

**Katy Gardner, Zahir Ahmed, Fatema Bashir and Masud Rana**

## Elusive partnerships: gas extraction and CSR in Bangladesh

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Gardner, Katy, Ahmed, Zahir, Bashir, Fatema and Rana, Masud (2012) Elusive partnerships: gas extraction and CSR in Bangladesh. [Resources policy](#), 37 (2). pp. 168-174. ISSN 0301-4207  
DOI: [10.1016/j.resourpol.2012.01](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resourpol.2012.01).

© 2012 [Elsevier Ltd.](#)

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/52763/>  
Available in LSE Research Online: Sept 2013

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## Elusive Partnerships: Gas Extraction and CSR in Bangladesh

### Introduction

This article examines a programme of 'Community Engagement' undertaken by the multinational corporation Chevron at a gas field in Sylhet, Bangladesh. Our aim is to examine the ideologies and practices of the programme, digging beneath the corporation's claims of partnership with the 'community' and suggesting that, paradoxically, 'community engagement' allows Chevron to remain detached from the area and its inhabitants, creating instead a particular set of practices and relationships which we term 'disconnect development.' The paper is based on anthropological fieldwork in the area from 2008-10, carried out by a small research team co-ordinated by the universities of Sussex and Jahangirnagar<sup>1</sup>. Our methods were largely qualitative, involving interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation, but also included household and community surveys, and drew upon Katy Gardner's long term research in the area, which dates back to the late 1980s<sup>2</sup>.

As far as we are aware, Chevron's programme of community engagement is the first CSR programme to take place amongst communities surrounding a mining or gas extraction site in Bangladesh. As such it should be examined carefully, not so much for lessons it might impart about 'how to do CSR', but more, the role of such programmes in changing or reproducing hierarchy and inequality, promoting or suppressing rights and providing pathways out of, or contributing to, poverty. Whilst the focus of the paper is upon one case study, our broader objective is thus to contribute to the broader literature on whether or not CSR is 'good for development' (Rajak, 2011; Jenkins, 2005; Gardner, 2012).

Within Bangladesh, the wider context is one in which energy shortages are a major hindrance to the country's economic growth. A 2010 report by the Asian Development Bank states, for example, that: 'acute power and energy shortages have reduced Bangladesh's short term growth prospects'<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, the extraction of the country's energy resources by multinationals, in particular gas and coal, has become one of the most explosive issues on the political agenda. Whereas people once rioted over food, increasingly civil disturbance in Bangladesh is caused by the issue of energy, whether involving protests against power shedding (when the power supply is turned off by the electricity board, often for many hours, in order to save energy),<sup>4</sup>, or over the presence in the country of extractive multinationals which, protesters argue, are plundering the country's resources. The role of extractive multinationals has caused serious political unrest in the country in the last decade. In 2006 protests against a proposed open cast mine in Phulbari, in the North East, to be operated by Asia Energy, which, it was said, would leave over 20 000 displaced people, led to the death of three and injury of around a hundred when police shot into the crowd. More recently national agitation has centred around the content of Power Share Contracts with foreign companies, with the activists

---

<sup>1</sup> The research team were Fatema Bashir, Masud Rana and Zahir Ahmed from the University of Jahangirnagar and Katy Gardner from the University of Sussex. The research was funded by the ESRC / DFID. We are grateful for their support

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account, see Gardner, 2012

<sup>3</sup> See: <http://www.adb.org/Documents/News/BRM/brm-201002.asp>

<sup>4</sup> See: for example, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Six-dead,-100-reportedly-wounded-in-Bangladesh-electricity-protest-5196.html> (accessed 14 October 2010).

arguing that these exploit the country's natural resources, leading to large profits for the multinationals, generous backhanders for corrupt government officials and nothing for Bangladesh. In September 2009, for example, a rally called to protest against the leasing of rights to extract off shore gas resources to multinationals led to police violence and the injury of 30 people.

At the heart of these protests is the widely held belief in Bangladesh that the state is corrupt. Those protesting at power shedding, for example, accuse electricity board officials of taking bribes, whilst disputes over multinationals revolve around the content of power share contracts, and allegations of bribery by corporations of government ministers. Rumour, counter rumour, civil unrest, accusations and arrests are the order of the day in a fragile democracy marked by lack of accountability, secret deals and limited if no transparency. It is significant that the research was carried out during a period in which the country was controlled by a caretaker government which took radical action over corruption (from 2007-08) arresting and holding in detention hundreds of politicians and business people. Recent reports from groups such as Transparency International suggest that under the new Awami League government, perceptions of corruption remain extremely high.<sup>5</sup>

The role of the Bangladeshi state and its lack of accountability therefore underscores any discussion of Extractive Industry CSR in Bangladesh. As such, our findings are probably similar to those of other research projects which examine the micro politics of CSR in contexts where the state is weak and unaccountable (see, for example, Zilak, 2005; Welker, 2009). As suggested at the end of the paper, besides providing employment and adding to the country's economic growth, corporations aiming at 'socially responsible' policies would do well to place their energies in pressing the governments they work with for greater transparency in their dealings, as well as being transparent themselves. Although Chevron is a signatory to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative, for example, neither the details of its deals nor the findings of its environmental or social impact assessments are made public in Bangladesh<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, whilst the company scores 88% for 'Organisational Disclosure' in Transparency International / Revenue Watch's 2011 data, it scores only 8% for 'Country led disclosure', figures which hint at corporate double standards<sup>7</sup>.

