

Civil Society in Bangladesh: Rich Grass-roots Action but Poor Participation¹

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Since the advent of globalization, civil society has emerged as an important sector in which to achieve and maintain democracy and pluralism. International development organizations and donor countries have found civil society to be the best instrument to ensure democracy and good governance in the developing world. However, outcomes are not always favorable. The policy of introducing Western notions of civil society to non-Western societies while neglecting indigenous settings, local circumstances and histories has provoked controversy. The high profile of NGOs and the large number of development projects may not necessarily guarantee a vibrant, participatory civil society. Referring to Bangladesh, this paper based on a survey work on civil society organizations in September 2006, attempts to understand civil societies in contemporary developing countries based on their indigenous settings. It discusses progress at the grass-roots level and attempts to identify the factors that currently impede civil society from developing further at the meso and national levels and rise as a powerful sector to keep the state within its limits. The study also indicate to patron-client relationships, patronage, nepotism, corruption as certain common features in Asia that serve as important indigenous factors that contribute to a politicized and

¹ An earlier version of this paper, titled "The Nature of Civil Society in Bangladesh: From Rural and Urban Perspective" was presented at the 9th PRSCO Summer Institute, at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 18 July, 2006.

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weak civil society in spite of its claim of success at the grass-roots level in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Donor policy, participation, advocacy, politicization, vertical-links

1. Introduction

International development agencies and donor countries have found civil society to be the best tool to ensure democracy and good governance in developing countries. As such, attempts to develop Western-modeled non-governmental organizations (NGO) and strengthen civil society have taken place in these nations, albeit varying in magnitude and scale. However, such policies of introducing Western notions of civil society in non-Western societies, without recognizing the indigenous setting, local circumstances and histories, has often provoked controversy and resulted in undesirable outcomes. It has been observed that, often these NGOs have shown some progress to empower and enlighten the poor and uneducated at the rural level. Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of ensuring democracy and pluralism at the national level through such NGO activities, in those countries remains a distant goal. Bangladesh ranks among the top Asian countries in terms of intensity of NGO activities (Shigetomi 2002, 30).³ To date, Bangladesh has enjoyed marked success in rural development through micro-credit, education, social welfare and empowerment programs. Such endeavors gained world recognition with

³ A few statistics of registered civil society organizations: 1,997 foreign funds receiving NGOs registered with NGO Affairs Bureau, 45,508 registered voluntary welfare organizations, 8,271 registered women groups, 6,607 listed youth organizations, 465 registered trade organizations, 6,780 registered trade unions, 189,847 registered cooperatives, 299 chambers of commerce and trade industrial associations (sources: booklets of respective ministries and their websites). Besides, there are numerous registered and unregistered professional groups, regional groups and clubs. The number will proliferate if unregistered and informal organizations are included. Unfortunately, statistics of unregistered organizations is not available in Bangladesh.

the 2006 Noble Peace Prize being awarded to Professor Yunus and his Grameen Bank. According to statistics from the NGO Affairs Bureau, from 1991 to 2006, more than USD 3.8 billion of foreign aid for 11,875 projects had been released through its office for NGOs⁴. In addition, the number of small clubs, voluntary and religious organizations at the community level is also quite substantial. However, at the advocacy and policy levels, the performance of the civil society has been insignificant. After 35 years of independence, the country is still a fledging democracy with a per capita income of USD 418⁵, marked by confrontational politics as well as a corrupt and politicized society and administration. The story is more or less the same for other developing nations.

Using the case of Bangladesh, this paper tries to understand the reasons why civil society achievements at the grass-roots level do not always result in participation and democracy at the meso and national level. The first section discusses the successful involvement of civil society in rural development in Bangladesh. The second section identifies obstacles that prevent the further development of civil society. The third section examines the marginal and politicized role of civil society in advocacy and policy participation. In this paper, I point out the powerful influence of political parties as well as the patron-client relationship, patronage, and corruption—certain features common in Bangladesh and other Asian nations—as important indigenous factors that contribute to a politicized and weak civil society in spite of its well-publicized success at the rural level.

2. Theory and Argument

The roots of the idea of civil society are various and scattered and its

⁴ Bangladesh NGO Affairs Bureau <http://www.ngoab.gov.bd/> (website visited on 18 January, 2007)

⁵ Statistical Pocket Yearbook of Bangladesh 2004, p. 6

history may be traced over the past two millennia. This paper is concerned with the contemporary notion of civil society, referring to that section of society consisting of sustained, organized social activity that occurs in groups that are formed outside the state, the market, and the family (Schwartz and Pharr 2004, xiii). Civil society is conceived both as an arena of governance and as a force to bring about change in political society and state (Alagappa 2004, 53). The two predominant contemporary formulations of civil society are the neo-Tocquevillian or liberal democratic model and the Gramscian or new left model. Alexis De Tocqueville crafted his conception of civil society as a sphere of mediating organizations between the individuals and the state (Tocqueville 1873, 190). Based on his observation of 19th century American society, he argued that associational culture and civic activity preserves individualism, act against despotism and foster democratic culture (Howell and Pearce 2001, 44). Mainly American scholars, for example, Robert Putnam, Larry Diamond, and Lester Salamon espouse this doctrine. They advocate that the coexistence of liberal markets and civil society ensures and enhances democracy. The Gramscian or new-left model argues that civil society is an arena, separate from but enmeshed with the state and market, in which ideological hegemony is contested, implying that civil society contains a relatively wide range of organizations which both challenge and uphold the existing order (Lewis 2004, 303). European scholars such as Andrew Areto and Jean Cohens belong to this group.

2.1. Civil Society in Development Approach

It is the liberal democratic model that had huge influence on development policies. Scholars like, Diamond et al. (1989) and Harbeson (1994) have emphasized on the need of autonomous, local based citizenry for the development and maintenance of a secure democracy in developing countries. They have identified the civil society as the missing key to political reform, legitimacy and governance in those political systems.

These ideas have provided theoretical basis to the development paradigm called good governance agenda where it is suggested that a virtuous circle could be built with the state, economy, and civil society which will balance growth, equity, and stability (Lewis 2004, 303). It is argued that democracy is positively related to development and civil society is an important check on government and balances state and market in political terms and economically act as the service provider (Howell and Pearce 2001, 40). Critiques have considered such arguments as normative and have questioned its applicability in third world countries where state is weak, limited in its capacity and social relations are embedded in vertical clientelistic manner.

