Dealing with the Local Level Power Structure: Findings from a Qualitative Study of Three Villages in Greater Faridpur District

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Abstract

As *World Development Report 2017* reminded us, understanding how the local power structure works, and how it is perceived, continue to be important themes for mainstream development policy and practice. Power asymmetries contribute to exclusion, inequality and restrict equitable growth. This paper reports on findings from a recent re-study that aimed to build a bottom-up view of how ordinary people try to deal with local power structures, comparing data from 2004 and 2016. Using semi-structured interviews, disaggregated focus groups and local participant observation, data was collected in Greater Faridpur District in order to gain more insight into the workings of the formal and informal institutions that govern peoples' everyday lives. Continuing a trend observed in the earlier data, the traditional village 'net' power structure has continued to fade, providing people with a wider set of livelihood choices and institutional options.

However, while we had encountered examples of win-win pro-poor coalitions in the earlier study between local people, civil society groups and elected officials, such cases were far fewer in 2016. Although reforms have been put in place ostensibly to increase levels of local civic engagement, it is not easy to find evidence that these are working. Civil society space has diminished, along with opportunities for rights-based action to secure justice and inclusion. A decline in the Union Parishad's role and status as the basic institution of local government is a further worrying change that has negative implications for improving poor people's participation in local decision-making, achieving productive local government and civil society partnerships, and securing improved levels of local resource mobilization.

Introduction

Improving development policy and practice requires us to pay attention to the ways that power operates at the local level. *World Development Report 2017: Governance and the Law* (WDR) makes the case that effective governance can only be achieved by taking power asymmetries more fully into account. In order to make institutions work for power people, there is an overall need to move beyond technical 'capacity building' and 'best practice' approaches to engage more fully with inclusive forms of political decision making, including contestation, coordination, participation, and coalition building (World Bank 2017). This paper discusses how these issues play out locally in one locality in Bangladesh, where efforts to build the capacity and effectiveness of local government are set against the everyday realities of how power and politics operate to shape local people's lives.

Drawing on a set of new qualitative data collected during 2016-17, this article reports on findings from a study that aimed to build a bottom-up view of how ordinary people try to deal with the local power structure.[1] Using semi-structured interviews, disaggregated focus groups and participant observation, data was gathered in Greater Faridpur in order to gain insights into the workings of both the formal and informal institutions that govern peoples' everyday lives. The aim of the research was to address two central questions: 'what does the local power structure look like?' and 'is it changing in ways that can enable people living in poverty to make stronger claims on rights and entitlements?' The study aimed to document the barriers and challenges that people face as they seek to maintain and further their livelihoods. In this way the study aims to complement more conventional macro-level analyses of power being undertaken at country level.

In order to study the local power structure five main sets of institutions were identified and these are set out in Table 1. The first is the Union, the most visible element of decentralised local government, with its locally elected council or *parishad* and nested beneath

the Upazila (UPZ) sub-district and Zila district structures (see Siddiqi and Ahmed, 2016). The second element we identify as the political structures that lead from Parliament down into community level politics in the form of local political party structures and activists. Third is the formal judiciary from High Court down to the Village Court system, and finally there are the various civil society organisations and activities that we characterise as both 'formal' and 'informal' categories. We use formal civil society to encapsulate the NGOs and other established associational forms, and informal civil society to include *ad hoc* collective action groups such as those formed locally and temporarily to protect rights, as well as traditional social structures such as *samaj* and *shalish*.

Fieldwork was carried out in three contrasting locations: one peri-urban, one well-connected, and one remote village community.[2] The new study followed up on earlier research carried out by the authors out in the same communities during 2004 (Lewis and Hossain 2008). It is comparatively rare for revisit studies of this kind to be undertaken in order to compare past and present (but see Jansen and Rahman 2011 for an exception), so it is hoped that it offers a useful glimpse is afforded into changing realities. Central to the analysis is the enduring role of patron-client relations as key elements of the power structure, creating institutional arrangements that bring both benefits and risks for poorer people (Gay, 1998; Banks, 2015). Other key concepts used in the analysis of the data included governance, informality, empowerment, and patriarchy.