### **Chevron's Vision of Partnership**

Chevron have a vision. Put simply, this is:

*" .... To be the global energy company most admired for its people, partnership and performance".<sup>8</sup>*

---

<sup>5</sup> In 2010 Bangladesh scored 2.4 in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, which ranged from 9.3 in New Zealand, to 1.4 for Afghanistan and Myanmar ([http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2010/results](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results) accessed 3/11/11)

<sup>6</sup> Freedom of information legislation will mean that this information will be available in the US from 2012

<sup>7</sup> See Revenue Watch / Transparency International, 2011 'Promoting Revenue Transparency: 2011 Report on Oil and Gas Companies' (available at [http://www.transparency.org/publications/publications/other/prt\\_2011](http://www.transparency.org/publications/publications/other/prt_2011); accessed 3/11/11)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.chevron.com/countries/bangladesh/inthecommunity/>; accessed February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2010

That 'partnership' is valued so highly by the company is re-iterated time and time again in their promotional literature. Indeed, it is integral to 'The Chevron Way':

### ***Partnership***

*We have an unwavering commitment to being a good partner focused on building productive, collaborative, trusting and beneficial relationships with governments, other companies, our customers, our communities and each other<sup>9</sup>*

Besides sounding good, what does such 'partnership' mean and what does it involve? Why, indeed, do global extractive industries need to have a vision or a 'Way'? Isn't enough for them to simply make a profit? That demonstrable ethically sound practice and social responsibility are crucial to multinational corporations in the Twenty First Century has been established for some time by a burgeoning literature on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)<sup>10</sup>, the best of which seeks not simply to address whether or not this is 'good for business', or indeed 'good for development', but the power relationships and moralities involved, as well as the unintended consequences (Rajak, 2011). In the extractive industries, in which security considerations are often paramount, anthropologists have also pointed out how CSR and the relationships it involves, be these of patronage, 'partnership' or both, are designed in part to gain a 'social license to operate', particularly in locations where there has been a history of resistance against operations and violent confrontation such as Nigeria (Zilak, 2004) or Indonesia (Welker, 2009). In these cases 'partnership' doesn't merely look good for global shareholders, it creates compliance. Indeed, CSR and its attendant discourse of partnership may be core to the creation of 'secured enclaves' in which extractive industries can successfully operate (Ferguson, 2005). And whilst global capital is usually highly mobile, moving on to more peaceful sites of production if one becomes too tricky, the extraction of natural resources is necessarily fixed. It is in these contexts that 'partnership development' comes in so handy (Zilak, 2004).

Yet although 'partnership'<sup>11</sup> implies an ongoing relationship, countervailing forces push in the opposite direction. Alongside the rhetorics of connection, corporations need to disconnect, for whilst a degree of territorial fixity is necessary for natural resource extraction, geopolitical as well environmental and geological uncertainty mean that if conditions change they must quickly disinvest and move on to pastures (or gas fields) new. These contradictory pressures mean that they need create and celebrate partnership whilst simultaneously following what Jamie Cross has dubbed 'the corporate ethic of detachment' (Cross, 2011).

In what follows we suggest that whilst apparently building partnerships in the villages that surround one of their largest operations in Bangladesh, the Bibiyana Gas Field in Sylhet, Chevron successfully remain detached from the local population

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.chevron.com/about/chevronway/> (accessed 2/09/11)

<sup>10</sup> Cf Blowfield and Frynas, 2005; Kapelus, 2002; Duane, 2005; Burton, 2002; Jenkins, 2005

<sup>11</sup> Partnership is 'the relationship between two or more people or organisations that are involved in the same activity', according to the Encarta Dictionary

via their community development programmes and employment policies. This contradiction is submerged by ideas and practices within global development discourse which celebrate the disconnection and disengagement of donors via the rhetoric of sustainability. Chiming with development praxis and the neo-liberal values which underscore it by stressing self reliance, entrepreneurship and 'helping people to help themselves', the corporation's Community Engagement Programme does little to meet the demands of local people who hoped for employment and long term investment, a form of connection that is discordant to discourses of self reliance and sustainability.