Civil society organizations (CSO) that are targeted in the development approach are mainly development NGOs. International development agencies have sponsored these NGOs in developing countries to implement their programs of development and good governance. Such NGOs, funded by donor agencies act as dependent partners, implementing their projects based on Western notions of civil society. They are showing success in social development and service providing programs. Besides these development NGOs, every developing country has its own indigenous social organizations, generated from cultural and historical circumstances. In most cases these groups are not integrated into the mainstream process of development. However, these community groups, social clubs and associations are important part of the civil society from social, historical and democratic view points. Unless these organizations are also taken into consideration in the third world civil society studies, it is not possible to understand overall nature and influence of civil society upon the political system. In the same way, it is important in the development approach to include local indigenous civil society organizations along with development NGOs, for making assessments and forming strategies aiming better governance and democracy. The present paper addresses civil society combining both types of CSOs.

2.2. The Debate Concerning Applying Western Notions of Civil Society to non-Western states

Researchers agree that associational revolution in developing countries is significantly influenced by external factors including donor enthusiasm for NGOs as agents of economic and political change. Nevertheless, criticisms to introduce such Western notion of civil society in non-western settings have gained considerable attention in recent scholarly writings due to the ramifications observed in different countries. This may be discussed from two overlapping viewpoints, that is, imposition of a new idea in a very different social-historical setting and from the point of immature institutional development or lack of necessary conditions for proper functioning of civil society.

Without careful and sensitive prior analysis of needs in the social and political contexts, donor intervention in local civil societies can end up distorting and weakening the local processes of association and problem solution (Howell and Pearce 2001, 121). Such projects based on preconceived notions of civil society and neglecting indigenous settings, local circumstances, and histories, provokes controversy. There is no guarantee that the liberal democratic model of civil society will necessarily bring positive outcomes across nations, cultures, history and political system.

This may be considered as a similar endeavor of exporting modernization theory from the developed North to developing South. Sardamove (2005, 391-394) is of the opinion that failed efforts of social modernization for decades, attempts to create Western-style nation-states, and inter-communal conflicts have paradoxically produced, in his words, a partial 'retraditionalization' of social life in the developing world. In these societies, most individuals have remained embedded within face-to-face and quasi-kinship networks and have tended to pursue social goals through informal associations based on personal or factional loyalty. As a result, beneath the successive social and political changes, societies have remained dominated by tightly-knit 'mafias' pursuing narrow agenda.

Strong influences of such trends have caused a clientelistic and parasitic nature among the modern NGOs. Civil society organizations have brought tangible benefits like social welfare, empowerment, education etc. but they have been generally unable to exercise the multiplying effects often expected of them like pluralism, democracy.

The necessary institutional development and environment for a civil society to move for pluralism and democracy is in most cases absent in those societies. Often, high rate of violence, marketization of rule of law, privatization of law enforcement, and the wide gap between the poor and the privileged (Oxhorn: 2003), concentration of political power in the highest political office, constrain civil society's democratic potential in Third World countries. These have caused periodic setbacks to the democratic development in countries like Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia that do have vibrant civil societies (Alagappa, 2004:493). These constraints to the performance of civil society and ultimately to democracy, remind the strong presence and influence of indigenous vertical social forces such as clientelism, patronage, nepotism, corruption, and violence all working within political system.

2.3. Arguments Concerning using the Case of Bangladesh

The case of Bangladesh demonstrates evidences of tangible success of civil society in grass-roots development in contrast to its inability to contribute effectively in political participation and democracy. A weak state, poverty, donor policy, and a long tradition of religious philanthropy have contributed to the rise of a substantial number of NGOs in the country (Lewis 2004: 305). In the past 15 years, a number of NGOs have brought a silent revolution to rural Bangladesh through their service-providing projects, mostly through micro-credit, education, and health. This is considered an important advancement for uneducated and poor villagers with low education levels. On the other hand, civil society's role in ensuring pluralism, participation and advocacy has been insignificant. In this regard, Westergaard (1990: 175) has described Bangladeshi civil

society as being weak and fragmented. Yet Holloway (1998) points out that civil society's resource constraints could be the main reason for its failure. Refuting them, Quadir (2003, 432) has simply described the civil society organizations of Bangladesh as being partisan, engaging in manufacturing and maintaining an elite-dominated hegemony rather than advancing the genuine interests of the groups they are supposed to represent.

Moreover, the ability of civil society to eradicate poverty—the most important goal for donor groups in introducing the idea of civil society in Bangladesh—has been challenged. Davis and McGregor (2000, 47) claim that although Bangladesh has a notable history of what can be readily described as civil society, there is growing evidence that a considerable part of civil society may not necessarily lead to the reduction of poverty and may even be implicated in the ongoing reproduction of poverty. The challenge for development practitioners in this case is to understand the meaning and role of civil society in specific cultural and political contexts.

2.3.1 Historical and Political Background

Historically, Bangladesh society has always been alienated from the state. During the British colonial period, the relationship between the state and the emerging civil groups was naturally confrontational. Afterwards, the oppressive rule of the Pakistani elites up to 1971 strengthened anti-state sentiment among civil society organizations. During her 36 years of independence, Bangladesh was under direct and indirect military authoritarian rule for 16 years. All these had a deep negative influence in institutionalizing bureaucracy, political parties, and other democratic institutions. The major political parties lack internal democracy. There exists a confrontational political atmosphere which also weakened civil society. Political parties in the fledging democracy are fighting for monopoly of power and using it to build a support base, oppress and suppress political opposition, and provide patronage to their own

supporters. Civil society is often used and manipulated to such ends.

2.3.2 Social and Cultural Background

In combination with historical and political influences, indigenous vertical norms, such as the patron-client relationship, patronage, nepotism and corruption which developed through centuries in the rural society and afterwards generated into the national life, play an important role in civil society performance in Bangladesh. Factionalism and the patron-client network have formed the base of social organization (Jahan 2005, 199). While the present ruling elites of Bangladesh have a moral commitment to Western political philosophies such as democracy or socialism, in practice they rely on the patron-client relationship to run the state and political parties (Islam 2001, 429). Political parties tend to recruit support by co-opting patrons in various localities (Jahan 2005, 200). Patronage is another institution that is most useful for understanding social and political life in Bangladesh (Lewis 2004, 319). As kinship linkages are influential in Bangladeshi social culture, nepotism is extended not only to direct family members but to lineage, relatives (including those linked through marriage ties), and neighbors and friends. Moreover, it is necessary to mention that Bangladesh has been rated five times (2001-2005) in a row as the world's most corrupt country by Transparency International⁶. In this connection, Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus comments, "[N]othing gets done unless you bribe, it's part of life. It's not the law or rule any more, its how you are paying" (The Daily Star, 18 January 2007). Actually Bangladesh society is a highly complex network involving reciprocal favors and obligations, and, as a result, payoff is the lifeblood of the country (Khan, 2005). Violence and violent expression of demands is another weak point for Bangladeshi civil society. As the government and political leaders hardly

⁶ Corruption Perception Index, 2006, Transparency International Bangladesh, available at <http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/CPI2006.pdf> (internet access at 12 June, 2007)

pay attention to peaceful protests of the opposition or petitions and advice from CSOs, often demands are expressed through violent strikes and demonstrations. Such violent civil society mobilizations are then utilized by the opposition to their political ends.