Findings from the Earlier Study

The aim of the original study was to understand issues of power and governance in anthropological terms 'from the ground up'. It focused on both the 'traditional' village power structure (the system of elders, structure of landholding, and its mechanisms for resolving disputes) as well as on villagers' relationships with the Union Parishad (UP), the lowest main tier of local government. It also documented the presence of non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local associations, and analysed their changing roles and significance. A key assumption made in the study was that the power structure was dynamic rather than static, and that even its so-called 'traditional' aspects were evolving and changing (Mannan 2015).

The mid-2000s was a period when there was growing investment in local infrastructure and this was slowly improving connectivity and market access. A diverse range of NGOs were delivering services and working on rights-based approaches to development (such as improving land rights for the poor) in attempts to foster more inclusive development at the local level. The UP was placed at the centre of ongoing decentralization efforts aimed at strengthening their capacities and inclusiveness (Ahmed et al 2010). Both the UP and the *shalish* were receiving support from government and international agencies that aimed to make them more democratic and participatory, and to improve gender inclusivity.

At the same time, mirroring the national situation of dysfunctional gridlock between the two main political coalitions led by the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), there was a high level of political polarization between supporters of government and opposition parties. This was played out within increasing factionalism and the increasing politicization of local level decision-making and resource allocation, sometimes leading to conflict.

A central aspect of the original study was that the insights it provided into the institution of patronage. Forms of patron-client linkages – such as the unequal forms of reciprocal relationship between wealthy landowners and poor tenants that have long dominated rural communities – are an important element of the local power structure. Our earlier study had reported that the patronage relationships that govern local power relationships were becoming less rigid. This finding was in contrast with studies such as *The Net: Power Structure in Ten Villages* (BRAC, 1982) which had emphasised the rigid nature of the traditional village level power structure and the propensity of village elites to capture any resources provided by government to support the local poor, and limit the latter's attempts to organise in pursuit of their interests.[3]

There was now a wider selection of potential patrons available for poorer people to choose from - including local elected officials, party politicians, NGOs and local business leaders, and a range of intermediaries through which such people could be approached. This diversification, we argued, was contributing to a local level power structure that was slowly becoming less unitary. Instead it was becoming what Mannan (2015) has termed a 'multifocal power structure' that allowed more economic, political and social 'room for manoeuvre' for disadvantaged groups in their negotiations with local elites. The 'net' metaphor had referred to relationships that had mainly served to constrain people (while also offering a measure of protection), but the new situation could be understood as something that was more akin to a 'web'. This implied a set of relationships that were now also based on the important of building *connections*, increasingly important for linking people with productive resources and opportunities (see Gardner 2012). People could still get caught up in the web, but they could also move across its many strands and create potentially useful new connections.

We also found there to be emerging synergies between local government and civil society actors. In some cases, these were leading to strengthening of the rights of the poor (such as in relation to improved land rights) and enabling more participation in local decision-making (such as influencing which local infrastructure projects were given priority by UP works committees). We found evidence for forms of positive, negotiated change taking place locally that we thought might be sustainable, in spite of the overall context of a turbulent and unstable national and local political system that had become highly adversarial and polarised between two confrontational political party blocs. For example, civil society organisations could sometimes work with an elected UP leader to help strengthen local land rights for people if this increased his popularity. Traditional village elites might accept more gender-inclusive *shalish* arrangements if this increased their reputation and prestige, and brought in more outside resources. The main source of power was no longer solely land ownership, but also increasingly important were the connections people were able to make to resources outside the village that they could then distribute: such as development resources, political linkages, and employment and migration opportunities (see Gardner 2012). Finally, the study also found a high degree of local diversity: that these issues were playing out very differently across the three village settings studied, leading to the finding that context and locality – such as the state of the economy, types of civil society that were active, and the individual strategies of local political leaders - mattered considerably.