### **The Bibiyana Gas Field: A Short History**

That the Bibiyana Gas Field is about a quarter of a mile from the site of Katy Gardner's 1980s doctoral fieldwork is a co-incidence, but serves as a powerful reminder of how peoples' lives in apparently remote and rural places are bound up with global processes in multifaceted ways, drawing to our attention the complex interactions between global and local scales, or 'the grips of worldly encounters' which Anna Tsing calls '*friction*' (Tsing, 2005:4). These 'grips of worldly encounters' have been taking place in Sylhet for centuries; rather than the story of Bibiyana involving the discovery of natural gas and subsequent dragging of otherwise isolated rural communities into the global arena via resistance to and eventual compliance with multinational companies, it is one of on-going connectedness. Bibiyana has, for example, had a long and intimate relationship with the global economy, via the *lascars* who worked on British ships from the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the men who left for Britain in their thousands from the 1960s onwards, and their families who settled in the UK with them since the 1980s. As described in Gardner's earlier work (e.g. 1995, 1993, 2007, 2008) three of the villages surrounding the gas field are what's known locally as 'Londoni' villages, meaning that a high proportion of people have either settled in the UK or have close relatives there. The original migrants spent most of their earnings on land, building houses, and transforming their status. By the 1980s access to the local means of production (land on which to grow rice) was almost wholly based on one's access to foreign places: Londoni families owned almost all the local land whilst those families who hadn't migrated but were once large landowners had slipped down the scale to become landless or land poor. Local economic and political hierarchies were therefore dominated by relative access to the U.K. and other destinations in Europe, the US or the Middle East.

These inequalities took on a distinctive local pattern, adhering to kinship networks. Whilst large and dominant lineages capitalised on the opportunities of movement to Britain and have built substantial power bases in their villages, in Kakura, which was originally settled by in-migrant labourers, no-one had the economic or social capital necessary for migration. Today the village is over 80% landless, far higher than the national average of 56% (Toufique and Turton, 2002).

The discovery of natural gas in the area took place in the mid 1990s by Occidental. By 2000 Unocal had taken over in the development of the resources; a smaller installation a few kilometres north at Dikhalbagh was to be joined by a second development, in between the villages of Nadampur, Karimpur, Kakura and Firizpur, using around sixty acres of prime agricultural land. The land was to be forcibly acquired by the Bangladeshi government and rented to Unocal, who were

contracted to develop the site. Once gas was being produced it would be sold back to the government at a rate to be fixed in a 'production share contract'. In 2005 Unocal merged with Chevron and by 2007 the gas field went into production, joining other gas fields operated by Chevron in Moulvi Bazaar and Jalalabad. Today, Chevron produce nearly 50% of Bangladesh's gas<sup>12</sup>. Whilst executives explained that the company were hoping to stay in Bibiyana for at least thirty years, whether this happens is a moot point. Not only is the extent of reserves continually disputed but the difficulties of working with the government and attendant 'risk to reputation' may make their game far more short term.

Given the forcible loss of land, it is hardly surprising that the development of the gas plant met with consternation in the villages surrounding the site. As soon as people heard of the plans, 'Demand Resistance Committees' were set up and a series of demands put to Unocal: the rate of land compensation was top of the list, followed by connection to the gas supply (the villages do not have piped gas). A school, a hospital, a fertiliser factory and improved roads were also included in the 'demands'. Today, people claim that Unocal agreed to these stipulations; if this was the case they were making promises they could never keep: rates of compensation, the piping of gas to the communities and the development of power plants and factories were not in their gift but determined by the government. The negotiations took place in a context of passionate agitation. In the perspectives of the landowners who led the protests they were about to lose a resource which sustained not only their households but those of many people around them and which was irreplaceable; for some it seemed almost like a loss of self. As one of the biggest land losers told us: *'The day they grabbed my land, I lost my words. If I remember that day I have to stop myself from going mad.'*

In 2005 the road was blocked by local people in an attempt to stop construction. The police were called, threats made by the District Commissioner, arrests made and writs issued. Yet whilst some local leaders tried to hold out against the inevitable, others started to negotiate: the seeds of 'community engagement' were sown. By this time Chevron had taken over Unocal and the compensation process was underway: this was for land and property taken in the building of the plant and the roads that surrounded it. Today Chevron claim that 95% of land-owners were compensated at the highest rate they could negotiate with the government<sup>13</sup>

Within Bibiyana many people were highly ambivalent about the gas field: angry at the loss of their land, certainly, and with a strong sense that the gas was a local resource which should benefit local people, yet also hopeful that the plant would bring substantial economic development in the form of jobs, industry, improved infrastructure and so on. At first these hopes seemed to be well founded; when the site was being built hundreds of local people gained employment as labourers, their safety training and company registration cards signalling that the plant would provide a future of secure employment and connection to modernity.

---

<sup>12</sup> According to Chevron's Bangladesh CEO in 2008, Steve Wilson, the production share contract was 60:40 – ie, the government would take 60% of profits and Chevron 40%. For 100 units of gas, the company have to give 60 to the government free of charge; the remaining 40 are sold to them. This figure is disputed by activists, who claim that Chevron take 80% of the profits.

