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Revisiting the Local Power Structure in Bangladesh: Economic Gain, Political Pain?

DAVID LEWIS AND ABUL HOSSAIN



Following up on research conducted by the authors just over a decade ago, this study of the local power structure presents new qualitative data to analyse the changing formal and informal institutions that govern people's lives in rural and urban Bangladesh. It explores the ways in which disadvantaged individuals and groups seek to increase their influence and further their economic and social goals, documents the barriers and challenges that people living in poverty face, and explores the current limits to these local change processes. It finds that while economic opportunities have increased during the past decade, this change has come with a potential political cost.

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Foreword by the Ambassador

This restudy of *Understanding the Local Rural Power Structure in Bangladesh* was commissioned by the Embassy of Sweden with the purpose to identify, analyse and describe formal and informal political, social and economic drivers of change in comparison with the Power Study conducted in 2004.

The original study stressed the importance of carrying out analyses of formal and informal political, social and economic power structures and power relations as a way of boosting our understanding of the opportunities and challenges encountered by women and men living in poverty as they try to shape and improve their lives. The 2004 study also revealed the main barriers and challenges that the poor people face, indicated areas in which pro-poor change is taking place at local level, and explored the limitations of these local change processes.

Over twelve years have passed since the original study was carried out, and many things have changed in Bangladesh to the better for people living in poverty. The reality of interlinked formal and informal power structures and relations at micro-, meso-, and macro- levels in Bangladesh are still identified as one of the main challenges for well-functioning local governance. The restudy of 2017 is relevant as it presents an updated analysis on these relations and structures, and how they act as major barriers for social change, gender equality and effective poverty alleviation.

The Embassy of Sweden is pleased to share the restudy findings which will provide well researched but relatively rare comparable insights into the political economy of rural Bangladesh. It is also valuable as a research source on comparable anthropological analysis over time of the local power structure in Bangladesh.

I am happy to learn that the new study highlights the significant economic progress made by Bangladesh as well the ways economic opportunities have been enhanced through government and civil society action for all groups since the earlier study. While the new study found that the local power structure continues to grow less rigid, women and men continue to face significant barriers to empowerment and participation through the reliance on informal patronage relations and connections rather than on rights-based accountabilities. While the study shows the continuing importance

of decentralisation processes in support of local participation and inclusion, it also suggests that new approaches to capacity building are needed if decentralisation is to be successfully deepened. 'Place' may be becoming less important than before as Bangladesh becomes more urban and peri-urban, but geographically marginalised areas still lag behind and are vulnerable to poor infrastructure, environmental instability, and remain unevenly covered by social services. It also shows the way that earlier dynamic forms of civil society at community level have become less active, suggesting the need for strengthening coalitions between local government and non-state actors to reduce 'elite capture'.

I hope that this restudy of 2017 will become a useful resource in Bangladesh and that it will inspire the use of power analysis in other countries. Although the study's observations and conclusions are the authors' sole responsibility, the study will help Sweden, in cooperation with Bangladeshi governmental and non-governmental actors, to better design development action that reaches the poorest. I am confident that the study's findings also will be used as a reference for better inclusion of poor people's perspectives on development, something that is key to the reduction of poverty and inequalities around the world.

Dhaka, July 2017

Johan Frisell
Ambassador
Embassy of Sweden

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Executive Summary

Development policy and practice requires a detailed understanding of the ways that power operates at the local level. Drawing on a literature review and new qualitative data, this study takes a bottom-up view of how ordinary people try to deal with the local power structure in their daily lives. Following up on an earlier study carried out in 2004 these issues are considered in three contrasting areas of Greater Faridpur District, plus one new urban study site, by analysing the changing formal and informal institutions that govern people's lives. The research addresses two main questions: (i) what does the local power structure look like, and (ii) is it changing in ways that enable people living in poverty to make stronger claims on rights and entitlements? It documents the barriers and challenges that people face, and explores the current limits to local change processes. The study aims to complement more conventional macro-level analyses of power undertaken at country level.

Chapter 1 begins by summarising the findings of the earlier study, and then discusses context and the economic and political changes that have taken place. It outlines the methodology, which draws on a literature review and on a set of new semi-structured interviews and disaggregated focus group discussions. As before the fieldwork was carried out in one peri-urban, one well-connected, and one remote village community, plus the urban slum study site. Key concepts used in the analysis are then discussed, including various ways of understanding power structures based on concepts of governance, informality, empowerment, and patriarchy. The enduring role of patron-client relations as a key element of the power structure is explained, and the benefits and risks for poorer people of such relationships and arrangements are discussed.

Following the structure of the earlier study, Chapter 2 updates the five main sets of institutions that make up the local power structure. First is the three tier administrative system of local government of *Zila* (district), *Upazila* (UPZ, sub-district) and Union. A key change was the 2009 Local Government (Union Parishad) Act that created a local Ward '*sabha*' (council) meeting system, introduced a Citizen Charter, and brought measures to increase women's representation. Second we discuss political institutions. A 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 earlier. Local elections have

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also become more politicised and a stronger Members of Parliament (MPs) role has emerged in determining how local development activities are now carried out. Third, at the level of formal civil society, we find that economic support from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in our communities has expanded, but the NGO sector itself is less diverse. Rights-based NGO development work with the poorest has largely faded away (apart from in the urban study site). There is also more political control of local civil society associations. Fourth, we find that 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, in both rural and urban areas. Finally, the changes to the judiciary are briefly discussed, including the changing role of the '*shalish*' (traditional dispute settlement meetings) and continuing decline of the formal Village Courts.

Chapter 3 presents the main findings in relation to each of the four study locations. The peri-urban village has experienced sustained economic growth that has improved local livelihoods. The area is more urbanised and will in 2017 be absorbed into the 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 community support for ongoing efforts to tackle 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 Union Parishad has become less central to local development processes. With a UP Chair who is affiliated to the political opposition, local ruling party activists with the support of the MP have set up informal by-pass arrangements that ensure that they maintain as much control as possible over local affairs. The 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 rarer 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 improved its infrastructure and its 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 when we did 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 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 faded since the earlier research. Forms of civil society loan and small business support have increased and are well liked by both poor and non-poor. 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 quite different. Despite its proximity to the town, this village remains cut off by a large river. There has been little infrastructural development to improve local connectivity or enhance access to economic opportunities for this area's local inhabitants. Here, the economic opportunities are far fewer than in the other two areas and people's economic position has become less favourable. Severe environmental pressures are also experienced in the form of large-scale river erosion (perhaps exacerbated by climate change) and this has caused many households to leave their homestead and farm land and resettle. Economic pressure has led to increased out-migration more from a position of weakness here 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 dependent on expanding the use of child labour. Once again, we found the relative marginalization of a local opposition UP Chair. The MP has a high level of control over the distribution of externally provided resources from government, which is achieved through the use of a loyal party 'informal coordinator', who is also

a UP member. This made it possible for party activists to bypass the UP level distribution system for local entitlements such as Test Relief and Food for Work (FFW) thereby consolidating a set of 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 in the area, and these are now providing business training and small-scale loans designed to improve economic opportunities. The area is less socially progressive, 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.

The slum study site provides some continuities and differences with the three other locations. The main similarity was people's relative economic prosperity levels (with a thriving small scale local business sector, and factory employment available in the ready-made export garment industry). We also found the use of informal administrative arrangements to extend the ruling party's influence in the local community. Since this is an informal settlement, there is no corresponding local government institution which residents can hold directly accountable. The City Corporation has created an unofficial Unit Office (UO) located in the centre of the slum, staffed by party activists who levy informal taxes and provide some community services to residents. There are two classes of residents in the slum: the original squatters who are *de facto* landlords and who rent out accommodation to those who have arrived more recently, who are effectively second class citizens. Both are at high risk of eviction. NGOs here provide a range of useful services, but the community-based organisations that they form tend to be dominated by the former group. This is because control of these CBOs enables these households to add value to their properties through improving sanitation and water supply. Nevertheless, the groups have also served as useful vehicles for people to mobilise against regular threats of eviction. Law and order is said to have improved and this arrangement is generally preferred to the previous informal arrangements in which insecurity gangs and police harassment were more common. The UO has formed good relationships with the NGOs working in the slum, but this relationship also implies a level of political control. Here too we find that patronage relationships have endured as key components of the local power structure, along with community-based solidarities.