The historical, political and socio-cultural facts of Bangladesh lead us to assume a hostile and penetrative environment where civil society organizations come in interaction with other social, political and market actors in the political system. Such social and political facts have weakened the ability of civil society to strongly participate in political affairs and ultimately ensure better democracy and good governance. This paper investigates the grass-roots functions as well as advocacy participation of CSOs and tries to analyze them from the viewpoint of their indigenous setting⁷ using survey and interview data as well as other supporting secondary materials.

3. Methodology

The arguments and propositions in this study are based on both primary and secondary data. The secondary data have been collected from published and unpublished books, articles, research reports and dissertations. The primary data have been gathered from a field survey of 504 civil society organizations (CSO) in the Rajshahi district in Bangladesh in September and October 2006⁸. The Rajshahi district was selected as it best represents Bangladesh civil society at the

⁷ By this term I refer to society and social culture, norms, beliefs, customs, institutions, organizations, community interactions, social stratifications, and the status quo that have historically developed and been institutionalized in the region.

⁸ This survey is a part of a multi-country survey on civil society organizations sponsored by a Special Project of University of Tsukuba named 'Civil Society, the State and Culture in Comparative Perspective (2003-2008)', directed by Professor Yutaka Tsujinaka and funded by the Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

periphery and meso level, in terms of urban rural distribution, social composition, education, economy, and administrative importance⁹. All registered or enlisted CSOs of eight categories: cooperative organizations, voluntary social organizations, NGOs, youth groups, labor unions, trade organizations, professional associations and university-centric organizations¹⁰, totaling 3,768 organizations in the district were regarded as the total population. The sample size was selected through a random sampling process: 1,227 organizations were selected randomly representing 30% of each category. Ultimately, representatives of 504 CSOs were actually interviewed making the return rate 41%. Each organization was directly interviewed with a structured questionnaire. Moreover, formal and informal interviews were conducted with resource individuals—scholars, experts, civil society leaders, NGO officials, politicians, and government administrators concerning civil society in Bangladesh in April and September of 2006.

⁹ Justification for selecting Rajshahi district: As Rajshahi is a divisional town, divisional head quarters of all administrative offices as well as district branch offices of private companies, bank, educational institutions and NGOs are found here. Like the national agrarian economy (20.4% to national GDP), economy of Rajshahi is also contributed most by agriculture (19.5%) and very little by industry (8%), 76% of the national population lives in the rural area, similarly, 67% of households in Rajshahi are farm households. National literacy rate (45%) resembles Rajshahi's literacy rate (47.4%). Again as the district is the centre for higher education in North zone of the country it attracts population from different zone and strata and provides a space for associational activities (Data sources, Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh 2002, 2004, World Bank Development Indicator 2006).

¹⁰ After indicating their status on the meta level, the 504 responding CSOs were again asked to categorize themselves in terms of 13 subcategories, such as agricultural organizations (18%), economic organizations (11%), labor unions (3%), education and research organizations (3%), cultural organizations (3%), administrative organizations (0.2%), social welfare organizations (44%), professional organizations (2%), citizens groups (1%), NGOs (7%), religious organizations (1%), recreational and sports organizations (6%), and other types (1%).

4. Civil Society and Grass-roots Activities

A large portion of Bangladesh civil society is grass-roots oriented and the nature of its activities are related to the socio-economic development of the rural sector. Among the 504 CSOs surveyed, most showed an interest in national policies on poverty alleviation (72%), social welfare (58%), local and rural development (59%), and education (47%). Sixty-three percent of the CSOs are active at the union or ward level (the lowest local government unit in Bangladesh). Moreover, 76% of the organizations indicated that they were somehow involved in grass-roots development¹¹. Table 1 shows the involvement of CSOs in different categories of grass-roots activities. Respondents were free to choose multiple answers if they were involved in more than one way in grass-roots development. Among them, the most popular activities were found to be health (46%), education (44%) and economic empowerment (44%) or micro-credit.

Table 1 Civil Society Involvement in Grass-roots Development

Types of grass-roots activities	CSOs (f)
Active in government-NGO cooperation for rural development	16% (81)
Active in developing group network	24%(122)
Active in women empowerment	31%(158)
Active in local representation and ventilation of grievances to the authorities	18% (90)
Active in education and literacy	44%(222)
Active in health education and health service	46%(235)
Active in legal, political and human rights	17% (90)
Active in economic empowerment	44%(222)
Active in social and political awareness and participation	30%(149)

N=504, *No Answer=1 (0.2%)**Not Applicable=106 (21%)

(Source: Prepared by the author based on the survey data)

¹¹ This refers to CSO programs such as micro-credit, literacy, skill training, relief, health, women empowerment, group network building, as well as social mass-awareness, humanitarian and legal aid carried out at the rural level and within poor communities.

Progress took place mainly through development NGOs. In different studies, it has been evident that villagers who receive micro-credits from the NGOs or who participate in NGO programs are more likely to undertake new income-generating activities, raise their income and productivity, empower themselves, adopt family planning, reduce infant and child mortality, prevent childhood diseases, and attain self-reliance in meeting their socio-economic and other welfare needs than those of their comparable non-beneficiaries (Amin 1997, 116). Besides material development, the poor have heightened their self-confidence over time (IOB 1998, 3 and Scheyvens 2002). NGOs have also been successful in inspiring these poor, uneducated people to learn, become socially and politically aware, and even to participate and win in local council elections. In the 1996 general parliamentary election, the turnout of women voters was 77%¹². In the local Union Council Election held in 2003 among 4,484 unions, 3,945 women council member candidates were from the NGO named Bangladesh Rural Advance Commission (BRAC), and of that figure, 2,388 succeeded in being elected¹³. Other NGOs also sent their beneficiaries to the local council. NGO efforts for education have ensured 82% primary school enrolment in Bangladesh¹⁴. No doubt these are important achievements in strengthening civil society in rural Bangladesh. Thus, it may be stated that where there was nothing, now there is at least something.