<sup>13</sup> We heard of various ongoing 'cases', often involving land that was already under dispute or had once been classified as 'enemy property': Hindu land that had been passed to Muslims.

In these early days the Demand Realisation Committees were optimistic that their requests would be met. Alongside the rate of compensation, connection to the gas supply was seen as hugely important, symbolising the area's inclusion in the benefits of economic development as well involving a cleaner and less dangerous form of energy: then, as now, women cook over firewood, causing chronic respiratory problems. As the demands of the Committees imply, local understandings of the relationship between Chevron and the villages surrounding the gas field were based more on a model of compensation than partnership.

### **Imagining Partnership**

In their accounts of this period, Chevron Bangladesh's External Affairs team are keen to describe how much time and effort was devoted to developing positive relationships with the villages surrounding the gas field, transforming hostility and confrontation into partnership and support. After the rate of land compensation had been agreed, the design of community development programmes became key to the company's community engagement strategy, replacing what were seen by them as impossible demands. Both a hospital and gas connection, for instance, can only be provided by the government, whilst 'sustainable development', funded via NGOs, seemed to be a realisable objective. As their publicity material states:

*Chevron Bangladesh will always consider itself a partner of the local people of Bibiyana in the community's effort to improve their socio-economic condition. The company would like to strengthen this partnership with a view to achieving sustainable development in the locality*<sup>14</sup>

To have a 'partnership', one has to have communities with which to partner, and indeed, 'local leaders' to help facilitate that partnership. In their narratives of the early days of community engagement, Chevron executives describe how developing friendships with these 'leaders' was central. In his account, for example, a top official was at pains to describe the efforts he took in building relationships with particular individuals who he assumed to be 'leaders' who represented 'the community'. Our discussions revealed that he had no idea of internal village dynamics, coping strategies or indeed levels of poverty in the area. That the 'leaders' only represented certain interests or did not have automatic lines of communication with the poorest or particular groups (eg Hindus) did not seem to have occurred him. Another official told us in self congratulatory tones how before Chevron funded its programmes in the area: 'there was nothing there.'

Whilst forging positive relationships is key to the merit making of community engagement officers, the schemes also carry neo-liberal moralities and can be seen as a way of imposing social order on what could potentially be chaotic and dangerous to the gas plant. In her ethnography of colonial, state and donor improvement schemes in Indonesia, Tanya Li Murray argues that such schemes must be understood in Foucauldian terms as a form of governance which operates

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

by educating desires, aspirations and beliefs (Li Murray, 2007: 5). By rendering what are essentially political problems (such as extreme poverty, or the loss of livelihoods to industrial development) as 'technical' issues with a range of technical solutions, projects of 'improvement' govern by the back door.

In their accounts officials describe how the first stage of Chevron's community development programme involved the hiring of consultants and experts to 'map' the area that was soon to be referred to as 'Bibiyana'. Later came PRA exercises in which problems were diagnosed and the field of action delineated (Li Murray, 2007: 246). The knowledge gained from these exercises was written up in more reports, and the 'problem' (the loss of livelihoods to the gas field/ poverty) transformed into 'project goals'<sup>15</sup>. Like all development projects the solutions offered by the reports were by definition technical in nature. As a result of these 'scoping exercises', project objectives began to materialise, all of which found the solutions in strengthening community and individual capacity. After participatory assessment and planning, community groups were to be formed, with organisational capacity building taking place; training in literacy and other 'productive' skills would be offered, alongside technical, supervisory and marketing support.

Key to these objectives was the setting up of Village Development Organisations (VDOs) which would involve committees of the 'local leaders', who would choose beneficiaries for the credit and training. Through this mechanism actual relationships between the donor and the eventual recipients is avoided: it is the 'local leaders' and not Chevron who actually have to deal with the poor. The VDOs are modelled on a notion of natural communities, in which leaders speak for, and know, 'the people', and in which the role of development is to strengthen and modernise these structures, provide training and improve access. A second key element to the programme was its implementation by the NGO FIVDB, who would have an office in the area and run the actual programmes in conjunction with the VDOs.

Alongside the mapping exercises, with their technical language and objectives, the area (referred to by the Head of External Affairs as 'our community') is physically demarcated via Chevron's Road Safety Awareness Programme. Part of this involves large billboards, which have been erected to advocate road traffic safety; also health and safety procedures for workers (hired by contractors). Picturing smiling children or students sporting hard hats and tee shirts emblazoned with the Chevron logo, these bill boards create an image of a contented population, happy to be part of Chevron's 'Vision'. Similar imaginings of successful partnership are created by ceremonies and visits carried out by high level Chevron executives to the area, which are publicized in the company's publicity material and reports. A key event in the performance of success is the 'handing over ceremony'. School rooms or NGO offices are prepared, banners erected, local, national and international dignitaries invited. The community is represented by a selection of 'local leaders' and grateful recipients. Once assembled, speeches are made, photographs taken, usually of the moment of 'hand over': the computer, sewing machine or stipend physically changing hands<sup>16</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> *The project goal was : 'to assist the Bibiyana Gas field affected households and disadvantaged people to enhance their productive potential, improving their asset base and make sustainable use of them to overcome poverty through alternative livelihood.'* Alternative Livelihood Programme for Vulnerable Families of Bibiyana Annual Report, 2006-2007

<sup>16</sup> The Chevron Bangladesh Newsletter of July 2008 contains nine such photographs, in 24 pages.