Chapter 4 discusses the main findings of the study in the light of the terms of reference. It draws on both the background literature review

and empirical data to reflect on what is happening in these communities in relation to the local power structure today, and how this situation has changed from the earlier decade. To summarise, we find that market connectivity is much higher than before, which means that people have improved economic positions, but access to new opportunities for inclusive local participation in 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, a more *multifocal* power structure increasingly governs people's access to political and economic opportunities, as compared to the previous *unifocal* one that had been based 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 broadened. 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. The diversity of NGO work has declined, leading to more economic support but less rights-based work that could support more inclusivity.

Women's relationship to the local power structure continues to evolve in ways that bring both positive and less favourable outcomes. Women's presence and visibility in UP, UPZ and other local decision-making forums is undoubtedly increasing. We heard for example from women in the peri-urban area that the newly-introduced UPZ level Women's Development Forum is widely viewed as a positive step for increasing voice, and that the Child Marriage Protection Committee is operating reasonably well. We saw that female empowerment through women's increased participation in productive economic activities is also challenging aspects of local power, signalled for example by reports of stronger voice in household decision-making, and by a reported perception from some women of an increased readiness to initiate divorce when mistreated or abused by their husband. We also found that local civil society groups do sometimes take action against sexual harassment (such as a case relating to schoolgirl stalking in the peri-urban study area) though such action may as much be about defending 'honour' as much as about women's rights.

In many small ways patriarchal norms *are* constantly being resisted and renegotiated, but women continue to face many challenges. For example, we found that women committee members often feel marginalised, are rarely given Project Implementation Committees to chair, that decisions are still made mainly by the MP or by male UP/UPZ staff, and that if women are too talkative in the meetings they are marginalised further. There was no perception that women's presence made the distribution of safety net entitlements any more gender equitable in the communities that we studied. Wages received by women remain lower than men's and in some cases almost half (in the remote village), and women's inheritance rights are in practice still weak. We found many cases where *shalish* rulings were made in favour of male defendants in gender-related disputes such as land inheritance or violence against women. The view of one female focus group member that the power structure is associated primarily with men continues to be a problem. But overall, there does seem to be more women present in local formal decision-making meetings, which is good news.

Moving to the changing role of local formal institutions such as the Unions, while these are working quite well, a concerning finding is the increasing marginalisation of this key tier of decentralised local government. This has in part been driven by the increasing dominance of the power of MPs who seek to build political support directly in local communities and manage vote banks. The result is that 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 Chairs are from opposition groups. This has negative implications for local government capacity building efforts aimed at strengthening participation and civic engagement. In contrast to our 2004 findings that the UP role was increasing in significance, this time we were told: *'The UP's glory is now in the past'*.

Nor has the closer collaboration between UPs and NGOs in local development work that was embedded in the aims of the 2009 UP Act materialised to any significant degree. However, the modest gains towards increased women's representation are a step forward, even if many informants continue to report the marginalization of women within decision-making processes at UPZ, UP and Ward levels. 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' 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 gang brokers or intermediaries than studies from other parts of Bangladesh might lead us to expect.

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 from the opposition party, they are simply worked around by creating informal coordinator and intermediation roles, using patron-client relationships. In the same way, key local civil society organizations such as business associations are increasingly 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, or the recent attack on the Unit Office in the slum. This might be taken as hinting at future instability. However, we did not find evidence of extremist political activity in our study areas.

Locally distributed resources are therefore 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). Only in the slum area did we see effective efforts made to raise new local taxes - albeit informally - in an attempt to improve local services, and we found this to be generally received quite positively. 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.

While people are better off economically, the opportunities for people to access improved participation in local decision-making and shape service provision that we hoped for after the earlier study have not kept pace. One exception is the example of community-based organizations in the slum, which have succeeded in driving some modest improvements to services. But these gains are also compromised by disproportionately reflecting the interests of better-off slum dwellers. We also found a higher profile than last time in our study sites for the rights of disabled people, though this was mainly expressed through claims on welfare benefits rather than that of broader social change.

Civil society space, as we have seen, has been shrinking both in the sense that it has become 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. Their relative absence – at least in the Greater Faridpur sites – raises short-term problems for poor people seeking to advance their rights, and longer-term problems for ongoing 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 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 at a political cost.

Chapter 5 provides a conclusion. Our earlier study had reported a cautiously optimistic picture. We identified small but potentially significant ways that new institutional spaces were opening up that were making it possible for some poor women and men to improve their situations. This centred on improvements to the functioning of local government structures, the evolving inclusivity of some local institutions, and forms of civil society action and

coalition building that produced ‘win-win’ outcomes for both poor and non-poor people. Today, while we note that there has been positive economic change experienced by most people in the communities we visited (although the remote village continues to be marginalised), we are less optimistic about the recent ways in which the power structure has been changing.

Economic dynamism has intensified, resulting in improved livelihoods for many people. Women’s market participation has increased as many continue to access new economic opportunities (often with the support of NGOs). Communities are now more geographically and socially connected than before, and households have greater choice in the range and type of connections they seek to form. Migration opportunities have increased. Progress with achieving women’s political inclusion into local institutions is occurring, albeit at a slow rate. Elements of an older power structure remain, with the persistence of patron-client relations, elite clan politics and patriarchal norms, but these 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.

What is different today? Local government institutions have the potential to continue to play enhanced roles based on recent and continuing capacity building efforts, but under current political conditions they risk becoming marginalised. Civil society space has become reduced, particularly that formerly occupied by radical NGOs and civil society groups addressing local rights-based development in relation to land, local political participation and civic engagement. As a result, there are fewer opportunities for the types of win-win coalitions we had identified and predicted would become more frequent in the earlier study. Associations and other local civil society groupings are increasingly being captured by political interests. This means that while there is a wider range of patrons available (for example local media supported activism), opportunities for poorer people to build horizontal forms of solidarity remain limited. Connected to this trend, local level political competition has also diminished as the ruling political party has consolidated control of local power structure and weakened any formal 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’ in which people 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.

As *World Development Report (WDR) 2017* reminds us, understanding how the local power structure works, and how it is perceived, continues to be important themes for mainstream development policy and practice. Power asymmetries contribute to exclusion, inequality and restrict equitable growth. As a result, 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*.

Our re-study found levels of coalition building between local government leaders and civil society groups to be lower than those we 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, a change that brings negative implications for poor people’s participation in decision making, joint government and civil society pro-poor coalition building, and increased local resource mobilisation. The implications of these should not be seen as a purely technical problem, and supports *WDR 2017*’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.

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) currently relatively inclusive, the 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 to go. 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 in marginal locations and those with marginal identities, and women who face continuing marginalization within formal governance structures.

The earlier study concluded with four practical insights for governmental and non-governmental agencies seeking to support pro-poor change in Bangladesh: the need to (i) recognise the importance of economic development as a solid foundation for progressive change; (ii) find ways of supporting local government and civil society jointly; (iii) understand and build upon local difference to avoid ‘one size fits all’ support strategies; and (iv) continue to identify new opportunities to support pro-poor coalitions involving local elites.

In the case of (i), 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 ‘inclusive growth’ remains a challenging goal. Our analysis highlights the risk that economic gain displaces issues of inclusivity, participation and rights (political pain). With (ii), to support to 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’ nevertheless provide some cause for optimism in this regard. With (iii), we still argue there is a need to avoid ‘one size fits all’ approaches and that it is vital to pay close attention to 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, (iv), 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.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LOCAL POWER

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

This study is concerned with understanding local change processes and people's efforts to deal with power as they go about their lives. It updates original research that was undertaken by the authors more than a decade ago in late 2004 in the Greater Faridpur area of central Bangladesh. This was published as *Understanding the Local Rural Power Structure in Bangladesh* by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Lewis and Hossain, 2008). The report aimed to better understand how the institutions, relationships and process that made up the local power structure both facilitated and constrained poor people's efforts to improve their livelihoods, and the ways that the poorest people went about trying to manage relationships with more powerful people in their local communities.

The earlier study helped to inform the Embassy's policy dialogue in Bangladesh, contributed to methodological development of power analysis at Sida headquarters, and was used in the preparation of Sweden's 2008-12 Country Cooperation Strategy. Other major donors in Bangladesh such as the World Bank and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) also drew upon the study when developing their local governance programmes.¹

¹ In the Foreword to the original study Jan Bjerninger and Olof Sandkull from Sida Stockholm wrote: 'Over the years, it has strengthened the Embassy's policy dialogue in Bangladesh and, as the first analysis focusing on the local level, it has contributed to methodological development of power analysis at Sida HQ. Finally, it provided valuable input with regards to shaping the direction of the new Swedish Country Cooperation Strategy with Bangladesh 2008-2012. Other major donors such as the World Bank and UNDP have also benefited greatly from the study while developing their major local governance programme in Bangladesh'.