In the present survey, respondent CSOs were asked to separately evaluate their grass-roots performance and the overall performance of NGOs in Bangladesh on a scale from 1 to 7 where “1” indicates very little success while “7” means very high success. Naturally, a rating over “4” indicates optimistic success. On average, CSOs engaged in grass-roots activities evaluated their performance as 4.3 (Standard Deviation=

¹²USAID Fact sheet, <http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/womrts/intwmday.htm>, [Access date, 21 August, 2006]

¹³BRAC Annual Report 2003.

¹⁴UNICEF Website http://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/child_development_education_389.htm [Access date, 8 November, 2006]

1.28), while the average overall national performance of NGOs was just 4.1 (Standard Deviation=1.16). Thus, CSOs' self-evaluation of civil society concerning their performance is positive but not overwhelming. We can infer that while they have achieved something, it may not be enough for the overall development of the grass-roots sector.

5. Difficulties and Impediments to Further Advancement

To attain their ultimate goal of teaching individuals and organizations to participate and advocate, to foster policy debate, and to disseminate analyses of issues and policy options in Bangladesh, civil society has to move much farther forward from the stage it has reached thus far. This requires further teaching, more organized collective functions and better autonomy for civil society organizations. This is where development has become stagnant. Table 1 shows that the involvement of CSOs in building group networks (24%), local representation and ventilation of grievances (18%), and social and political rights issues (17%) is relatively less than in other areas of involvement.

Previous studies have also revealed that often rural micro-credit debtors do not have full control over their money. NGO workers place priority on the commercial value of micro-credits vis-à-vis its welfare potential. In most cases, the education level as well as the management and leadership qualities of NGO beneficiaries is below the standards to gain independence (Tasnim 2005b, 92, 175, 177; Quadir 1999, 213; Ullah and Routary 2003, 118). Village organizations or groups formed by the beneficiaries of NGOs seem to act like sub-branches of the particular NGO instead of articulating members' needs and preferences (Hulme and Edwards 1997, 276 and IOB 1998, 251). Several factors may be indicated as impediments to further advancement of civil society from this level. This study has identified four fundamental impediments in this regard. The first is the donor policy based on Western theory and

experience on civil society, the second is the influence of the local elites and vertical norms upon the NGOs, the third is the politicization and bureaucratization of NGOs, and lastly, the neglect towards local collectivity and voluntarism in the development policy.

5.1. Donor Policy

International donor agencies' policy of using NGOs as a means to achieve good governance and bring success to their development programs in developing countries is very much influenced by the theories of Alexis de Tocqueville, Robert Putnam and the John Hopkins Centre for Civil Society Studies (Howell and Pearce 2001, 42). These ideas have been formed with the experiences of Western societies, overlooking the indigenous setting and culture of Bangladesh. In this survey, CSOs were asked to evaluate the role of foreign donors and international NGOs in the development of civil society from a scale from 1 to 7, where "1" means very little contribution and "7" means the highest contribution. Similar to the NGO efficiency evaluation noted earlier, here also the evaluation mean is only 4.1 (Standard Deviation 1.599), indicating that CSOs accept the reality of positive contributions by foreign actors but they do not highly appreciate their role.

5.2. NGOs and Rural Elites

NGOs are outsiders and naturally their social roots are very weak. Initially when they enter rural society, either they experience clashes with the status quo or they build compromising relationship with rural elites. The days of clashes between the NGOs and the status quo are over (Stiles 2002, 99). At present, in most rural areas, it may be observed that a local elite-NGO alliance is dominating the local councils (Nobusue 2002, 51). The new and rich resources that NGOs have brought to rural society helped them reach the position of new elites, serving as patrons to the poor. Rather than bringing change to the social order, NGOs have established themselves in an advantageous position in the long chain of

vertical clientelistic network found in Bangladesh society.

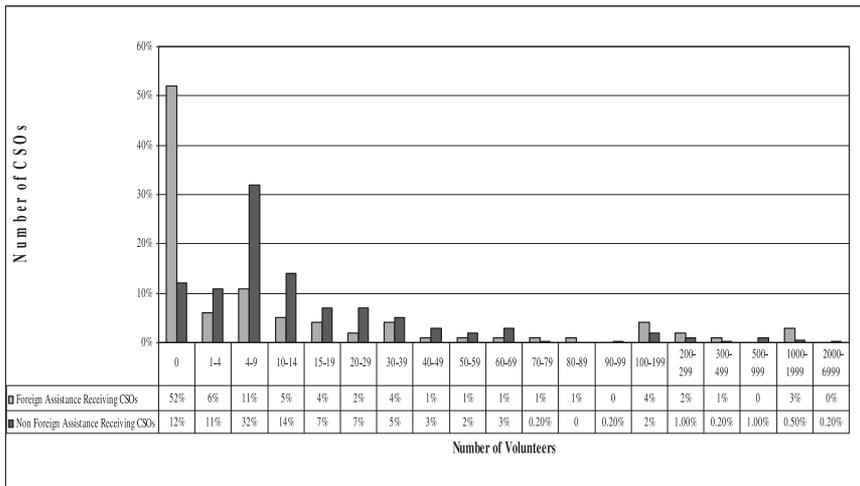
5.3. Politicization and Bureaucratization of NGOs

The more NGOs are getting involved in the political agenda, the more they are becoming politicized (Tasnim 2005a, 28 and Stiles 2002, 120). The umbrella organization of development NGOs, the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), has become divided and practically inactive due to the political alignments of its leaders (The Daily Star, 18 February 2003, Hossain 2006:242-245). Big NGOs have also become bureaucratized. Their management programs and strategies have been termed “top-down initiative to get bottom-up development” (Amin 1997, 118). In an opinion poll conducted by BBC World Service Trust on Bangladesh citizens, only 11% have demonstrated trust to the NGOs (The Daily Star, 16 November 2005). This situation is very much incongruous for a strong civil society network. Among the surveyed CSOs, only 11% admitted that they form coalition with other like minded NGOs on different occasion and issues. Later part of the paper will focus more on politicization and vertical social and political links that constrain the participatory role of the civil society.