Summing up the findings and recommendations from the first study (Lewis and Hossain 2008, p.13) we commented:

> Many people who live in poverty in rural Bangladesh still have little faith that local institutions will provide the means to secure rights or justice, but our study found some evidence that those with power can sometimes respond positively to negotiation and pressure from civil society around creating potential win-win outcomes which can benefit both poor and non-poor people. For example, we found that a union chairman may cooperate with an NGO that is seeking to strengthen land rights for the poor if it helps to build a stronger political support base for him. Similarly, when previously excluded people, such as landless women, campaign to take up positions within governance institutions such as the union or the *shalish*, either on the basis of bottom-up or top-down pressures, small areas of opportunity and policy 'space' are sometimes opened up. The challenge for the future is to combine understanding of this complex 'micropolitics' of local change with support for the strengthening of broader economic and political pro-poor change at the district and national levels.

Four practical insights were drawn from the original study, in terms of the need: (i) for designing and implementing interventions that recognise and build upon local institutional difference and diversity; (ii) finding opportunities for the identification of win-win coalitions with elites to help secure sustainable pro-poor change; (iii) supporting NGOs and civil society alongside broader institutional support to local and central government; and (iv) recognising more fully the importance of economic development as a foundation for sustainable governance reform and community level empowerment.

Findings from the New Study

Returning to these communities more than a decade later revealed many changes.

The country's longstanding 'illiberal democracy' has now moved in a new direction, away from the old bipartisan political system in which two competing political blocs of AL and BNP had alternated in power. Following the 2007 military-backed Caretaker Government, an AL-led alliance won a majority at the 29 December 2008 general election. After disagreement around the reform of the arrangements for the January 2014 elections, the BNP refused to take part and the AL was re-elected unopposed for an unprecedented second term in government. This means that with the political opposition is in disarray, the AL is now dominant and, and the nature of what Hassan (2013) has called Bangladesh's 'partyarchy' has changed. There are concerns that restrictions on the activities of mainstream parties could create a vacuum in which a new extremist threatens to the stability of political institutions and the country's record of relatively inclusive growth (Khan 2017).

The AL government has enhanced the authority of Members of Parliament (MPs) by giving them an advisory role on the local UPZ sub-district authorities. According to Siddiqui and Ahmed (2016, p.574) this has made worse a situation in which 'MPs dictate instead of advising the affairs of local government'. It has also further politicised the local administrative system by allowing party affiliation to play a greater role in local UP activities. In 2016, elections were held with political party affiliations on the ballot paper for the first time (instead of just a candidate's name as before). This may also have been a factor that contributed to increased

election violence during these elections (Siddiqui and Ahmed 2016).

The economy has continued to perform very well in terms of growth in the period since the earlier study. According to UNDP (2016), Bangladesh has seen a 'major economic transformation' in recent years, growing an average 6.3% between 2011-15, and 7.1% in the 2016 financial year. Poverty has declined from 31.5% of the population in 2011 to 24.7% in 2015 below the national poverty line. There have been impressive gains in productivity and infrastructure improvement. Bangladesh's social development indicators improved as measured against the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). A new National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) has been put in place with the potential to better address social protection in terms of multiple dimensional needs and risks.[4] The government's Seventh Five Year Plan (2016-20) aims to further increase growth, build more citizen inclusion, and strengthen resilience.

Major challenges remain with high levels of extreme poverty (12.9% of the total population in 2015-16), along with growing inequality and increasing vulnerability. Growth has been achieved at the expense of high levels of environmental damage. Women remain disadvantaged in terms of earnings (52% lower than men's) and labour market participation (34% as opposed to 82% for men). Women's low economic status is reflected in high levels of gender-based violence (experienced by 65% of women in the last 12 months according to a recent government study). The country also has the fourth highest rate of child marriage in the world, a statistic that the government attempted to bring down by reducing the legal age of marriage from 18 to 16 years of age.[5] The informal sector remains the main source of urban employment. Democracy and governance are still deeply problematic, with low levels of civic participation, high levels of corruption (147th out of 167 according to Transparency International), and relatively little progress being made with civil service reform and building more transparent institutions. Tax revenue collection is below 10% of gross domestic product (GDP) making the level, quality and sustainability of public services generally low.