Performances need an audience if they are to be meaningful. Whilst the assembled locals and dignitaries are important participants, handing-over-ceremonies require a global audience if they are to have their full impact on 'reputation'. Local performances of success are thus turned seamlessly into heart warming stories of partnership and community and disseminated via Chevron's PR machinery, the reports and newsletters to be downloaded at a click, received through the post for shareholders, or handed in hard copies to visitors and colleagues.

For example:

*Buffie Wilson, wife of Chevron Bangladesh President Steve Wilson recently made a visit to the village of Karimpur , located next to the Bibiyana Gas Field in Habiganj. Her visit heralded a brand new beginning for the families of Champa Begum and Jotsna Dev. Both women lost their homes during the devastating flood of 2007 and in standing by the community, Chevron gave them the chance to restart their lives afresh by rebuilding their homesteads. Their homes were officially presented to the proud new owners in a simple, heart warming ceremony and Ms Wilson was accorded a rousing reception. Champa Begum and Jotsna Dev finally found a reason to smile after last year's floods wreaked havoc, chaos and devastation in their lives. <sup>17</sup>*

Let us now shift focus from the ways in which Chevron have created and represented relationships with the villages surrounding the gas field within the idiom of 'partnership' to other aspects of their programme, all of which involve ideologies of self reliance and sustainability, geared towards the eventual disconnection of the donor rather than close, on-going connection.

### **Disconnect Development**

Whilst in Unocal's days gifts such as tee shirts (with the company logo) were distributed at random, the Chevron programme became increasingly aimed at 'community development' and poverty alleviation. Some gifts were aimed specifically at the poorest. Slab latrines were distributed to households without hygienic sanitation<sup>18</sup>. Tin roofs and concrete pillars for low income housing were also supplied, again, sporting the Chevron logo. The company could not provide piped gas, but it distributed smoke free chulas (stoves)<sup>19</sup>. These, like other donations came with a price tag: the 'community' should contribute to their upkeep. In the case of the stoves, for instance, an NGO worker explained that when it appeared that people were not caring for them properly, the decision was taken that they

---

<sup>17</sup> Chevron Bangladesh Newsletter, Year Y, Issue 2, July 2008

<sup>18</sup> According to literature produced by Chevron, they distributed 1,300 sanitary latrines among poorer households living near the field in the first year of operations, plus another 1,400 by March 2007 (*Bibiyan Gas Field : 1st Anniversary Report*)

<sup>19</sup> I never saw these stoves being used; they were unsuitable for the *lakri* (firewood) used for cooking, I was told when I asked about a disused Chevron *chula* I noticed in someone's yard.

should be 'sold' to recipients at a cost of two hundred taka (production costs were eight hundred taka), in order to instil a sense of ownership<sup>20</sup>. In terms of development discourse, such initiatives encourage responsibility and sustainability.

It is worth noting that by being the intermediaries between Chevron's donations and its recipients it is the NGO fieldworkers who have relationships with poorer people within the villages and who receive the most flak for failing to give enough, or being too dictatorial about how gifts should be used. For example, we heard frequent complaints that so and so from FIVDB hadn't allowed so and so from Kakura to join the savings group. Meanwhile, Chevron's community liaison officers were rarely seen around the place. Centrally too, existing relationships of patronage are maintained via the VDOs, which are composed of 'local leaders', who chose which households should become beneficiaries of the programmes. Unsurprisingly, these local leaders are also local patrons, from wealthier and more powerful lineages, invariably with strong transnational links. The poorest households – the sharecroppers and labourers who use local land but don't own it – are not represented on the V.D.Os. One of the complaints we heard was that elections for positions on V.D.Os were not anonymous; they therefore had to vote for existing patrons in order to maintain favour with them.

Other donations came with similar conditions, again, aimed at producing a sense of ownership. Two 'Smiling Sun' medical clinics were built, run by the NGO SSKS, and partly funded by the donations of transnational villagers. These provide diagnostic services but not medicine, with a further programme of outreach health workers, and an ambulance which could take patients to the nearest hospital in Sylhet, though at a cost. Our research in 2008 showed that the poorest households in the area did not use these services since in their view there was little point in having a diagnosis if they could not afford the prescribed medicines and, if in dire need, the fare of a CNG<sup>21</sup> was lower than that of the ambulance. Whilst not actually building a school, the company has provided support for four high schools in the area, via the funding of teachers and teaching materials, the distribution of school uniforms and providing several hundred scholarships for pupils each year<sup>22</sup>.