5.4. Ignoring Local Group-based Activities and Voluntarism

Not only foreign-funded NGOs but also tens of thousands of village and sub-district-level organizations have been extremely effective in improving the lot of the people, especially at the time of natural disasters in Bangladesh (Stiles 2002, 122). These are organization such as clubs, cooperatives, community groups, theatre groups, private charities, and credit unions. There are also a high number of religious charities (prayer groups, mosque committees or orphanages) in every village. But there has been very little effort to include or link such indigenous groups with modern trends in rural development. These organizations have the potential to develop collective unity and develop social and political consciousness among active citizens and citizens’ groups. Among these

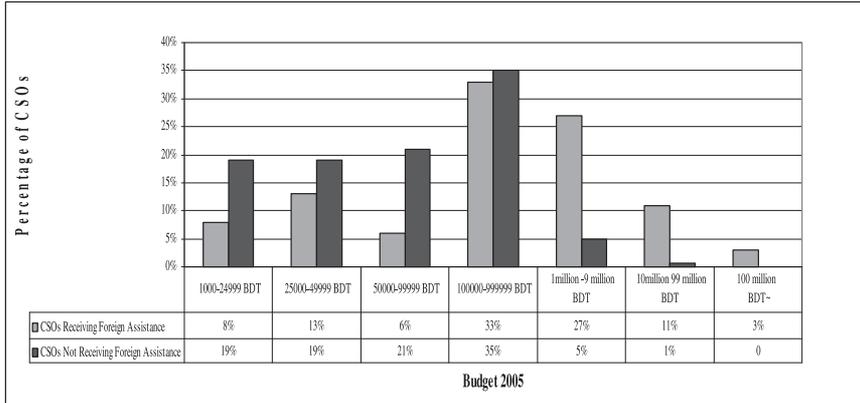
local and small CSOs and cooperatives, only those that are registered were targeted by the present survey. It has been found that though they are very small in terms of the number of employees and their budgets, they are very rich in volunteers. Volunteers mainly run these organizations while the big NGOs rely on paid staff for their management. NGO budgets are also much higher than other CSOs. Figures 1 and 2 show volunteer and budget strength of CSOs that receive foreign assistance (19%) of any type and those do not receive foreign assistance (81%), respectively. Figure 1 shows the richness of volunteers among the small CSOs that do not receive any type of foreign funds. In most cases their number of volunteers ranges from 1 to 40 persons, and the most common among such CSOs (32%) is to have 4 to 9 volunteers. Only 12% of such CSOs have mentioned that they do not have any



*N¹⁵<sub>=504, n1=96, n2=407, No Answer = 1 CSO (on receiving foreign assistance).
 (Source: Prepared by the author based on the survey data)</sub>

Figure 1 Number of Volunteers of Foreign Assistance Receiving and Non-receiving CSOs

¹⁵N means total number of CSOs surveyed, n1= CSOs that have admitted that they receive foreign assistance in cash or kind, n2 means CSOs that have mentioned that they do not receive any type of foreign assistance. Only 1 CSOs refrained from answering about receiving foreign assistance.



* 17% of CSOs receiving foreign assistance and 22% of those not receiving foreign assistance did not provide their budget statistics. CSOs in total 106 (21%) have not been considered in this graph. So the valid N here is 398 n1=80 and n2 =317.

** The budget is provided in Bangladeshi currency BD Taka. 1 US \$= 69 BD Taka and 1 Taka = 1.7 JP Yen (According to Yahoo currency converter <http://finance.yahoo.com/currency/> On 15 May 2007

(Source: Prepared by the author based on the survey data)

Figure 2 2005 Budget of CSOs Receiving or Not Receiving Foreign Assistance (in Bd. Taka)

volunteers, while such absence of volunteers is very common among CSOs receiving foreign assistance (52%). As the number of volunteer rises more than 100, we may observe rather steady presence of CSOs receiving foreign assistance. This is because large NGOs belong to this group and some of them have identified their large number of beneficiaries as their volunteers.

A significant portion of the sample CSOs refrained from providing their budget. However, with the collected data available (Figure 2), it is clear that in the year 2005, the annual budget of CSOs not receiving foreign assistance (94%) ranges between BDT 1000 to only BDT 1 million. On the other hand, 33% of the foreign-assistance-receiving CSOs budgets' range from BDT 100,000 to BDT 1 million, 27% of such CSOs have budgets ranging from BDT 1 Million to BDT 10 million while 11% have budgets between BDT 10 million to BDT 100 million. The budgets of the large NGOs (3%) are much higher, exceeding BDT 100 million annually.

In case of employee, 78% of CSOs not receiving foreign assistance

have mentioned that they do not have any employees, while 77% of the foreign-assistance-receiving CSOs have mentioned specifically the number of their employee. Among these types of organizations 57%, have full-time employees ranging from 1 to 14 persons. Large NGOs (2%) may have more than 200 employees working in a certain locality or district.

Data presented indicate distinct gaps between the financial and human resources of the foreign- assistance-receiving-CSOs and the non-receiving-CSOs. NGOs receiving foreign-assistance may be well equipped with handsome budgets and skilled employees; but it is the small local groups that are rich in spirited volunteers. These small local groups are also engaged in grass-roots activities, but due to the lack of necessary resources and technical guidance, their social efforts have hardly been effective or evaluated.

6. Civil Society Participation through Advocacy

Besides the NGOs and the large number of small voluntary groups and cooperatives discussed thus far, Bangladeshi civil society also includes different types of professional associations such as labor unions, chambers of commerce, trade organizations, different mass organizations (women's and youth groups), hometown organizations¹⁶ and philanthropic groups. These are mainly civic-based advocacy organizations in which the educated middle class participate. This section of civil society has played a glorious historical role in times of national crisis to advocate the causes of nationalism, secular society and democracy, and in rising against state power, such as the East Pakistan Language Movement (1952) that ultimately led to the independence of Bangladesh in 1971 and the mass

¹⁶ Such organizations are set up by those who have their origin in a particular place but now living in the capital or divisional town. Such organizations try to work for the interest of the people hailing from the same hometown. Mostly students, businessmen, professionals, and sometimes politicians become members of such organizations. (Holloway 1998, 62; Tasnim(b) 2005, 47)

movement against the autocratic-military regime in 1990. Civil society members have also played a crucial role in ensuring free and fair elections in 1990, 1996 and 2001 by forming non-party care-taker governments (Tasnim 2005a, 25). In most of these cases civil society elites or leaders, very near to state power and administration, or active at capital-Dhaka, have played the decisive role. Moreover, in all cases, civil society contributed on a big event or at times of national crisis or need. However, during the normal time, in the process of democratic consolidation, overall advocacy function¹⁷ of civil society both at the national and local level is not encouraging. Within the survey, CSOs were asked whether they thought that civil society in Bangladesh has been successful in influencing national policies. Only 32% responded positively and the majority 68% answered negatively. The same echo was found among most of the resource individuals interviewed. Such pessimistic perception of the CSOs became clear, when they were asked about their actual involvement in policy making and advocacy. Tables 2 and 3, show the nature of policy