Revisiting the five institutions that make up the power structure, we find some key changes. First at the level of the three tier administrative system of Zila, UPZ, and Union the 2009 Local Government (Union Parishad) Act has created some important changes. This reform created a new local Ward '*sabha*' (council) meeting system, introduced a Citizen Charter, and brought measures to increase women's representation. There has also been a shift in political institutions. After failing to contest the last general election a severely weakened political opposition now leaves the ruling Awami League (AL) party as the dominant and largely unchallenged political actor in a way that is quite different from before. Local UP elections – which took place at the time of the fieldwork in early 2016 - have also become more politicised, and there was widespread violence reported in many areas of the country. Compared to 2004, MPs have gained more power to intervene locally in direct ways, giving them greater influence over how local development activities are carried out and to whom welfare and relief entitlements are distributed.

At the level of civil society, we find that economic support from NGOs in our communities has expanded, but that the wider NGO sector itself is less diverse. Rights-based NGO development work with the poorest has largely faded away. There is also a higher degree of political control of local civil society associations. Informal civil society in Greater Faridpur has continued to decline in its traditional forms, such as the local village level institutions. However, we do find cases of local level protest and community level action, sometimes taking 'unruly' forms. Finally, there are changes to the judiciary, including more flexible forms of the *shalish* (traditional dispute settlement meetings) and a continuing decline of the formal Village Court system.

What are the main findings from the new study in each of the three study locations? The peri-urban village today has experienced sustained economic growth that has improved local livelihoods. The area is more urbanised and will soon be absorbed into the local City Corporation. People report that local businesses are doing well, and that economic support from NGOs is useful and appreciated. The law and order situation is reported to be good, and there is a positive level of communal harmony between different religious and ethnic groups locally. There is strong community support for efforts to discourage underage marriages by government and NGOs. Forms of 'traditional' authority such as the *matbars* (village elders) continue to lose power. Compared with before, the elected UP has become less central to local development processes. With a UP Chair who at the time of the fieldwork was affiliated to the political opposition, local ruling party activists with the support of the local MP have set up informal by-pass arrangements that ensure that they maintain as much control as possible over local affairs.

The ruling party has also increased its influence over local civil society groups such as School Committees and Business Associations, contributing to a higher level of local politicisation than we had found before. The types of win-win pro-poor coalitions between local leaders and civil society at UP level that we encountered in the earlier study are much less common today.

However, there are still cases of small-scale informal community-level civil society action, such as the organisation of a defence group to challenge the threat of loss of water rights by local interest groups.

The well-connected village has also substantially improved its infrastructure and its local economy. The expansion of national and international migration opportunities, supported by government and NGOs, has had positive effects on local livelihoods. However, we found growing politicisation of local level institutions here as well, with the ruling party deploying informal strategies to work around the locally elected opposition-affiliated UP Chair. With the backing of the local MP, the UPZ Chair – who was formerly the UP Chair during our earlier study, and is AL-affiliated - extends party power by managing a patronage network in terms of access to jobs and local positions on committees and civil society groups, to some extent side-lining the UP. He nevertheless retains his solid local reputation for settling disputes fairly, with *shalish* arrangements that are reported as mainly working well. His a relative is the local UP Chair, which is another factor that helps in managing the relationship, suggesting that clan-based politics continues to provide a measure of stability to local institutions, even where there are party political differences. In this location formal rights-based civil society action by development NGOs has also become less common since the earlier research period. In its place there are more NGO loans and new forms of small business support, and our focus groups indicated that these are well liked by both poor and non-poor people. There are no reports of people struggling to repay their NGO loans as we had come across last time.

