UP members were known to solicit bribes of Tk. 500 to 1,000 in return for cards (Alim and Sulaiman 2009, p7-9). However, they found no significant difference in targeting effectiveness between areas with and without PSs. Those selected from PS areas had a 1.8% lower likelihood of being poor (2009, p9).

Alim and Sulaiman locate the PS' inability to improve beneficiary targeting in its group dynamics, which fail to strongly engage members. They found a significant discrepancy between the number of meetings listed in the official record and the number of meetings recalled by members. Meetings typically had low attendance mainly because members did not see a clear financial incentive to participate (p13). Members did not report receiving any rewards for participating in the PS; whatever resources they acquired from the UP, they reported that they got them through other media (p16-17). Alim and Sulaiman also note that in some instances PS presidents were the wives of UP chairpersons or members, in which case they tended to be less motivated and hold attitudes contrary to the objectives of the PS (p18). Furthermore, PSs tended not to be representative of the entire Ward; rather, members were usually clustered around the president's or secretary's house or in the same neighbourhood (p18).

Alim and Sulaiman conclude that the PS generally does not inculcate a sense of cohesiveness or solidarity, and lacks the functional qualities of a successful group such as interdependent goals,

frequent interaction and leadership. These in turn obstruct it from successfully bargaining with the UP to improve targeting for resource allocations. But it is important to recognize that poor group dynamics are a symptom of other disempowering factors. For example, it is unsurprising that there is little group solidarity when the president takes bribes for VGD cards, or selectively favours neighbours and/or political supporters. Furthermore, even well-functioning PSs have limited leverage on UP decision-making. It is, therefore, understandable if some members display limited enthusiasm for its activities. It is also unclear whether more group solidarity would substantially improve the PS's performance. While persistent lobbying is one success factor, others such as the influence of the PS president and the preservation of a friendly relationship with the UP chairman are equally if not more decisive.

One particularly concerning finding is that POs do not appear to crack down on inappropriate behaviour by PS presidents, a concern shared by Alim and Sulaiman (2009, p 18). This matter requires further study, but there are some preliminary explanations. Firstly, POs are responsible for many PSs, and may not have sufficient time to monitor them and deal thoroughly with the issues that arise. POs also do not seem to feel that it is their role to intervene in the PS' affairs. This belief is understandable given that one of the PS programme's objectives is to promote female leadership; PSs are, therefore, intended to be self-sufficient. Nevertheless, it is BRAC's policy that POs must intervene in the case of internal problems such as corruption, nepotism or favouritism. This entails discussing the issue with the president, and if necessary, raising the issue at the executive committee meeting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study is part of the baseline survey for the Active Citizens and Accountable Local Government programme, which aims to improve governance by providing training to members of the UP and PS. The most important lesson that must inform these efforts is that most irregular practices are intentional, not the result of lack of knowledge. For the UP these include the failure to share information, the centralization of power in the chairman, the inactivity of standing committees and corruption. For the PS, this includes gate-keeping and favouritism on the part of the president.

These findings, although based on a small sample size, suggest that the PS programme faces problems of governance. It would, therefore, be wise to explore means of promoting transparent, inclusive and participatory decision-making, and of breaking down the patron-client relationships that may automatically emerge between the president and general members. This should encourage general members to assert themselves, and presidents to adopt an open-minded, inclusive leadership style. Secondly, training programmes should establish a code of conduct for presidents on matters of preferential treatment and corruption, and mechanisms for members to bring issues to light and deal with them. One example, as described by a PO, is holding a confidence vote after repeated irregularities on the part of a PS president.

While strengthening internal decision-making is important, it appears that there is a very important need for POs to step in if the PS has been subverted. It must be made clear to POs that they have a responsibility to intervene in the case of corruption, nepotism or favouritism. POs accountability to other BRAC staff must also be improved to ensure that they do not sweep problems under the rug. Crucially, POs must also feel that they have the organizational support to report negative outcomes of the PS programme. It should also be reconsidered whether POs can realistically oversee as many PSs as they presently do, or whether more POs should be trained.

To improve PS's bargaining power with the UP, one possibility may be to acquaint members with the UP's operating procedures. While these do not obtain in practice, it may strengthen their advocacy role to point out how matters should be handled.

For UP members, one possibility is to target general and women members' ability to access information. BRAC POs and PS have managed to establish fruitful relationships with *upazila*-level officials, hence there may be similar opportunities for UP members. This intervention would loosen the chairman's control on information, and by extension, decision-making power. This may in turn increase competition between members, leading to better deals for clients such as PS members.

All of the recommendations put forward so far fit within the patron-client paradigm in which the PS presently relates to the UP. This relationship does not lay the groundwork for structural change, such as increased accountability, enhanced critical consciousness or political participation of PS members, reduced corruption in the distribution of government resources or the operation of the justice system, or pro-poor governance. Addressing these issues will require a rethinking of the PS system. Doing so will require that BRAC be prepared to take a confrontational stance towards the UP, a decision that must not be taken lightly.

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