Table 2 Civil society involvement in policy making, policy breaking¹⁸ and development decisions

Geographic area where the organization encompasses its activity	Frequency	Success*** in policy making (f)	Success*** in policy breaking (f)	§Participation in PRSP (f)***
Union/Ward	320	11.3% (36)	3.1% (10)	4.1% (13)
Sub-district/Municipality	96	10.4% (10)	2.1% (2)	20% (19)
District	48	22.9% (11)	20.8% (10)	29.2% (14)
National	31	16.1% (5)	16.1% (5)	29% (9)
Global	9	55.6% (5)	33.3% (3)	0
Total	504	13.3% (67)	6.0% (30)	11% (55)

N= 504 §3.6% (18) refrained from answering. ***Sig P < 0.01 (two-sided).

(Source: Prepared by the author based on the survey data)

¹⁷ This term refers to functions such as participation in policy-making and preparation of budgets, lobbying, and educating the public concerning on different social and political issues by CSOs.

¹⁸ "Policy breaking" refers to the success of the CSOs to prevent any government policy, decision or budget to be formally adopted.

Table 3 Issue-based advocacy functions of different civil society organizations

Type of Organization (Total)	Advocacy for Development Issues						Campaigns related to Politics and Democracy				
	In Labor right and Unemployment issue(f)	In Rural development (f)	In women's right issues(f)	In Education (f)	In public health(f)	In Environment issue(f)	In Political and human rights(f)	Against Corruption issue(f)	For better law and order(f)	Against Street Politics and <i>Harai</i> (strike) Culture(f)	For Separation of the Judiciary from the executive branch(f)

Agriculture and farmer related organization (92)	7.6%(7)	43.5%(40)	15.2%(14)	31.5%(29)	26.1%(24)	13.0%(12)	5.4%(5)	5.4%(5)	10.9%(10)	0	1.1%(1)
Economic or business organization (56)	17.9%(10)	33.9%(19)	41.1%(23)	33.9%(19)	42.9%(24)	28.6%(16)	10.7%(6)	19.6%(11)	17.9%(10)	0	1.8%(1)
Labor union or federation (16)	62.5%(10)	12.5%(2)	25.0%(4)	50.0%(8)	37.5%(6)	25.0%(4)	18.8%(3)	31.3%(5)	18.8%(3)	6.3%(1)	12.5%(2)
Education and research related organization (17)	17.6%(3)	11.8%(2)	11.8%(2)	41.2%(7)	29.4%(5)	35.3%(6)	11.8%(2)	11.8%(2)	5.9%(1)	0	5.9%(1)
Cultural organization (16)	25.0%(4)	12.5%(2)	31.3%(5)	37.5%(6)	31.3%(5)	18.8%(3)	18.8%(3)	37.5%(6)	12.5%(2)	0	
Social welfare organization (223)	20.6%(46)	39.9%(89)	35.9%(80)	43.0%(96)	43.5%(97)	36.3%(81)	10.8%(24)	24.7%(55)	18.8%(42)	3.6%(8)	4.9%(11)
Professional organization (8)	50.0%(4)	37.5%(3)	37.5%(3)	62.5%(5)	50.0%(4)	50.0%(4)	50.0%(4)	50.0%(4)	50.0%(4)	37.5%(3)	37.5%(3)
NGOs* (33)	15.2%(5)	36.4%(12)	57.6%(19)	39.4%(13)	45.5%(15)	30.3%(10)	15.2%(5)	27.3%(9)	12.1%(4)		
Recreational or sports related social organization (32)	15.6%(5)	15.6%(5)	18.8%(6)	37.5%(12)	28.1%(9)	28.1%(9)	15.6%(5)	12.5%(4)	21.9%(7)	3.1%(1)	3.1%(1)
Administration, citizen, religious and other type of organization (5)	27%(3)	27%(3)	27%(3)	36%(4)	36%(4)	36%(4)	9%(1)	9%(1)	18%(2)	9%(1)	9%(1)
Total (504)	19.4%(98)	34.9%(176)	31.7%(160)	39.7%(200)	38.3%(193)	29.6%(149)	11.5%(58)	20.2%(102)	16.9%(85)	2.8%(14)	4.2%(21)

* 0.6% (6) CSOs refrained from answering. *** Sig. P < 0.01 (Source: Prepared by the author based on the survey data)

participation and rate of advocacy functions of CSOs working at different geographic levels and also belonging to different categories.

Table 2 reveals the low rate of CSO participation in policy making (13%) and success in preventing any decision, policy, or budget they did not support (6%). The third column of Table 2 shows the percentage of CSOs that participated in a nationally and internationally¹⁹ well-publicized government policy on poverty reduction, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The PRSP was formed in phases between 2000 and 2005 and it is claimed that all types of stakeholders at all levels had been consulted in its formation²⁰. However, the survey results show that only 11% of CSOs took part in PRSP opinion exchange meetings. Table 3 shows CSOs' involvement through advocacy in important issues in Bangladesh. High rates of involvement are mainly related to development issues like, education (40%), public health (38%), rural development (35%), women's rights (30%), and the environment (30%) having close connection to their service-providing actions at the grass-roots level. Labor rights or human rights attract only 20% involvement of civil society. The issues that are more related to politics and democracy such as campaigning for the establishment of law and order (17%), against corruption (11%), against street politics²¹ (3%), and for separation of the judiciary (4%) were not addressed. Their tendency seems to avoid issues that are more concerned with political action and that may lead to uncomfortable relations with state and political parties.

¹⁹ By the websites of international development agencies like, World Bank, Asian Development Bank etc.

²⁰ *Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction*. 2005. Planning Commission, People's Republic of Bangladesh. available at IMF website <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2005/cr05410.pdf> (Access date: 15 May, 2007).

²¹ In Bangladesh, political parties often attempt to encounter their rival parties not at parliament or committees but at streets through strike and violence.