The clinics and scholarships are part of Chevron's explicit objective of creating 'sustainable' development and community partnership in Bibiyana. In the perspectives of many local people, however, the company has not fulfilled what they believed was originally promised<sup>23</sup>. Moreover, the ideal of sustainability is not necessarily shared by the poorest, who subscribe to a more straightforward model of assistance (*shahajo*) which has traditionally been provided to them by land owning patrons and visiting transnational villagers. Within this logic, that Chevron, a corporation with vast wealth, should be offering donations with price tags attached is hard to countenance. In the following analysis, made by a member of a VDO, Chevron are placed at the centre of the 'big disease' of poverty and disenfranchisement, responsible for its cure. They are not 'partners', but are placed almost in the role of the state, their responsibility for the well being of their 'communities' taken for granted.

---

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication from FIVDB field officer

<sup>21</sup> Scooter rickshaw, run on natural gas

<sup>22</sup> *Bibiyana Gas Field First Anniversary Report, 2008: 39*

<sup>23</sup> Note that I have no proof of what was or was not promised by Unocal / Chevron during the negotiations in 2005

*Say you have a big disease and Chevron is giving us a Paracetamol. If the disease is big the treatment should be big too. You need a big doctor, diagnosis, operations, expensive medicine, good care and so on. But Chevron want to satisfy us by providing Paracetamol?*

Whilst there are many who say they have benefitted from the Alternative Livelihoods Programmes and other programme benefits, most accounts of what has transpired since the heady days of the Demand Realisation Committees belie disappointment. This is conveyed as much by the leaders of the VDOs (or Chevron's 'local partners') as the project's beneficiaries. Worse, some of the leaders who the company were to develop the strongest 'partnerships' with were now accused by other groups of using the relationship to benefit themselves at the expense of their communities. As one such leader explains, the expectations were so high that they could never be met:

*Of all the demands we made to Chevron, we achieved about 5%. Our fellow villagers started insulting us because we hadn't achieved their demands. They became very suspicious, saying that we'd been 'bought' by Chevron and were no longer looking out for their interests. I suppose the reason for these suspicions is that I'm working as a contractor for Chevron, so people think I'm their man, not a man of the people. Through my tree planting project I can hire a few women labourers, but not much more, so everyone's dissatisfied with me. Their demands are so high, but I can't recruit 100 people, only 15...<sup>24</sup>*

Let us turn to one of the biggest disappointments for local people: the employment prospects of the gas field.

### **An Easy Flow of Labour**

Back in 2005 not everyone opposed the construction of the gas field. Indeed, for the many hundreds of landless people living in the villages that surrounded the installation it was seen as a huge opportunity. The early days of construction bore out these hopes. Many hundreds of people were employed as wage labourers, helping to build the plant and surrounding infrastructure. This included a small group of women, who worked on the roads. In contrast to the skilled workers at the plant, who are recruited directly by Chevron at national and international levels, none of these labourers were employed by Chevron, but via contractors, who tendered for the work at the plant's inception. Once given the contracts, Chevron enlisted them as private 'companies' or *enterprises*.

Once the gas field was finished, the majority of labourers were laid off. Today, the men we spoke to who had been made redundant claim that the reason for losing their jobs was they didn't pay bribes to the labour contractors, or were not connected to the locally powerful leaders who gained contracts with Chevron. As Parry has pointed out in his work at the Bilhai Steel Plant in India, the point of such rumours is not necessarily that they reflect the objective truth (which in Bibiyana's

---

<sup>24</sup> Interview notes, 2009

case was that the labourers were no longer needed) but rather they reveal a model of how the world *should be*<sup>25</sup>. In Bibiyana, the rumours reflect a belief that local people should be compensated for the damage to their livelihoods with secure employment at the Gas Field which is equitably distributed in a transparent way, not doled out via the social networks of labour contractors. The complaints we heard are thus as much about the informal nature of employer-employee relations and local politics as they are about their failure to gain employment, which as one man put it; 'is our *right*.'<sup>26</sup>

*The leaders appropriated all the benefits. Chevron offered a high salary but the leaders (who were also labour contractors) didn't pay us much. Since the leaders controlled the jobs they became really powerful and had the authority to replace anyone who objected. At the beginning lots of villagers worked for Chevron ... now only fifty or a hundred people are working. People were sacked for a simple reason: they weren't recruited by Chevron but by the local leaders. These local leaders' followers and relatives got the jobs..... When I worked for the gas field I got 7500 taka a month in cash. Now I don't have a fixed income*

Ex Chevron labourer, Karimpur, 2009

Many people have a similar story. Safety training was given, identity cards issued but suddenly the work stopped. The situation has caused deep resentment, for the widespread perception is that since Chevron are using local resources, they should provide work. In an early focus group discussion that we held in Kakura in 2008, one man put it like this: *"The gas field roads go straight over our hearts, so we should be given priority for work."*

Whilst some local leaders were given contracts to supply labour to the Gas Field, our research showed that of fifteen enterprises contracting labour in 2009, only about half were 'local' (ie from the immediate vicinity) whilst the rest came from outside the immediate area, some bringing labourers from many hundreds of miles away. The advantages to Chevron of hiring labour in this way are easy to appreciate. Since the contractors recruit and pay the workers the company does not need to have any direct dealings with them. They are thus a reserve army par excellence, un-unionised and with no form of redress from the company, which offers none of the ethically irreproachable standards of employment that it reserves for its own staff, who come from outside the area or are foreign. As the community liaison officer based at the gas field explained to me, the use of labour contractors ensures 'an easy flow of labour.' Interestingly, rather than having a background in community relations, this man had previously worked as a manager on a tea estate, a sector not known for its promotion of human rights.