This new study was also commissioned by the Embassy of Sweden, and like the earlier one has combined a desk study that synthesised recent academic and policy literature with the collection of a set of new empirical data drawing on community-level interviews and focus group discussions. The field research was conducted in Rajbari and Faridpur districts, an area where there had been a long history of Swedish support to government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).²

The original study was based on data collected from three contrasting fieldwork locations. Each one had been chosen to reflect a different level of infrastructure and spatial connectivity: (i) a ‘remote’ village where villagers were relatively isolated and where we expected to find the traditional rural power structure largely in place, (ii) a ‘well-connected’ village with better access to markets and good transport infrastructure, and (iii) a ‘peri-urban’ village that was located close to the main district town. We were particularly interested in how people’s relationships with the power structure varied across settings, as well as in important cross-cutting dimensions such as gender and power, the role of civil society, and the relationship between formal and informal structures, that we know would be common to each site. We first carried out semi-structured interviews with key informants in each community, and with power holders from government, civil society and ‘traditional’ institutions. We then heard from local community members in each of the study areas through convening a series of focus group discussions. These enabled us to gain insights into peoples’ different experiences, perspectives and perspectives on the power structure from the ‘bottom up’. In each location, the groups were disaggregated by poor and non-poor villagers, and again by gender. Four focus groups were therefore held in each of the study locations: female poor, male poor, female non-poor and male non-poor.

For the follow up study we returned to the same three locations in order to learn what changes had taken place during the ensuing decade, using the

2 Faridpur and Rajbari are districts in central Bangladesh forming part of Dhaka Division, situated on the banks of the river Padma (Lower Ganges). The Greater Faridpur region includes the districts of Rajbari, Gopalganj, Madaripur, Shariatpur and Faridpur. Faridpur District has a population of over 1.7 million people and Rajbari just over one million.

same approach and data collection methods.³ Where possible, we tried to reconnect with people we had known during the earlier study. At the request of the Embassy, an additional fourth study site was added in the form of an urban slum community in Dhaka.

1.2 Background: the wider context

Political changes during the past decade mean that the country’s longstanding ‘illiberal democracy’ has begun moving in a new direction. The old bipartisan political system in which two competing political blocs, the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), had mostly alternated in power following regular elections since 1991 seems to have ended. Following the 18-month long Military-backed Caretaker Government that took power in 2007, 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. The AL is now dominant and the political opposition is in disarray, and the nature of Bangladesh’s ‘partyarchy’ (Hassan 2013) has changed. There are concerns voiced that the restrictions on the activities of mainstream parties will create a vacuum in which new political formations that favour extremism could create a threat to the stability of the current political institutions and to country’s record of relatively inclusive growth (for example, Khan 2017).

The AL government has moved to consolidate its power. It has enhanced the authority of Members of Parliament (MPs) by giving them an advisory role to 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

3 The fieldwork was carried out with 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, Taslim and Belal were also part of the original study in 2004, which added useful continuity. The main portion of the Greater Faridpur fieldwork (focus groups and semi-structured interviews) was undertaken in December 2015-January 2016, and most of the urban study was carried out during May-June 2016. The rural study preceded the series of UP elections that were held in six phases between January and June 2016. Some of the data has been updated to reflect changes following the elections, but the picture presented in the report mainly reflects the period just before elections took place. Brief follow up visits were also made to clarify some questions, and the provisional findings were presented to informants in May 2017 at a dissemination workshop in Greater Faridpur.

politicised the local administrative system by allowing party affiliation to play a greater role in local Union Parishad (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 performed well since the earlier study. According to UNDP (2016), Bangladesh has seen a 'major economic transformation' in recent years. The economy has grown (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), and 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.

However, major challenges remain. There are still high levels of extreme poverty (12.9% of the total population in 2015-16), along with growing inequality and increasing vulnerability. Growth has also 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

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).

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.

1.3 Greater Faridpur

No single district or region in a country as diverse as Bangladesh can be truly representative. Greater Faridpur has no specific characteristics that would disqualify it in this regard, or render it atypical of the country as a whole. The majority of the people in this area still undertake agriculture-related work, but do so within a local economy that is rapidly diversifying. Most households (almost 60%) continue to rely primarily on agricultural income, with non-agricultural labour, services, transport, construction and remittances making up the remainder.

Situated on the banks of the river Padma, many local communities also face growing environmental pressures such as soil quality depletion and riverbank erosion. There has been longstanding migration from the area: to Dhaka, and to Asia and the Middle East. There is a substantial Hindu minority in the area (just under 10% of the population), along with smaller numbers of Buddhist and Christian minority groups. We also encountered settled communities of formerly itinerant *bedia* or 'river gypsy' people.

Greater Faridpur is a relatively peaceful and politically stable area, but it is not immune from the wider concerns around political violence and terrorism that continue to affect many areas of Bangladesh. For example, the police recently arrested four suspected leaders of the banned militant group Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT) (*Daily Star*, August 28, 2016).

1.4 The urban research site

At Sida's request, for the follow up research project we added a new urban slum study site to the existing three locations in Greater Faridpur. We selected a slum community in the Mohakali area of Dhaka, drawing on

5 Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/09/bangladesh-girls-damaged-child-marriage>, accessed November 18, 2016.

Abul Hossain's local knowledge from earlier work on slum rehabilitation. We also consulted *Dushtha Shasthya Kendra* (DSK), a prominent urban water, sanitation and health NGO. We followed a similar approach to data collection to the one we used in the other three locations.⁶

As part of this new component we had originally hoped to identify some migrants originating from Greater Faridpur, in order to make a connection with the earlier work, but there were very few to be found. Residents were from diverse rural locations and mostly originated from areas such as Noakhali, Mymensingh and Barisal. We did speak with one woman who was originally from rural Faridpur who had migrated as a small child with her widowed mother when their home was destroyed in the 1991 floods.

1.5 The first power structure study

The aim of the earlier study was to understand key issues of power and governance 'from the ground up'. It focused on both the 'traditional' village power structure (its system of elders, structure of landholding, and its mechanisms for resolving disputes) as well as on villagers' links with the UP as the lowest main tier of local government, and with non-state actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local associations. It noted that the power structure was far from static, and that even its so-called 'traditional' aspects were evolving and changing.

These institutions of the power structure are set out in Table 1 (below, in updated form). Here we find the administrative tiers of local government leading down to Union/Ward level, the political structure from Parliament down to local level village politics, the judiciary from High Court to Village Court, and two different but inter-related arenas of civil society organisations and activities characterised as formal and informal. 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*.

The mid-2000s was a period during which different kinds of change processes were occurring at the local level. There was growing investment

6 The precise locations of the study locations, and the identities of people we spoke to during the research, have been anonymised in order to protect all those people who kindly participated in the research.

in local infrastructure and this was slowly improving connectivity and market access. A 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. We found that the UP was at the centre of on-going local decentralization efforts, and this was to some extent reshaping the local power structure. Both the UP and the local *shalish* were receiving support from government and international agencies that aimed to strengthen their capacity to be more democratic and participatory, and to improve their gender inclusivity. At the same time, there was also political polarization between supporters of government and opposition parties, played out within increasing factionalism and the increasing politicization of local level decision-making and resource allocation, sometimes leading to conflict.

Summing up the findings and recommendation from the study 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 main insights for practice emerged from the study: (i) 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.

These findings indicated growing synergies between local government and civil society actors. In some cases these were leading to strengthening of the rights of the poor and improving participation in local decision-making. The study also provided insights into the ways that the central institution of patronage (the unequal relationship between rich powerful landowner patrons and poor tenants/clients that has long dominated rural communities) was slowly changing. We contrasted our findings with an influential study that had taken place in 1979-80 and published as *The Net: Power Structure in Ten Villages* (BRAC, 1982). This earlier study 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.⁷

There were more patrons for poorer people to choose from including local elected officials, party politicians, NGOs and local business leaders and their intermediaries. This, we argued, was contributing to a local power structure that was becoming less rigid and unitary. Instead it was what Mannan (2015) has termed a 'multifocal power structure' that allowed a little more economic, political and social 'room for manoeuvre' for disadvantaged groups in their negotiations with local elites. A gradual shift was also taking place from 'net' to 'web', in the sense that while the net metaphor had referred to relationships that mainly constrained and trapped people, the web implied a set of relationships connecting people in potentially more productive ways. People could still get caught in the web, but they could also move across its many strands and form useful new connections.