In the remote village, the picture is different. Despite its relative proximity to the local town, this is a village that remains comparatively isolated, cut off by a large river. Here there has been comparatively little infrastructural development that can improve local connectivity or enhance access to economic opportunities. Livelihoods opportunities are far fewer than we encountered in the other two study areas, and most people's economic position remains less favourable. Severe environmental pressures are also experienced by these communities in the form of large-scale river erosion, perhaps exacerbated by climate factors. This instability has caused many households to leave their homestead and farmland and resettle. Economic pressure has led to increased out-migration more from a position of weakness than from one of relative strength, as observed in the other two locations. Dhaka's expanding local informal sector garment industry (as opposed to the ready-made garment export sector) has become a growing source of new small-scale economic opportunities for many households in this community, though it is not as lucrative as opportunities observed in the other two areas, and appears to be strongly dependent on expanding the use of child labour as young teenage boys are the main travellers to the garment sector.

Once again, we found that there had been the relative marginalization of the local opposition party UP Chair. The MP had a high level of control over the distribution of externally provided resources from government, which he achieved through the use of a loyal party 'informal coordinator', who was also a UP member. With him as an intermediary, it became possible for party activists to bypass the normal UP level distribution system for local entitlements such as Test Relief and Food for Work (FFW), and this helped to consolidate a set of more politicised patronage networks. Last time we had found one or two relief-oriented NGOs operating here that were providing basic welfare goods and services. Today there are more NGOs than before operating in the area, and these organisations are now providing business training services and small-scale loans designed to improve economic opportunities. But there was little evidence of rights-based work or local advocacy by NGOs. The area is less socially progressive than the others, with for example more persistence of child marriage, which some claimed was linked with increased mobile phone and social media use. This was seen as intensifying concerns about family honour and reputation, particularly among the poorest households.

Discussion: Implications of the Changing Local Power Structure

Overall our findings suggest that local change has been unbalanced: there is significant economic development that is occurring but without much counterpart political development. Market connectivity is much higher than before, which means that people have better access to economic opportunities, but opportunities for enhanced participation in local decision making have not increased to the same degree. Poorer people still understand the power structure primarily as a highly personalised set of informal relationships with more powerful people, including but not restricted to, elected or administrative officials. The main actors in the power structure remain the same as before, but the power of MPs has increased, along with the growth of politicisation within the local power structure.

Continuing a trend that was identified last time, there is a more *multifocal* power structure that increasingly governs people's access to political and economic opportunities, as compared to the previous *unifocal* one in which people were dependent on the power of local landowning elites. This means that power structure is becoming more flexible than before, and people's access to connections, information and resources has broad-

ened. Despite a high level of agency, resourcefulness and creativity shown by many households, dealing with the power structure requires constant effort to build connections and negotiate partisan political interests in order to access opportunities, resources and entitlements. Furthermore, the diversity of NGO work has declined, leading to more economic support but less rights-based work that could support more inclusivity.

The process of formal decentralisation has been disappointing. A very concerning finding is the increasing marginalisation of the UP, which is intended to be a key tier of decentralised local government. This has in part been driven by the increasing dominance of the power of MPs who are seeking to build political support directly in local communities in order to manage their vote banks. The UP is increasingly being bypassed as a potentially inclusive and accountable centre of local decision-making and resource distribution, as MPs play more direct roles in local affairs. This is particularly the case where local UP chairs are affiliated to opposition groups. This has negative implications for the various local government 'capacity building' efforts that continue to take place aimed at strengthening participation and civic engagement (GoB 2014). While we found in 2004 that the UP's role was increasing in significance and that it was becoming a little more inclusive, this time local people told us that *'The UP's glory is now in the past'*. The aim of encouraging closer collaboration between UPs and NGOs in local development work that was embedded in the 2009 UP Act has not materialised. The modest gains towards increased women's representation in local bodies are a useful step forward, even if many report the continuing marginalization of women within actual decision-making processes.

The extension of the ruling party's power means that local power relations in each of our locations have been further incorporated into the wider 'political game'. The use of informal strategies is becoming a key tool for this incorporation. If there is an elected official in place who is inconveniently affiliated to the main opposition party, they are simply 'worked around' by the creation by the ruling party of informal coordinator and intermediation roles based on a patron-client relationship. In the same way, key local civil society organizations such as business associations are increasingly being co-opted by placing politically affiliated individuals in charge. One overall result is that local political competition has been reduced since the earlier study. This is a cause for concern because it leaves people with fewer opportunities to represent their interests, and because of fears that the opposition vacuum could become filled in the future by political or religious extremists. It also makes less likely the possibility that future new independent political leaders might emerge from local civil society. Competition is instead expressed through increased local factionalism within ruling party, evident from the tensions between MP and UPZ/UP levels in the peri-urban site. This might be taken as hinting at future instability. However, we did not find evidence of extremist political activity in our study areas.