7. Discussion: Factors behind poor participation of civil society

What causes such patterns of involvement or poor participation? It is not political apathy, which may serve as an explanation in the case of developed democracies (Putnam 2000, 35, 46-47). Rather, it is the high politicization of the CSOs. In the survey, 44% of CSOs considered politicization to be one of the reasons for Bangladesh civil society not being able to influence national policies and 77% of CSOs thought it was important for CSOs to come out from under the influence of politics and political leaders to ensure an effective civil society. The politicization of civil society²² can be analyzed together with political institutional factors and socio-cultural factors.

7.1 Political Institutional Factors

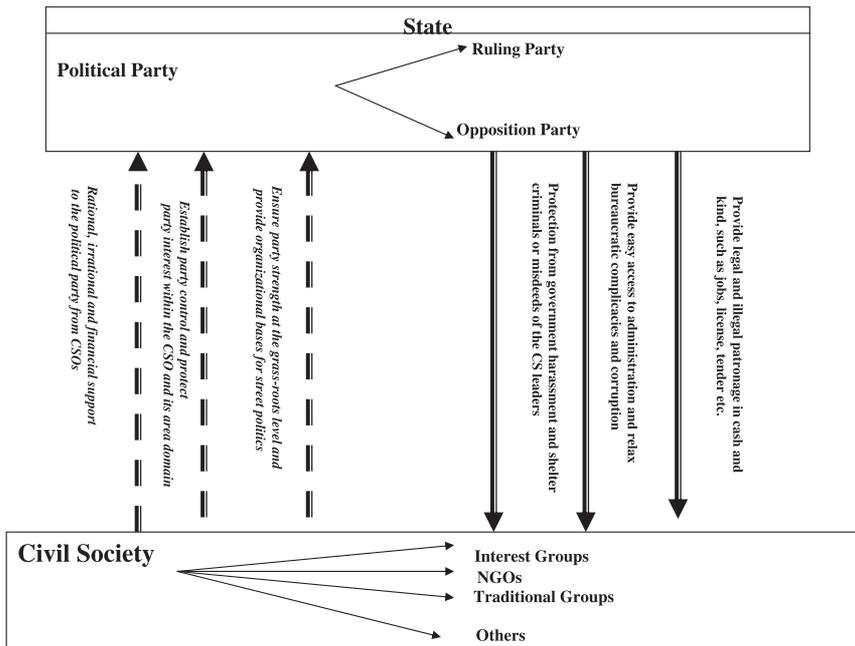
Civil society organizations, especially advocacy groups in Bangladesh, either support the government or the opposition parties. Labor unions, professional associations, university groupings, chambers of commerce, and even newspapers are identified primarily by their political affiliation (Stiles 2002, 110). They are in effect co-opted by the parties (Blair 2000, 197). Instead of representing the collective interests of the people, these civil society organizations are mainly engaged in the practice and promotion of the ideas and interests of a given brand of politics (Quadir 2003, 432).

In the survey, CSOs were asked to rate the influence of 15 types of actors in politics on a scale from 1 to 7. Among the 15 types of actors, political parties were rated the highest with a mean of 6.48 (Standard Deviation=1.189). But when they were asked to rate the cooperation that existed between them and political parties on the same scale from 1 to 7,

²² When a civil society organization makes politically motivated decisions or move, either as directed by a party or government; or influenced by the political affiliation of its members, bypassing the original objectives and interest of the group, we may describe it as a politicized civil society organization.

they rated very low with a mean of 2.61, but a standard deviation of 1.74. Moreover, the survey data reveals that the percentage of civil society organizations contacting the ruling party and opposition party is 64% and 51% respectively. So there is relatively high percentage of contact with powerful parties though low rate of formal cooperation. This implies a lack of formal or horizontal relationship between civil society and political parties which may lead us to infer a vertical (powerful and weak) relationship existing between them. This has become evident through the information's gathered from interviews with resource individuals.

The vertical give and take relationship existing between the political parties and different civil society organizations understood from such interviews has been expressed through a simple diagram (Figure 3). At



Source: Drawn by the author

Figure 3 Vertical Reciprocal Relationship between Civil Society and Political Parties

the top of the figure are the major Bangladeshi political parties. They have the same possibility to win a general election and form coalition cabinet as well as enjoy full control over the state, administration, and judiciary or become the opposition in parliament and engage in violent street politics. In the lower portion of the figure are the civil society organizations of different categories. At the mid-section of the diagram, two contrasting paradigms may be observed. The civil society organizations and leaders from their lower position are sending different types of rational and irrational support up toward to political parties and acting in favor of the political interest of those particular parties. While in turn, the political parties from above, with their available state resources, distribute legal and illegal favors to CSOs or their leaders. In this process, the CSOs lose their independent status and become divided, determined by their members' party affiliation.

7.2. Socio-cultural Factors

As it may be observed in Figure 3, politicization of civil society is taking place in a vertical manner. Political parties are co-opting civil society organizations through patron-client relationships, patronage, corruption, and violence.

7.2.1 Patron-client Relationship and Patronage

Patron-client relationships are based on direct, face-to-face encounters between individual elites and poor people and are characterized by little or no formal structure. They may be explained as an exchange of relations between roles; a special case of two persons' ties involving a large instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection and/or benefits to a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patrons (Scott 1972, 178). This vertical patron-client link existing in the political system of Bangladesh reaches up to

highest post of the government machine—the Prime Minister—and may go down to a poor farmer or a laborer. The local leaders and civil society organizations, NGOs are clients to the state and patrons to the citizens and villagers (Islam 2001, 213).

It has been revealed through discussion with the resource individuals that, interests of the clients cover group favors such as project sanctions, financial grants, and creating job options as well as personal favors including government loans, employment, promotion, business grants and licenses, government contracts, legal matters, and simple favors such as medical help. In return, the government and political parties receive loyalty and support from different sections of the social strata, ensure vote banks, financial and logistic support during elections, execute party control over different institutions such as education, industry, business, welfare, government institutes, and even the media and ensure necessary organizational base for staging mass meetings, violent protests, and strikes. Patronage²³ and nepotism take place in the same vertical give-and-take process.

This also explains the fact that developmental NGOs have turned into new patrons to the poor, both in relation to providing them with micro-credit and mediating with other power structures on their behalf. In interviews, executives of well-established NGOs admitted the fact that under the present circumstances, the NGOs also need to show their political affiliation or at least maintain good informal relations with government and incumbent political parties to get their projects accepted

²³ Patronage refers to the distribution of favors to individuals in exchange for political advantages accruing—or being expected to accrue—to those who give the favors. The provider of the favors may be the government or it may be a political party and such favor constitutes patronage if the advantage gained by the recipient directly or indirectly involves the public sector. Thus the favor may be an honor, a job or position, a contract, or an advantage given to a particular district such as a road or hospital (Blondel 2002, 241). For smooth administration, governments need to distribute a minimum amount of patronage, but when patronage reaches its extreme form it comes close to corruption.

or release their foreign funds through administration.