We also found evidence for forms of positive, negotiated change taking place locally that we thought might be sustained, in spite of the overall context of a turbulent and unstable national and local political system that had become highly adversarial and polarised between

7 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'.

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 a more gender-inclusive *shalish* arrangements if this increased their reputation and prestige, and brought in more outside resources. The main source of power locally was no longer solely the ownership of land, but also increasingly important were the connections people were able to make to resources outside the village which they could then distribute: such as development resources, political linkages, and employment and migration opportunities. Finally, the study found 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.

The issues raised in the study continue to be important for current development policy and practice. For example, the World Bank's *World Development Report 2017* (WDR) main message is that improved governance can only be achieved by taking power asymmetries more fully into account (World Bank 2017). The report argues for the need to move beyond technical and managerialist 'capacity building' and 'best practice' approaches in order to engage more fully with more inclusive forms of decision making, including contestation, coordination, participation, and coalition building (World Bank 2017). An engagement with power issues also lies at the heart of UNRISD's *Policy Innovations for Transformative Change* report on implementing the 2013 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UNRISD 2016).

1.6 Key concepts

A number of concepts are deployed in the study. First, in order to make sense of the local power structure, it is necessary to briefly contextualize it within the broader national level situation.

Bangladesh's political settlement (the balance of power between social classes) has enabled a high level of economic growth and positive change around key social indicators, but it has not produced the conditions for a stable or inclusive democracy. For what political scientist Douglas North (2009) terms an 'open access' society, formal property rights, enforceable contracts, and an efficient and impersonal bureaucracy are each prerequisites that are not sufficiently present in Bangladesh. The result is that organized

political action (and economic activity too) will normally require the purchase of support on a personalised basis so that the dominant form of political organization becomes one of 'competitive clientelism' (Khan 2013). Without a state that can enforce the rule of law, 'rent-seeking'⁸ is commonplace, meaning that Bangladesh is more accurately characterized in North's terms as a 'limited access order' that does not meet the key conditions for a functioning democracy.

Bangladeshi society is strongly hierarchical, and patronage is a key component of social relationships. Breman (1974) defines patronage as 'a pattern of relationships in which members of hierarchically arranged groups possess mutually recognized, not explicitly stipulated rights and obligations involving mutual aid and preferential treatment' (p.18). Patron-client relationships are therefore central to understanding the local power structure. Jahangir (1982) emphasises that it is a personal transaction between two individuals rather than one that addresses the collective good.⁹ Vertical social arrangements of mutual obligation and loyalty exist between unequal individuals through which people negotiate access to resources, protection, social mobility and political support. This makes it more difficult for poorer people to build 'horizontal' relationships of solidarity among equals, such as through cooperatives or the grassroots community groups that some NGOs seek to form.

From the point of view of the poor, such vertical relationships are not only asymmetrical but also uncertain, since they tend to be discretionary rather than rights-based. The dominance of patron-client relations is widely seen as something that 'constrains universalism, devitalizes civil society and prevents the popular sector from mounting sustained pressure on the state' with mainly negative implications for political participation (Gay, 1998, p.11). But patron-client relations are not straightforward - they are complex, multi-stranded and always evolving as we showed in the earlier study. They can also be viewed more positively as the means through which those who are poor or excluded undertake their civic engagement, seek to improve their security and practice politics.¹⁰

8 This refers to the extraction of value without making a contribution to productivity.

9 He also makes a distinction between patronage as primarily economic relationship and clientelism as the building of political support - though in practice these may be interlinked.

10 Patronage should not only be seen in functional in functional economic or political terms: it is also a 'living moral idiom' that helps to structure peoples' political aspirations, engagements, practices and relationships (Piliavsky (2014, p.4).

Moving to the local level of the power structure, the concepts of governance, empowerment and informality are used to analyse local level processes. *Governance* is understood as the process in which individuals and institutions - both public and private, formal and informal - try to manage resources, accommodate conflicting and diverse interests, and organise forms of cooperative action. *Empowerment* is a term that refers to the efforts to bring about changes in the distribution or nature of power within a given context, and the outcomes of such changes. This may be understood at both the level of individuals and/or groups, and individual forms of resistance as well as forms of group-based political mobilization.

Informality refers to relationships and networks around power and governance that are not formally codified or enforced, such as the forms of social and political patronage highlighted above. For example, from the point of view of a local citizen living in poverty, he or she is confronted with the need to deal with unofficial intermediaries (such as an informal charge made to access a supposedly free public service) as a form of unsanctioned rent-seeking that takes place beyond the realm of rules-based formal governance. Informality operates within (and not just outside) formal institutions. This means that in practice both formal and informal relationships help structure and mediate the relationship between state and society and are not easily disentangled. Focusing on the extent and type of informality offers insights into how power is being exercised in a society, by whom, and for whose benefit. We suggest that studying informality is important because provides deeper insights into workings of the power structure that go beyond the surface level. The informal dimensions of public authority/formal state processes are central to the workings of the local power structure. There are formal rules associated with governance, but part of peoples' daily experience is to deal not just with these rules but also with the various informal arrangements and obstacles that they face.

Informality is also important in relation to civil society (see below). For example, Partha Chatterjee (2004, p.4) has suggested that civil society is merely a 'closed association of elite groups' set aside from the wider population of poor people forced to negotiate and contest their claims in relation to government within the wider space of 'political society' where there are fewer formal rules and norms.

Finally, *patriarchy* is central to the power structure in the form of 'structures of constraint' that are associated with kinship and family systems and the ideological constructions of gender identity and selfhood in Bangladesh

(Kabeer 2011). Patriarchy is not confined to kinship relations within or between households, but also informs the way institutional power is exercised in the context of wider interactions the state, markets and civil society. At the same time, there is fluidity to this aspect of the power structure too. Gender relations are constantly shifting, and can sometimes be reshaped, through market opportunities, government policies and by participation within new forms of association within civil society:

If it is through the ‘given’ relationships of family and kinship, the ‘communities of birth’, that women gain their sense of identity and personhood, then it is through participation in alternative forms of associational life that they can acquire a reflexive vantage point from which to evaluate these relationships (Kabeer 2011, p.503)

However, in Bangladesh, as in many other countries, progress in relation to women’s empowerment and inclusion continues to be slow, with ‘competing interests remain clustered around power and resources at the local government level in ways that exclude women’ (Beall, 2005, p.253).

1.7 ‘Follow up’ studies

Despite their potential value for understanding change, follow up research studies are less common than they should be. There *are* a few examples of social science researchers working on themes related to this study who have returned to the field sites of their earlier work to explore and analyse the changes that have taken place. These provide useful reference points for our work. Kamal Siddiqui undertook a follow up study in the late 1990s to follow up on research he had undertaken as far back as 1977 on poverty and rural social change in Narail district, which borders on Greater Faridpur (Siddiqui, 2000). His main findings were that local family structures had further nucleated, that factional politics had intensified, and the traditional *samaj* village community structure had declined. He also identified growing tensions between the generations, with the older members of the community displaying an attachment to what he termed ‘tradition and religious orthodoxy’ and the younger generation afflicted by what was in his view a more ‘decadent’ modernity that now gave greater emphasis to individualism over community solidarities.

Kirsten Westergaard and Abul Hossain (2005) revisited a village in Bogra district in north-western Bangladesh originally studied during the mid-1970s. They found that traditional patron-client relations as a

foundation of the local power structure were changing, becoming weaker as poorer people were growing less dependent on the local landed classes for their livelihoods, but they found that no obvious new forms of social or political organisation were taking their place. Finally, Eirik Jansen returned a number of times to an area of Manikganj district where he had first undertaken fieldwork in the 1980s. He found dramatic improvements in local infrastructure, increased use of modern agricultural technologies, the rise of non-agricultural employment and a new and growing centrality of migration based livelihoods in determining household social mobility (Jansen and Rahman 2011). There may be value in commissioning more such ‘follow up’ studies in the future in order to better capture medium change processes in Bangladesh and elsewhere.