Furthermore, locally distributed resources are still being mobilised in ways that give ordinary people little influence or control over decisions. Furthermore, such resources are being drawn from the centre, rather than being raised locally through taxes (even though a strong economy means there is increasing potential for doing this). The political interests are directly served by the allocation of resources at local level. Recently changed rules that now allow for the formation of Project Implementation Committees without needing a UP member as Chair contribute further to this. Nevertheless, the increased range of social safety net services, including new forms of support for disabled people, are proving relatively effective measures to reduce exclusion even with their politicised distribution.

When it comes to informal civil society institutions, we found that a resilient (though shifting) set of patronage relations remains at the heart of UP and Ward level meetings and activities. We did find some cases of poor people taking small-scale collective action to address local problems, such as land rights, often assisted by more powerful supportive patrons (such as journalists or lawyers). But aside from these messy spaces of 'political society' (cf Chatterjee 2004) in which people with relatively little power attempt to contest and negotiate, we did not find evidence of the kind of progressive social movements that some observers have hoped might emerge in support of social and political rights more widely. More positively, we found less presence of local *mastan* criminal intermediaries than some studies from other parts of Bangladesh might lead us to expect (e.g. Khan and Stidsen 2014).

Civil society space, as we have seen, has been shrinking both in the sense that it has become mainly dominated by market approaches to development (loans, business support) and because fewer rights-based or radical organizations are in evidence. The decline of rights-based development NGOs is a result of many complex factors, including tensions with government, internal organizational problems, practical difficulties with local mobilization approaches, and changing donor support trends (Lewis 2017). Their relative absence raises short-term problems for poor people seeking to advance their rights, and longer-term problems for progress with decentralization and local accountability. In the earlier study we found that when NGOs and local authorities worked together through building productive coalitions or forming appropriate partnership

arrangements there were sometimes positive outcomes for poorer people. Today there is less countervailing pressure from civil society visible on issues such as land rights or the use of extra-judicial killings, because to do so would risk problems from local AL leaders. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that the government strategy of building a co-opted civil society into a unified national development approach is one that may yet bring stable and inclusive economic growth, even if this is achieved at a high political cost.

Conclusion

We began with a focus on two central research questions that asked: 'what does the local power structure look like?' and 'is it changing in ways that can enable people living in poverty to make stronger claims on rights and entitlements?'

The answer to the first question is that the local power structure continues to have both formal and informal dimensions, with patronage relations at its centre. Today, we are less optimistic that the loosening of the power structure that we had observed in our earlier study is likely to continue. Despite the efforts to build the capacity of local government through a series of donor-funded initiatives, the increased local influence of MPs means that the ruling political party has consolidated power in local areas at the expense of local decentralising institutions such as the UP. Civil society space has also become reduced, particularly that formerly occupied by radical NGOs and civil society groups seeking to address local rights-based development in relation to land, local political participation and civic engagement.

The question as to whether recent changes are enabling people to make stronger claims to advance their livelihoods cannot be answered simply. There are fewer opportunities for the types of win-win coalitions that we had identified in the earlier study and predicted would become more frequent. Today ruling party political interests have increasingly captured local associations and other civil society groups. This means that while there is a wider range of patrons available (for example, in the form of local media supported activism and sympathetic local journalists), opportunities for poorer people to build horizontal forms of solidarity remain limited. Connected to this trend, local level political competition has also diminished because the ruling political party has consolidated its control of the local power structure and has weakened local political opposition. The forms of political competition that do take place are now primarily expressed through increasing factionalism at local level within the ruling party.