The use of contractors also means that labourers can be controlled, since they are hired informally by their patrons and are therefore unlikely to challenge the authority of their *malik* (owners, or boss), due to their 'loyalty', as one contractor put it. As a contractor from distant Pabna explained:

---

<sup>25</sup> Parry, 2001

<sup>26</sup> Focus group discussion, Kakura, 2009

*My own people are unemployed during the rainy season as we have only one crop a year in our part of the world. So I bring them to the gas field... the whole thing is based on trust. We all have to trust each other. Say, for example, if I bring people who aren't good, or who are impudent, then Chevron won't give me another contract. If I recruit people from my own village then I don't need to worry, because my villagers won't be rude to me. They'll do as I say. Also, they'll go to me with whatever they need, like for wages, borrowing money or sending it back to the village or whatever. So that's why I recruit my own people. If you want to be a contractor you have to have repute and trust, which I do my best to maintain.*

To summarise: a gas field is a capital and not a labour intensive industrial site. This means that at Bibiyana there are few jobs for local people, who do not have the training for the highly skilled technical jobs which are available. Whilst a few men are employed as security guards, our research showed that most of these had gained their employment via their close connections to the local patrons or 'local leaders' who the company has developed working relationships with. Others are employed by labour contractors, some of whom are the very same patrons / 'local leaders' on the V.D.O.s. It is with these men, not Chevron, that landless or land poor people must have relationships with to gain the benefits of either employment at the gas field, or the community engagement programmes that the corporation fund.

### **Partnership as Disconnection**

We therefore come to an interesting paradox. Whilst Chevron must claim partnership to gain a 'social license to operate' and enhance their reputation as an ethical and socially responsible global player, the partnerships that they have developed and the development practices of their partner NGOs ultimately contribute to their social disconnection from the villages that surround their Bibiyana gas field. NGOs are funded as intermediaries, carrying out programmes which bring them repute whilst enabling them to have no direct contact with the landless poor. V.D.O.s have a similar function. Whilst working with a handful of local patrons or 'leaders', the company is able to neatly side step the role of corporate patron, in which it would be connected to the locality in the way that many local people expected but which would do nothing to gain merit in the world of development CSR. Sustainability, the holy grail of much contemporary development work, is, after all, a process of disconnection: the donor withdraws and the good works continue.

Crucially, the company's employment regime at Bibiyana means that it does not hire local people directly but via labour contractors, who are 'partners'. The lucky few who find work associated with the gas field and its environs are thus not included in the strict employment standards which the company adhere to, the pensions, sick leave and so on, but are subject to the employment procedures of contractors, and hired on the basis of patron client relations. Once again, partnership with the few is associated with the disconnection and exclusion of the majority.

Combined with this, company staff are notably absent from the villages that surround the gas field. During our fieldwork people frequently complained that there was no-one they could contact to express their concerns over safety issues or environmental damage, and no grievance procedures. Whilst in the early days of developing the site Unocal's people visited the surrounding villages, holding 'community consultation' meetings and distributing their business cards, today the general perception is that the community engagement staff have largely retreated behind the high security perimeter fence.

What local people want, however, is connection: not just to officials who might act as patrons, but to the long term benefits of global capitalism and the modernity it is supposed to bring. The gas field seems to materialise these. The roadside billboards with their explicit messages of road safety and implicit signals of corporate governance say it all: this is Chevron Country, a place where the standards of the modern world are adhered to. Salaried employment, satellite industry, roads, maybe even a hospital: all seemed possible with the arrival of the corporation. Whilst the Gas Field is by no means the only form of connectivity to modernity that can take place, for the history and impact of transnational migration in the area is far more profound, it is almost tantalising in its material reality: located so close to the villages yet for the vast majority who lack the connections that are necessary to get the contracts or the jobs, impossibly distant. Indeed, as our research shows, the poorest face a process of increasing disconnection. The ruptures are various and contradictory, but include the ongoing movement away from land based livelihoods and the monetarisation of the local economy, the diminishment of relations of patronage and 'helping', due in part to the absence of patrons in the U.K, and, for the most vulnerable, faced with a range of 'push' factors, out migration.