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

Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' civil soc	'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) Bilateral and multilateral international donors focused on governance (with conditionalities)	High Court	National NGOs (e.g. BRAC) NGO apex bodies such as ADAB/FNB Federation of Chambers of Commerce (FBCCI) Journalist associations (print and electronics)	Elites and their formal and informal relationships (e.g. positions of power in government, civil society, business plus patronage and kin networks) Social norms e.g. gender relations
Departments (254) and Directorates, boards (173) with civil service of c. 950,000 staff	Political parties			
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 <i>Gram sarkar</i> village government (abolished 2007). <i>Ward sabha</i> meetings since 2011.		Village development and welfare associations NGO-formed grassroots groups for savings/other activities	<i>Gusti</i> (patrilineages) <i>Samaj</i> (social groupings) Mosque/temple committees <i>Shalish</i> (informal courts) Philanthropic activity Collective action groups (e.g. journalists)

UPDATING THE POWER STRUCTURE CONTEXT

CHAPTER 2

As we saw in Chapter 1, the local power structure has changed since the earlier study. This chapter provides a brief contextual overview of the changes. The earlier study began by mapping out the main formal and informal institutions of the local power structure across five categories: administrative institutions, political institutions, formal civil society, informal civil society, and the judiciary (Table 1). This set of structures set out in the table remains similar, though there have been some changes. We will briefly review these changes in turn.

2.1 Administrative institutions

The three tier system of local government at the level of Upazila, Union and Ward has continued to evolve. When we carried out the earlier study, we found that the Union Parishad was the centre of local development activities. The most important tier of local government, the UP is responsible for the administration of government departmental activities at the local level, the maintenance of public order, the provision of public welfare services, and the implementation of economic and social development programmes (Siddiqui and Ahmed 2016).¹¹ UP representatives were not primarily identified as party political leaders, but were also viewed by people as social and civil society leaders as well. We found there was frequent UP level interaction with NGOs and civil society, sometimes bringing positive outcomes for poor people. However, we found that the UP is less powerful today than in the earlier study. While we saw earlier that local MPs were often involved with local decision-making they were not the controlling authority that we find them to be today.

11 The UP system was originally created in 1870 by the British colonial authorities.

The 2009 Local Government (Union Parishad) Act is the most significant formal administrative change since our earlier study and aimed to enhance local participation and improve the local accountability of the UPs. Implemented in 2011 the Act brought new local level planning arrangements designed to enhance social accountability through the introduction of Ward sabha and Open Budget Meetings (*Unmukto Budget Shawa*). This was it was hoped would open up new space for citizen involvement in participatory budgeting, with anyone from each Ward able to attend and participate. The UPs would now also provide more information and services locally, including issuing documents and certificates. The Act also made provision for representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to play a role in planning and budgeting.¹² The Act also introduced a Citizen Charter to provide transparent information about the UP's responsibilities in relation to service provision and rights of citizens, aligned with the Right to Information Act that was also passed in 2009.

In theory, the new Ward *sabha* is intended to facilitate improved local participation in local governance and promote productivity. It has a large number of formal functions (including inspiring people to undertake economic activities, raising awareness around violence against women, and implementing local self-help projects). Its main activity is to plan local development and infrastructure repair schemes, draw up lists of local people eligible for assistance from government, and provide community level information to the UP, such as details of births and deaths. Ward sabha are supposed to take place twice a year in an open meeting, convened and chaired by the UP member from that ward, with the woman UP member serving as adviser to the meeting. However, the functioning of the Ward Sabha system during the five years of its operation has generally been judged as 'not very encouraging' overall (Ahmed, 2016, p.2). This was largely confirmed in our findings.

We learned that in our rural study areas that Ward meetings *had* taken place in each of the nine wards around once a year, and had in some cases helped identify local needs for possible projects. But confirming Ahmed (2016) we found that most attendees tended to be safety net beneficiaries and clients who were there primarily to vote in favour of patrons. While we found that the appointment of women UP member advisers

12 Another difference between 2004 and today is the demise of the normal and weak *Gram Sarkar* village government system, which earlier BNP governments had attempted to introduce.

to these meetings had been implemented, focus group discussions indicated that the meetings tend to be formal and male-dominated with few opportunities for meaningful participation by woman members. This finding is in keeping with other studies such as Chowdhury (2015) who found that while a modest start has been made in promoting the principles of grassroots citizen participation in local planning and budgeting, the reality on the ground is that lack of resources, patriarchal norms, and vested political interests are each major factors that limit opportunities for ordinary citizens to engage meaningfully in these new 'spaces'.

The UPZ is supposed to be active in local development and provide oversight of the UPs.¹³ Chairs have been elected in two national level sub-district elections held since our earlier study (in 2009 and 2014) but in practice these elected Chairs have few resources and little power with which to act. Indeed, successive governments have struggled to know what to do with the sub-district system. Abolished by the BNP in 1991, the UPZ was revived by the AL in 1998, with the local MP in an advisory role. The 2008 Upazila Parishad Ordinance removed the MP's role, creating two new elected positions of Vice Chairpersons (one female), and stipulated 30% reserved female seats. However, when elections were held in April 2009 the MP's advisory role was reinstated.

Today's UPZ continues to serve more as a mechanism to consolidate clientelist political support by the ruling party than as a genuine attempt at decentralised democracy. One study found that 'the outcome will remain poor if the government is not sincere enough to make the system more accountable and responsive and merely uses it as a tool in consolidating its political foundation...' (Ahmed et al, 2010). The Zila has never been fully activated, and this has not changed. There have never been elections held for District Committees or Chairs, with the Zila Chair simply selected as a government political appointee. The District Commissioner (DC) is an administrative appointment within the civil service. There are some small budget made available by central government at this level, but the District tier of local government remain relatively inactive. Both the UPZ and the

13 The Upazila sub-district had been created by General H.M. Ershad in 1982 primarily as a tool for his unelected military government to strengthen political control over local areas. Initially intended to become the key unit of local government it never developed into this role because central governments fear that it will serve as a basis for local political opposition. It mobilizes few local resources, remaining fully dependent on central government patronage.

District (Zila) continue to play relatively low-level roles.

In order to address these shortcomings, extensive externally resourced capacity building support has been provided to the UPs and UPZs, including through the Union Parishad Governance Project 2011-2016 (UPGP) and the Upazila Parishad Governance Project 2011-2016 (UZGP). These donor-supported programmes provide training and fiscal support to UP/UPZ so they can better assist line ministries plan, resource and deliver local services with the aim of improved local synergies around local development and democratization. Both aim to add value to the large WB-supported Local Government Support Programme (LGSP 2) that focuses on local governance work, capacity building, fiscal innovation, regulatory improvements and identifying best practice.

In Greater Faridpur we found that the bulk of local development work continues to be carried out with resources provided by central government and through international donor-supported projects. The Ministries provide government revenue money to the UPs for the Annual Development Programme (ADP) budget, covering a range of expenditures. The largest proportion is for infrastructure and roads and is provided through the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED).¹⁴ Test Relief is food for work provided under the Ministry of Food and Disaster Management. A smaller proportion of overall central resources is provided by the Social Welfare Department for various social protection schemes. Since 2009 there has also been an MP's fund of around Tk3 crore annually. This is money for the ADP budget over which the MP has sole rights. Occasionally, additional resources are provided to MPs by the Prime Minister and by Parliament as gifts at election time or festivals, or as additional TR in times of hardship. This gives MPs additional influence in local communities through distributing patronage resources to followers. This latter channel is particularly open to abuse, with few checks and balances. Local taxes are collected at UP level such as property (holding) tax, land sales tax, and bazar lease tax, as well as water body leasing fees, licenses for rickshaws and money from shops and small industries. However, these locally collected resources form only a tiny proportion of the spent at UP level, with the bulk coming from central funding.

¹⁴ The MP has a strong influence over LGED funds for larger scale works such as embankment, bridge and major feeder road repairs. LGSP funds for local works are sent directly to a Union account in order to minimise bureaucratic and political interference. However, these funds are relatively small and used only for minor works, such as construction and repair of culverts.

Local projects require the formation of a seven-member Project Implementation Committee (PIC). At the time of the earlier study, a UP member was always required to serve as chair of the committee, which usefully provided a measure of local level accountability. This has now been changed. Since the majority of funds for local expenditure are now being brought in through the MP's personal channels, more room for manoeuvre was required. This change means that local ruling party people can now more easily bypass the UP, particularly if its elected leader is inconveniently affiliated to another party or faction, and make resource allocations and local development projects decisions independently.

In 2004 we had also found that Upazila Development Coordination Committees (UDCCs) were playing useful roles in local development processes, reviewing prioritising different proposals from the UPs, the Wards and from the other government line agencies. Today they are merely a formality. Before, the UDCCs were chaired in rotation by UP Chairmen (since there were no elected UPZ chairs at that time), providing the UPs with access to the local development budget and the chance to set local priorities. Today, our findings indicate that the UDCC has become less relevant since the bulk of development resources now come directly through the MP.