The combination of stronger local livelihoods and reduced democratic space is producing mixed outcomes for poor men and women. Undoubtedly, the ruling party is delivering increased prosperity and a degree of stability. Economic growth makes people more optimistic about the future, particularly younger people. There are small gains specifically for women in both the economic and the local government decision-making spheres, even though many constraints remain. There are encouraging signs that informal civil society action remains vigorous, along with other forms of 'rude accountability' (Hossain, 2010) in which people occasionally confront abuses by those with more power. But the overall picture of economic gain has not come without cost – in the form of 'political pain'. The formal power structure may be becoming more fragile, brittle and less resilient than before. The ruling party's increasing dominance within the networks that connect people with less power to those with more comes at a cost.

Elements of an older power structure remain, with the persistence of patron-client relations, elite clan politics and patriarchal norms, but these too are slowly changing. The range of patrons people can access has continued to widen, increasing opportunities for those with less power to pursue more favourable forms of connection. Within the power structure, the blurring of formal and informal roles and relationships has also continued, creating a complex 'web' of relationships that limits civic engagement but nevertheless offers up some opportunities for incremental inclusive change. Progress with achieving women's political inclusion into local institutions is occurring, albeit at a slow rate. Ordinary people are seeking to advance their interests within a wider framework of political and social institutions that may be becoming less flexible and more brittle. Today we find less resilience in the system in two senses: (i) while still currently relatively inclusive, the existing system could fracture if there is sudden political change and disruption in the future; and (ii) for poorer households, falling foul of the ruling party's patronage will have serious consequences, with fewer alternative non-affiliated patrons to whom they can turn. The social protection system is particularly vulnerable to political capture at the local level. There is a need to protect those people who are left behind within the overall picture of positive growth, such as those living in marginal locations, minority communities, and women who face continuing marginalization within formal governance structures.

Today economic growth is now front and centre in mainstream development policy, but we cannot afford for this to be at the expense of diversity, inclusion, and civil society action. The continuing value of economic growth to improving livelihoods is clear, but achieving

'inclusive growth' remains a challenging goal. Our analysis highlights the risk that economic gain displaces issues of inclusivity, participation and rights. Supporting local government and civil society in mutually reinforcing ways remains key to securing growth within inclusion. But it has become more difficult today, given the decline of rights-based civil society actors such as NGOs. The presence of types of informal civil society and the persistence of forms of 'rude accountability' (Hossain, 2010) nevertheless provide some cause for optimism in this regard. We still argue there is a need to avoid 'one size fits all' approaches and that it is vital to pay close attention to local difference. People in the remote location are made more vulnerable by environmental vulnerability and poor infrastructure. Our data also suggests the need to continue to treat with caution generalizations about what is happening in Bangladesh, such as those commonly made in relation to extremism, intolerance and religious tensions. Finally, the need to find ways to support pro-poor coalitions involving local elites remains, even though we found fewer cases of NGOs working constructively with local officials and informal power holders to address local problems.

As *WDR 2017* reminds us, understanding how the local power structure works, and how it is perceived, continue to be important themes for mainstream development policy and practice. Power asymmetries contribute to exclusion, inequality and restrict equitable growth. Our re-study found levels of coalition building between local government leader and civil society groups to be lower than those we had encountered in 2004. Although there are some reforms in place that have been designed to increase levels of civic engagement it is not easy to find evidence that these are working. The decline of the UP's role and position as the crucial lowest institution of local government is a change that brings negative implications for poor people's participation in decision-making, for joint government and civil society pro-poor coalition building, and for increasing local resource mobilisation. The implications of this decline are political and should not be seen as purely technical. This finding supports the *WDR's* argument that we need to think beyond technical 'capacity building' of local institutions to engage more fully with power issues in supporting more inclusive growth. There is a continuing need for policy makers and development agencies to prioritise civic engagement, coalition-building and forms of bargaining that can take better account of the needs of those people excluded from growth, and whose interests are captured by those seeking to maintain the *status quo*.