7.2.2 Corruption

Corruption is (i) a hidden violation of a contract that, implicitly, states a delegation of responsibility and the exercise of some discretionary power, (ii) by a public agent (the bribee) who, against the interests or preferences of the principal (its public organization) (iii) acts in favor of a third part (the briber) from which he receives a reward (the bribe). The resources exchanged can be various: the gain can be a direct or indirect one, it can involve money but also other utilities and services, the exchange of commodities may be simultaneous or delayed, the value of goods may also differ (della Porta and Vannucci 1999, 16). As corruption is a common social and political problem in Bangladesh, the survey tried to learn the nature of corruption and the problems that civil society organizations face in their interactions with the state. As this was a very sensitive question, 32% refrained from answering. 30% of the CSOs admitted that they encounter administrative corruption. Besides, 38% CSOs mentioned about non-cooperation from the officials and 44% admitted facing bureaucratic complicacies. The later two problems are also interrelated to administrative corruption.

In 2005, Transparency International branded Bangladesh as the most corrupt country for the fifth time a row. In the report on Bangladesh in 2004²⁴, the sectors of political parties and NGOs were identified as moderately corrupt; that is, considered as corrupt actors in 1.1 to 3 percent of the total²⁵ media reports on corruption. Among the individuals involved in corruption, 2.6 percent were from NGOs and 2.6 percent were political leaders and workers. The most corrupt individuals were officers/employers of the government sector (71.9%). Civil society

²⁴ *Corruption Data Base Report 2004 (Summary Findings)*. Transparency International Bangladesh. [online document] <http://www.ti-bangladesh.org/> [2 December, 2005].

²⁵ 1754 reports in total.

organizations are always in interaction with politicians, government, and administration, and NGOs themselves are part of civil society. So civil society is not free from corruption, rather it is entangled with corruption.

7.2.3 Violent Behavior

Violence is a political weapon in Bangladesh, which is often considered democratic. In 2006, sudden and violent citizen protests concerning power supply and environment issues have shown success in forcing the government to accept their demands. However, such victories came at the expense of innocent lives²⁶. In the survey, among the CSOs (32%) that think that civil society in Bangladesh is successful in influencing national policies, 39%, (which is 11% of the 504 respondents) mentioned these recent two incidents as instances of civil society success. This reveals that there also exists a wide difference in the perception of civil society among the CSOs themselves and among domestic and international actors.

²⁶ From January to April 2006, the Kanshat Incident took place where the thousands citizens of Kanshat (a small rural area adjacent to the study area — Rajshahi district) staged protests in demand for mainly uninterrupted power supply. In their clashes with the authorities people were killed when police opened fire upon them. This incident sparked mass protest where more strikes and sit in were held and more people were killed or injured, not to mention the loss of public and private property which attracted national and international media. At last the government came into terms with the citizens and agreed to their demands (The Daily Star, 7-17 April 2006).

Another incident coupled with the same magnitude of citizen protests, violence and loss of lives took place in August 2006, in Fulbari. It was against an open pit coal project by a British company named Asia Energy, which would have direct environmental impact and destroy the community and livelihood there. Different environmentalist groups were warning about the project long before. After, violent outrage and losses of lives, the citizens became the winner, forcing government and Asia Energy to abandon the project. (The Daily Star, 27-31 August, 2006) Also http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5357458.stm (Access date: 9 December 2006)

8. Conclusion

Bangladesh so far has a vibrant civil society both in terms of its contemporary meaning and according to the liberal democratic model. This paper shows that, the majority of the CSOs are local based and engaged in service-providing functions at the grass-roots level. The flow of foreign funds has contributed to the development of this sector. A group of development NGOs has brought notable changes and development among the poor from the economic and social aspect. However, these NGOs are only a part of civil society in Bangladesh. Besides these NGOs, there are a good number of cooperatives, voluntary, and religious groups and small clubs that attract membership. Though they are small in size and are run with scant budgets in contrast to foreign-funded NGOs, they are also involved in social development. So there is a notable involvement in grass-roots actions among the civil society organizations. However, these two types of CSOs are not integrated in the development process which is facing obstacles to further advancements. Besides NGOs and small local groups, other types of interest and advocacy groups such as professional organizations, labor unions, cultural groups, youth groups, and trade organizations exist at meso and macro levels. Taking all three sets of civil society organizations into account, I have shown that their involvement in policy formation and advocacy functions is poor. They hardly take part in policy activities and hardly succeed in influencing government decisions to their interest. Participation rate in actions and issues that may lead them to a better democracy is significantly low. Secondary data and interview information lead us to infer that these CSOs are often politicized and co-opted by political parties. The paper refers to an informal vertical relationship that runs between the state, political parties and civil society organizations which may be inferred as an important reason for such poor participation of civil society. The vertical relationship is based on the rules of patron-client relationships, patronage, corruption and the

language of violence.

Liberalization, democratization, decentralization, civil service reform, containment of corrupt governments and further partnership with civil society, information dissemination, civic education, increasing competition, multiple nodes of alternative political power (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2002) have been termed as the solutions to the problems by the international donor groups. However, initiatives taken from outside may bring success in a few cases, but cannot change the entire society. The identified impeding factors, like, corruption, patronage, patron-client relations, to a participating civil society in Bangladesh are hidden in hundreds of years of social tradition and political history (Broomfield 1976, Davis and McGregor 2000, 55-56). It cannot be expected that state and civil society would change and become a participatory and vigilant one in a year or even a decade. When most civil society organizations are co-opted by the state and political parties, it is difficult for these organizations to strengthen themselves and their networks and develop both as a counterbalancing and a cooperating sector to the state. Donor-prescribed solutions require good commitment and cooperation from all sides including politicians, civil society and citizens. Realization must come from inside, rather being injected by foreign actors. Challenges lie ahead in finding ways to liberate civil society groups from their perpendicular relation with politics and form their united platform to exert their right to participation. The problem is not particularly of Bangladesh but of other developing nations too. Prospects for further research in this field lies in searching relevant strategies based on a deep understanding of local circumstances, history, culture, and indigenous norms.

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