Table 2: Summary of political/administrative situation in each location

Formal office holders	Remote	Peri-Urban	Well-Connected
MP	Local MP (AL) elected in 2001, 2008 and 2014 (a BNP MP elected between 1996-2001).	Local MP (AL) elected in 2008 and 2014, replacing BNP.	Local MP (AL) elected in 2008 and 2014 replacing BNP MP elected 1996-2001.
UPZ Chair	BNP Chair elected 2014, replacing AL Chair elected 2009	AL Chair elected 2014 replacing a different AL Chair elected 2009	Longstanding Chair elected 2009 and 2014 (AL, but changed loyalty from Jatiya Party)
UP Chair	BNP Chair elected 2003 and 2011 (re-elected again in May 2016 in what was seen locally as a 'fair' election)	BNP Chair elected 2003 and 2011. No election held in 2016 because the UP will soon join the CC – so remains in post (July 2017)	BNP Chair elected 2011, replacing current UPZ Chair (and an acting AL UP Chair after 2009 UPZ election)
Notes	In this area, informal power was in practice exercised by the MP who bypassed the BNP UP Chair using AL UP member Mr J. in an informal 'local coordinator' role. (This changed following the 2016 UP election).	The UPZ Chair is the MP's younger brother, and he usually follow his line in most decisions.	In this locality, the UP Chair is the MP's cousin, with the UPZ Chair part of a rival AL faction. The local MP is widely seen as unruly. A new AL UP Chair was subsequently elected in May 2016. There was some local violence reported.

Social protection has expanded, but is also subject to the politicisation pressures mentioned. The NSSS with its 145 safety net measures is intended to consolidate multiple existing programmes and to extend a wider range of social protection instruments to poor and vulnerable populations. Formally, it is the UP that is supposed to make decisions about who should be entitled receive payments, but this function is subject to patron-client allegiances and to growing politicization. For example, it was reported that in our rural areas local level ruling party leaders with the support of the MP are able to reserve up to 50% of social safety net resources for distribution to their supporters, leaving the UP with less to allocate than before.

2.2 Political institutions

As we have seen, the political situation has changed so that a single ruling party now dominates. The Awami League has worked hard to strengthen its local power base and largely eliminated BNP and Jama'at Islami (JI) that formed the main opposition.

Fieldwork coincided with UP elections that were held in a staged process across the country between January and June 2016. The tradition had been for these to be conducted primarily as local elections based on personal reputation and power rather than on formal political party affiliation and outside political party support. The controversial use of party affiliations this time around is believed to have contributed to heightened local tensions, both between AL and residual opposition, and among different AL factions. Nationally, the 2016 UP elections were reported to have been the most violent local elections the country has ever held. More than 100 people were reported killed in election violence across the country, and many more badly injured. Only around one third of elections were estimated to have been free and fair. However, there were only a few reports of violence in our areas compared to elsewhere.

In the three Greater Faridpur study areas, the small amount of violence that occurred this year was mostly the result of intra-AL factional conflict rather than between political parties as had sometimes occurred before.¹⁵ Factionalism within the ruling party was exacerbated when local candidates whose party affiliation had previously been secondary to their local status

¹⁵ In some areas of the country it was reported in the press that local police were paid by local candidates from different parties to ensure a fair election, because they knew they would win in a fair contest, including a JI candidate in Satkhira in the south.

and reputation faced the imposition of ‘official’ local candidates who had been selected centrally by the ruling party, or by the local MP. It was therefore common to find competition between the ‘official’ and the locally popular ‘rebel’ AL candidates, with their supporters coming into conflict as rival factions.

Table 2 summarises the formal political situation in each of the three locations from the earlier study and updates these. Only in the well-connected village was there a local elected official who was familiar to us from the earlier study: after serving four terms as UP Chair, he had been elected UPZ Chair in 2014. In 2004, all three local MPs had been BNP-affiliated, and this had also been the party of government. Since the BNP did not contest the general election in 2014, all three local seats are now filled by AL MPs, as are two of the local UPZ Chairs. Despite the dominance of the AL nationally, each of the three UP Chairs in our study villages were BNP-affiliated when we conducted the main fieldwork. This follows an earlier tradition that these individuals have remained first and foremost local leaders whose reputations has not rested primarily on their party links, but also on their standing in the local community.¹⁶ We also find in the peri-urban and well-connected sites that like last time clan politics remains a feature of local leadership.

UP and UPZ elections took place in 2011/2016 and 2009/2014 respectively. This has begun to pose a problem for the MPs interested in extending AL political patronage and consolidating party support at UP level. To help them manage this, the MP in the remote study area has appointed an unofficial ‘coordinator’ to help bypass the UP Chair through constructing a special informal relationship (Box 9 below). This informal relationship took precedence over the formal structures of elected local government and illustrates the way that the ruling party is extending its power locally.

In the well-connected village, the UP Chair is a relative of the AL UPZ Chair, which helps to cement their relationship. The MP is regarded unfavourably by both of them, because he is from an opposing AL faction. However, in the latter case the 2016 election saw a new AL UP Chair elected, who was from the MP’s faction.

16 This position subsequently changed, with a new AL UP Chair elected in the well-connected village, and the peri-urban UP Chair announcing in May 2017 that he will soon affiliate to the AL.

2.3 Formal civil society

For many years Bangladesh was characterised as having a vibrant civil society sector, with a range of development NGOs in particular playing key roles. For a variety of reasons, including changing foreign donor policies, government restrictions, and organization and leadership problems among certain NGOs, the NGO sector has become less diverse than previously and more dominated by organizations providing economic support rather than rights-based or social mobilisation type development activities (Lewis 2017). The current government has also taken action to restrict civil society ‘space’. For example, a new law placing stronger restrictions on NGOs receiving foreign funding came into effect in October 2016¹⁷ and action has also been taken against prominent journalists regarded as critical of the government.¹⁸

When we returned to Greater Faridpur, found that there was a changed composition of local level NGO activities. Economic support from NGOs for small business and credit had increased, and there was less rights-based empowerment work around land, labour or gender inequality, or local group formation. Civil society is now dominated by more mainstream development NGOs engaged in forms of business loan support and loan making. For example in the peri-urban village earlier more radical NGO activities were now almost entirely absent, despite the persistence of longstanding rights issues. Nor did we find NGOs working to encourage representatives from poorer groups and women to seek election to local bodies in order to challenge domination by local elites as was the case earlier. This left a significant gap where formal ‘radical’ or rights-based civil society used to be. The only exception to this was some small scale single issue organisations, concerned with legal aid, or with disability rights. The situation was however somewhat different in the urban study location, where NGOs were a little more active in both economic support and community mobilization work.

The mainstream NGOs that we found are now giving larger loans to clients than before. For example, rickshaw pullers who were previously taking loans of around Tk8 thousand are now able to access loans of up to Tk50 thousand for the purchase of new battery-driven models or ‘easy bike’

17 Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/19/bangladesh-new-law-will-choke-civil-society> (accessed May 19, 2017).

18 See for example the action taken against Mahfuz Anam, editor of *Prothom Alo* and *Daily Star* newspapers (‘Bangladeshi editor who faced 83 lawsuits says press freedom under threat’, *The Guardian*, 18 May 2017, accessed 25 May 2017).

motorised rickshaws.¹⁹ We learned that such NGO support to local small business activity mainly works well, and it was generally found to be popular with members of our focus groups.

2.4 Informal civil society

The boundary between formal and informal civil society is not clear-cut, but we deploy it here to consider local associational forms, loose action groupings, and traditional institutions. The ‘*samaj*’ is usually identified as the key traditional socio-religious institution at village level. Villages have for generations contained one or more of these loose social groupings, made up of communities of households linked by kinship and shared neighbourhood space and headed by an elder or ‘*matbar*’. At the same time, the *samaj* has always been vulnerable to factional instability. This is the institutional space in which the *shalish* is convened, where informal arbitration by local leaders takes place around issues such as land disputes, marriage, political or religious tensions, allegations of immoral behaviour, or political conflict.

The *samaj* has also provided a platform for religious leaders to organise and integrate their activities, as well as serving as a local civil society space for community level activities around local school building, mosque maintenance, local infrastructure repair, and disaster response (Mannan 2015). As reported in the earlier study, the *samaj* has been in decline, as other researchers have noted. For example, Iqbal (2017) describes ‘a fragmentary and retreating *samaj* in the contemporary public sphere’. The remnants of the *samaj* persist in the form of local institutions of traditional authority such as the *shalish* (although these have evolved and changed), and in the Quomi *madrasa* religious school system, which as Iqbal (2017) also suggests, exist mainly outside the control of the modern state and civil society (to the concern of both).²⁰

Other types of semi-formal civil society actor include Business Associations and Bazar Committees. We saw in the earlier report how these were often vulnerable to political capture, but it was apparent from our new data that the ruling party has now established a tighter hold on

19 There now about 250 auto rickshaws operating in two stands in the town, with associations which are controlled by the ruling party.