Endnotes

1. The full study can be accessed at http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/82224/1/17_0385%20Sida%20Report_v5_JustifiedCopy.pdf.
2. We gratefully acknowledge the invaluable assistance of an outstanding field team: Mr Abdur Rahman Liton, Mr Shakhawat Hossain Taslim, Ms Irfath Ara Iva, Ms Shamsun Naher, Mr Md. Belal Hossain, and Mr Md. Abu Alam. Liton, The main fieldwork was undertaken in December 2015-January 2016. It preceded the UP elections that were held in six phases between January and June 2016. The precise location of each of the study sites was concealed to maintain anonymity and security.
3. It also showed how 'vertical' patron-client relations between rich and poor (such as landlord/tenant, landowner/sharecropper, moneylender/loanee) were central to social structures, making the formation of such grassroots groups based on 'horizontal' links or 'social capital' difficult. Following findings from studies such as *The Net*, government and NGOs began searching for ways to bypass village elites and work directly with the poor through forming grassroots groups and better 'targeting'.
4. There has been an expansion of social protection measures since the earlier study. There are now a total of 145 'social safety net' schemes that are now being provided through a total of 23 different government ministries. Around 25-50% is estimated not to reach the intended recipients due to poor targeting and corruption. However, only 2.2% of GDP is currently allocated to social safety net expenditure, compared with 6-8% for other middle-income countries ('Allocate more for social safety nets', Star Business Report, *Daily Star*, 11 April, 2016).
5. Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/09/bangladesh-girls-damaged-child-marriage, accessed November 18, 2016.

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Table 1: Formal and informal institutions in the local power structure

Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' Civil Society	'Informal' Civil Society
Secretariat (43 Ministries and 15 Divisions)	300 member Parliament elected directly by constituents, plus 50 women members selected by MPs. (Since January 2014 all MPs are AL or its allies Jatiya Party, Workers Party and some independents after main opposition BNP boycotted election)	High Court	National NGOs (e.g. BRAC)	Elites and their formal and informal relationships (e.g. positions of power in government, civil society, business plus patronage and kin networks)
			NGO apex bodies such as ADAB/FNB	
			Federation of Chambers of Commerce (FBCCI)	Social norms e.g. gender relations
	Bilateral and multilateral international donors focused on governance (with conditionalities)		Journalist associations (print and electronic)	
	Political parties			
Departments (254) and Directorates, boards				

Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' Civil Society	'Informal' Civil Society
(173) with civil service of c. 950,000 staff				
Divisions (6)				
Zila (district) *Parishads* (64) (unelected) City Corporations (11)	Political party organisation and networks.	District courts with magistrates and judges (including civil and criminal courts)	District level FNB chapters Regional NGOs	
Upazila (sub-district) (491) with elected chair and two vice chairs (one female) Municipalities (225) Line ministry officials Upazila *Nirbahi* Officer (UNO) Development Coordination Committee (UDCC)	Local political party offices UPZ Committees of national political parties Informal patron-client relations (such as coordinator of LGSP) appointed by MP to bypass some Unions.	Formal land dispute court Assistant Commissioner (AC land) Police station	Field offices of national NGOs Local NGOs	Networks of kinship Patron-client relations (Note: some definitions of 'civil society' exclude these relationships, others are flexible)
Union Parishad (4,554) Union committees for school, market, law and order, etc.	Union Parishad with directly elected Chairman, 9 general seats, plus 3 specially reserved for women. Union level branches of national political parties.	Village courts (rarely used or effective) Arbitration councils (AC)	Business associations Market committees	Local political party organisers, activists, power brokers (increasingly by-passing official structures if occupied by opposition) Ad hoc structures of governance such as the Unit Office in the slum site.
Ward Committees (9 wards per union) Villages (86,038)	Political party activists Community police at Ward level. *Gram sarkar* village government (abolished 2007). Ward *sabha* meetings since 2011.		Village development and welfare associations NGO-formed grassroots groups for savings/other activities	*Gusti* (patrilineages) *Samaj* (social groupings) Mosque/temple committees *Shalish* (informal courts) Philanthropic activity Collective action groups (e.g. journalists)