### **Conclusion: Disconnect Development versus Development as Connection**

The irony of disconnect development is striking. Whilst local people are physically, culturally and economically disconnected from the gas field, Chevron must claim connection in order to promote their global reputation for 'partnership', so core to their 'Vision'. Moreover, a particular praxis helps the company achieve the appearance of attachment, whilst following the corporate ethic of detachment (Cross, 2011). We term this 'disconnect development' because of the way that discourses of sustainability and 'helping people to help themselves' mitigate against the long term provision of services or assistance by donors. Instead, they promote an ideal in which via income generation, micro credit and other globally fashionable practices, the poor are able to make enough of a living to afford the health services, education and other forms of social protection that in countries such as Bangladesh the state is generally unable to provide. Whilst originally rooted in radical leftist theories of power and political change, terms such as 'empowerment', used liberally by Chevron executives mask the neo-liberal tenets of contemporary disconnect development: the market is the answer

to poverty; the poor must 'be helped to help themselves', since the state obviously isn't going to help them.

In contrast to the development of disconnection, is the development of connection. This is what people mean when they speak of *unnoti*. Symbolised by connection to the gas supply (which never came about), *unnoti* involves progress and modernity, an end to poverty via formal employment, improved facilities, and industrialisation. Within connected development, the government would be transparent rather than corrupt, and citizens of a modern state would have the right to access information involving, for example, the deals made with multinationals.

In the development of connection, extractive multinationals might have several roles, all of which involve a formalised relationship between the company and the population surrounding the sites of extraction. This population would neither be 'our community' nor 'our partners', but 'our hosts'. The first role is the most straightforward: corporate social responsibility must surely, at the very minimum, involve transparent grievance procedures, and an openness concerning the content of environmental and social impact assessments, and corporate profits. Secondly, where possible, corporations should prioritise local people in their employment policies.

Finally, Chevron and other multinationals working in countries such as Bangladesh might play a role in supporting governments move away from the politics of informal patronage and corruption towards openness and transparency, placing anti corruption programmes at the centre of their CSR policies<sup>27</sup>. None of these changes need involve patronage, or taking over the role of the state; what they do require, however, is a process in which rather than aiding disconnect development, the development of connection is encouraged.

## Works Cited

- Blowfield, M. and Frynas, J.G. 2005 'Setting new agendas: critical perspectives on CSR in the developing world', *International Affairs* 81(3): 499–513.
- Burton, T. 2002 'When corporations want to cuddle', in G. Evans, J. Goodman and N. Lansbury (eds) *Moving Mountains: Communities Confront Mining and Globalisation*. London: Zed Press, pp. 109–25.
- Chevron Publications 2008 *Bibiyana Gas Field First Anniversary Report*. Dhaka: Chevron
- Cross, J. 2011 'Detachment as corporate ethic: materialising CSR in the diamond supply chain', *Focaal – Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 60: 34–46.
- Doane, D. 2005 'The myth of CSR: the problem with assuming that companies can do well whilst also "doing good" is that markets don't really work in that way', *Stanford Social Innovation Review* fall: 23–9.
- Ferguson, J. 2005 'Seeing it like an oil company: space, security and global capital in neo-liberal Africa', *American Anthropologist* 107(3): 377–82.
- Gardner, K. 1993 '*Desh–Bidesh*: Sylheti images of home and away', *Man* 28(9): 1–15.

---

<sup>27</sup> As recommended, for example, by Revenue Watch and Transparency International's 2011 report on Oil and Gas Companies

- Gardner, K. 1995 *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Migration and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gardner, K. 2008 'Keeping connected: security, place and social capital in a Londoni village in Sylhet', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* NS 14: 447–95.
- Gardner, K. 2012 *Discordant Developments: Global Capitalism and the Struggle for Connection in Bangladesh* Pluto Press: London
- Gardner, K. and Mand, K. 2012 'My away is here: place, empowerment and mobility among British Bengali children', in K. Gardner and K. Mand (eds) *Through Children's Eyes: Transnational Migration Revisited* Special Issue, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*.
- Jenkins, R. 2005 'Globalisation, CSR and poverty', *International Affairs* 81(3): 525–40.
- Kapelus, P. 2002 'Mining, CSR and "the community": the case of Rio Tinto, Richards Bay Minerals and the Mbonambi', *Journal of Business Ethics* 39: 275–96.
- Li, Tania Murray 2007 *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Mosse, D. 2005 *Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice*. London: Pluto Press.
- Rajak, D. 2011 *In Good Company: An Anatomy of Corporate Social Responsibility*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Toufique, K. and Turton, C. 2002 *Hands not Land: How Livelihoods are Changing in Rural Bangladesh*. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.
- Tsing, A.L. 2005 *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Welker, M. 2009 "'Corporate security begins in the community": mining, the CSR industry and environmental advocacy in Indonesia', *Cultural Anthropology* 24(1): 142–79.
- Zalik, A. 2004 'The Niger delta: "petro violence" and "partnership development"', *Review of African Political Economy* 31(101): 401–424.