20 There are two types: Aliya reformed government approved *madrasas* that also teach secular subjects, and Quomi unregulated ones. The latter are traditional in the sense they follow a purely religious curriculum, teach in Arabic, and rely on donations from the Middle East.

such local institutions than was the case earlier. Finally, while last time we sometimes found evidence of religious institutions such as Mosque or Temple Committees playing wider social roles – such as in *shalish* decisions – this was not found to be the case today. For example, we were informed that most *imams* these days are mostly concerned with prayers and funerals.

Other forms of informal civil society action, such as community-level activism and local protest, were encountered and are discussed later in the study. Finally, the spread of mobile phone technology and internet since our earlier study was striking and has also played a role in facilitating local level action.²¹

Greater Faridpur is an area of Bangladesh that is reported to be less strictly religious than some other parts of the country, and this was confirmed by religious attitudes and practices in each of our study areas. Few women in the area wear the *burqa*, for example. While there are both Quomi (private, unregulated) *madrasas* and Alia government regulated ‘reformed’ *madrasas* in the area, these are not reported to be increasing their numbers, or growing in influence.²² Religious meetings such as *waz mahfil* events take place as they have always done, where proper religious practice in the community is encouraged and resources mobilized towards the maintenance of local mosques and *madrasas*.²³ Here we also found that there was an interface with local politics, with local MPs and other politicians invited as chief guests and making financial donations to local religious groups as part of their vote bank calculations. While not completely absent from our data, we found relatively few reports of such meetings provoking tensions with for example members of the Hindu community, as has sometimes been reported from elsewhere in the country (Uddin, 2006).

21 The AL contested the 2008 election with the promise of building a ‘Digital Bangladesh’. Some suggest this idea has caught the imagination of the electorate, but others see it mainly as a strategy to capture and harness the power of new communication technologies to political interests (Shoesmith and Genilo 2013).

22 There are around 16,000 Alia and 10,000 Quomi *madrasas* in Bangladesh, with around 5.5 million and 1 million students respectively.

23 During the feedback discussions in Faridpur, one participant said that there were fewer cultural events than there were 10 years ago (such as plays and music) but more religious events.

2.5 Judiciary

We found in the earlier study that local political leaders, elders and civil society leaders were increasingly working together to produce outcomes that were generally viewed as fair within the community. Today the picture has changed and become more politicised. The longstanding *shalish* dispute settlement system remains central but has continued to evolve and change during the last decade. Ruling party leaders attend and dominate *shalish* and these days it is common for UP Chairs to be absent. There is no multi-party participation and less of a role for both the UP members and *matbars*. In the peri-urban village, for example, there were allegations that bribes must now usually be paid in order to receive favourable outcomes, and that as a result fewer people were seeking justice through the *shalish*.²⁴

More serious disputes, such as those over land, tend to be resolved at the UPZ level with local officials and/or party people present. The power of traditional local leaders has continued to decline. One person remarked *‘There is little importance given to matbars these days. If an incident occurs on a land issue or other kind of conflict, they don’t get involved, because no one shows them much respect any more.’*

In all communities, it was reported that earlier problems of police corruption and extortion had improved under the AL government. We learned from the rural locations that the official Village Court system is rarely used.

24 However, we also learned that the culture of penalties imposed by *shalish* was changing. A financial penalty is increasingly preferred to corporal punishment such as caning, which was previously more common.

COMMUNITY LEVEL PERSPECTIVES: MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE 2016 DATA

CHAPTER 3

This chapter reports on the main findings from the interviews and focus group discussions in each of our four study areas. It draws out key themes and links these with issues raised in the secondary literature that was analysed in the desk study phase of the research. For each site, the background data is first updated and compared to the situation we had encountered during the 2004 fieldwork, and then the main findings are summarised. The exception is in the case of the urban study site, which was not part of the earlier study.

3.1 The peri-urban village

In the peri-urban village, which is close to the main district town, we had found last time a prosperous local economy in which households previously dependent on agriculture were slowly moving into non-agricultural livelihoods such as shop keeping and rickshaw pulling. This time we found continued signs of increasing prosperity and new economic dynamism, reflecting improved communications and market access.

Just as Jansen and Rahman (2011) had found in their return to Manikganj district, we encountered better infrastructure, increasing non-agricultural employment, and successful out-migration. Both men and women have gained improved access to economic opportunities, to education and to health services. People tell us that agriculture has become less profitable and is contributing a declining proportion to household incomes. Construction and transportation and other informal sector businesses are booming. For example, it was immediately noticeable that many rickshaw pullers have upgraded their vehicles to new motorised models. They have been assisted in this in many cases through the provision of NGO credit loans, which have

expanded in scope and scale.²⁵ Migration includes national level migration for factory work in Dhaka and other urban centres, and at the international level increased numbers of women going for work to the Middle East as domestic servants.

The same BNP-affiliated UP Chairman remained in post as before. There was no election took place in 2016 since the area is scheduled to join the City Corporation in 2017 and will lose its UP. At the time of the fieldwork, the UP Chair's level of local influence was clearly much lower than before. Firstly, this is because the UP now controls fewer development resources than before, with an Annual Development Plan (ADP) budget totalling only about one fifth of what had been in 2004. Second, while today there are more social safety net programmes available for marginalised social groups (such as elderly, poor, widows, people with disabilities) than before, the UP Chair has less control over their allocation and provision.

Instead, it is the MP and his associates who mainly make these decisions. An increasing proportion is diverted to local ruling party leaders for distribution to their supporters. The result is that the UP chair's formal authority has gradually become weakened by informal 'bypassing' arrangements. For example, there is a local AL coordinator accountable to the MP who organises local development projects largely outside the formal UP system. The MP has additional power because he also has a ministerial position that gives him influence over local external donor-funded infrastructure work.²⁶ The power of the opposition's patron-client networks has declined as AL patronage has become strengthened.

The local business sector in Greater Faridpur is mixed in terms of scales, sectors and ownership. We were informed that many enterprises continue to be owned by established Hindu business families, some with businesses several generations old. Business associations do not operate independently of political groups, and we found that private sector associations have also been 'captured' by the ruling party. For example, most of the auto rickshaw

25 The UP cannot issue official licenses since the new battery-driven vehicles are not yet legal on the roads. Existing interests such as local bus and other road transport groups also oppose licensing. An unofficial solution has been found with the creation by local AL leaders of a new Vehicle Owners Association, with the backing of the MP. The consequent loss of transport license fee income further weakens the UP.

26 Some projects have arrangements in place to try to minimise interference from MPs, such as World Bank resources for local government strengthening that flow directly to the UP into a special account.

sector is controlled by one large association in Faridpur town that is linked to the AL, with a total of about 5000 rickshaws. Its President is a District level activist and former chair of the AL student wing Central Committee.

Issues and findings

The perception that economic progress has been experienced by all groups, but has occurred alongside a consolidation of ruling party power, came across strongly from the data. There were different factions and political affiliations apparent within focus groups, with for example among the non-poor men five individuals now happy to recognise the power of the ruling party, but two who still retained loyalty to the elected BNP chair.

From the focus group discussion with poor women it was confirmed that compared to before the local AL activists are more powerful in decisions around local resource distribution than the locally elected leaders linked to the BNP. They told us that although the BNP UP chairman remains popular locally and 'tries to provide' UP services fairly, it is now the local AL union level leader who oversees delivery of welfare payments, relief and other resources. They also confirmed that the MP is able to influence the UP through the use of informal coordinators. Box 1 describes an example of one way the ruling party is increasing its power locally over common property resources by subverting local formal institutions and informal traditions in favour of its supporters.

Box 1: Normal rules do not apply: party leaders and local water rights

We learned of one water body in the area is controlled by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and leased out each year for fishing. The normal arrangement for countless years has been that the UP arranges for an annual advertisement for leasing to be distributed, and any interested fisher folk groups are able to bid for rights to fish in the water body. The highest bidder is granted access to the fishing rights for the season. However, ruling party political power holders have recently started to ignore the tradition, and have forbidden local groups from making bids. The leader of the local Jubo League (the youth front of the ruling AL political party) has led the way in blocking this process in his own interest. He and his followers have found a way to take control the lease of the water body for last five years. We learned that he believed head the support of the MP to do this. Political pressure can therefore now be successfully exerted to ensure that the BWDB ignores all other applications in favour of this particular one - such that normal rules do not apply.

These days the local MP holds more power than before. Those loyal to the UP Chair, whom they described as *'polite and well mannered'*, claim that he is now increasingly bypassed in decision making by unruly AL activists who by contrast *'get things done by shouting and threatening'*, supported in the background by the MP. The non-poor men explain that despite being defeated when he stood for Chair at the last elections in 2011, in practice the local AL president and not the UP Chair is the most powerful person in the local area. He has informal influence over the UP. For example, he conducts the most important *shalish*, such as those concerning local land disputes.

While formal civil society in the form of radical NGO activity may be less common, we found examples suggesting that the capacity exists for informal types of civil society action to challenge local abuses of power (Box 2). The form of such action may be unruly or 'uncivil' in its use of force and threat. People try to resist infringement of their rights when they occur and they sometimes succeed in gaining redress. For example we heard that the main local AL leader, who had formerly been the elected president of the local High School's Management Committee, had without good reason refused some children the opportunity to re-take exams and it was implied that this was for political reasons. As a result, he failed to secure re-election to the Committee, suggesting a level of community level power to influence local services.

Box 2: Local civil society: neighbourhood watch or vigilante group?

The embankment's sluice gate creates a popular crossing point. It is also a place where local gangs have long attempted to collect illegal tolls by preying on those trying to get across. There was a particular case a few years ago during the rainy season when members of a gang interfered with the activities of local fishermen working in the waterlogged areas located on the southern side of the embankment. Following this trouble a violent clash took place between the fisher folk and gang members after Friday prayers. Several people were injured. Afterwards, two criminal cases were filed with the police. The same day local people with the help of a former UP Chairman, formed a Village Defence Group to protect themselves and seek justice, and they began patrolling the area. They petitioned the police and at a meeting organized at the local government Primary School, the Police Chief assured local people there would be full police cooperation. The group also talked to the local Mosque Committee who agreed to cooperate. Messages were broadcast across the community using the Mosque's loudspeaker to warn the remaining gang members to desist. Two gang members were soon arrested, and other arrests followed. The gang members were sentenced to imprisonment in some cases, with pressure

from the group ensuring that they were unable to pay off the police and avoid sentence. Police cooperation in this case proved very important. The informal tolls were successfully eliminated. With this particular problem solved, the informal civil society group then faded away.

Non-poor women are particularly positive about the business opportunities being provided by NGO loans and training, and contribution to livelihoods such as cattle and goat rearing and poultry. One woman told us about her experiences of building a small cattle rearing business, with the support and encouragement of her husband. Over a period of more than 10 years she has built up a herd of eleven cows and is able to sell 20-30 litres of milk a day. Using the dung from the cows she is also now producing organic manure for sale, and renting out a breeding bull. Using this income she has been able to build a good livelihood, including sending her two daughters to school. She has gone on to set up a savings and loan cooperative group with 25 members from among her neighbours.

They took a favourable view of the UPZ Women's Development Forum (WDF, introduced in 2015) that is composed of elected UP women members. The Forum is intended to influence the allocation of public resources towards benefitting women with public works. They also explained that most local disputes are settled informally, rather than through the Village Court system. There is agreement that both NGO campaigns and legislation such as the 2010 Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act (2010) has reduced the prevalence of these offences. We also understood that a high proportion of girls are now educated in this community and that access to education has improved considerably since the mid-2000s, with women now finding employment locally as teachers and as NGO workers.

While most groups mentioned the wider dominance of the ruling party, non-poor men were particularly concerned about the rise of 'party power' as a force that has undermined the authority of the *matbars*. This resonates with the concept of 'partyarchy' used by Hassan (2013, p.13) where he refers to the dominance of political party patronage networks in determining people's access to opportunities and resources. This loss of traditional authority is not just due to politicization, but also a result of inter-generational social changes in attitudes visible in the other locations as well (including the urban study area) that includes concerns about declining respect for elders. One person commented to us that *'young people are no longer being prepared to obey senior citizens'*.

While these men pointed to generally positive aspects of local economic changes, they also told us that growth was creating higher land prices by putting pressure on finite local resources. This means that there is a need to ensure that the costs of a land dispute are minimised by a fair judgment by local leaders: *‘Leaders are there to help people and they have links with the thana (police station). That’s why people try to keep good relations with them. Nobody wants to lose out in a land-related shalish.’*

There is reported to be relatively good community relationships in the area. For example, a settled ‘river gypsy’ minority community have to some extent been integrated into the local power structure (see Box 3 below). This could be taken as an example that the patronage networks used by the AL to consolidate its power can have a socially inclusive character.

Box 3: A local informal AL ‘coordinator’ from the local minority community

The once nomadic but now long-settled local river gypsy community are housed on squatted land along both sides of a nearby railway line. On this land they are increasingly joined by local people escaping river erosion in nearby areas and many now live side by side. We met a local activist lawyer who is originally from this minority community. He has been a longstanding AL leader since his student days, worked as a lawyer since 2011, and a former college president and former UP member. There have been attempts to move the *bepari* community off the railway land from time to time, but he has so far managed to prevent their eviction. He convinced the local MP to come to a community meeting and secured an agreement to protect their rights. With the support also of the UPZ Chairman he has come to serve as an informal ‘coordinator’ for this Union and now oversees many of the area’s local development projects. He explained to us that using both MP and UP funds he is able to undertake *Madrassa*, Temple, Mosque, and School projects along with local road maintenance work. During the BNP regime he told us there were far fewer local roads, but that now the government is able to provide more good quality roads in the area. A new bridge over the river near the UPZ has also been constructed. He explained to us that a new Marine College building and a riverside tourist infrastructure structure are also in the offing. He also told us that he is very proud of his minority community and has seen many of them go on to build successful small businesses in the area.

Overall, people reported that law and order has improved, and that *shalish* decisions are generally fair and timely, with the local tradition of holding an informal and inclusive *shalish* (including participation from women UP members) continuing from last time. There was widespread

approval of the creation of the Child Marriage Protection Committee that operates at the UP, and one person recounted to us the case of a successful intervention after a complaint was made by the father of an under-age girl who had eloped with an under-age boy in Class 9.²⁷

3.2 The well-connected village

In our earlier study, this was an area also characterised by a high degree of economic and social dynamism. Today, we find the quality of infrastructure has further improved and it is striking that the area today resembles the peri-urban study area far more than it had done back in 2004. Better living standards are reflected in the far smarter and more ‘urban’ clothes that we observed people wearing today. There are now extensive electricity connections to people’s houses, when these were only to be found in the bazar last time. The bazar itself has also grown substantially in size and turnover. Unlike before, there are few complaints made by any of the four sets of focus group members about rising food prices.

Increased economic opportunities are also reported in this area, including through the growth of migration to the Middle East (for both men and women). As in the peri-urban village, people are more connected than before with international migration opportunities. This has had the effect of reducing people’s vulnerability to criminal brokers and intermediaries. Some have been assisted by migration loans from NGOs such as BRAC.

Unlike before, we did not encounter NGOs engaged in social mobilization work around land rights issues. We had been particularly interested in two sets of civil society related findings from our study last time: that local UP leaders had become frustrated with NGO credit lending that was causing some people loan payment problems and causing disputes in the community that they were asked to settle; and that they were more supportive of certain radical NGOs attempting to settle landless people on illegally occupied local *khas* land and helping them to establish proper land rights (building win-win coalitions that provided assistance to local poor households and generated future votes).

27 The government’s Child Marriage Restraint Act (2016) has strengthened law enforcement on this issue, but it has also been criticised for making provision for ‘special circumstances’ such as accidental pregnancy that would allow marriage at a younger age to protect ‘honour’ (“Bangladesh child marriage law could violate girls’ rights”, Plan International, 7 February 2017, <https://plan-international.org/news/2017-02-06-bangladesh-child-marriage-law-could-violate-girls-rights>, accessed 30 June 2017).

Like last time, we found that there is relative harmony among different ethnic and religious communities in the locality. In particular there are many Hindu communities in this area and no violence was reported between Hindu and majority Muslim during the past ten years.²⁸ One of the non-poor women focus group explained that it is common for Muslim families to invite Hindus to their home during Eid, and for Hindus to invite Muslims during Puja, and she said that most people do not think it right to differentiate between Hindu or Muslim. However, some people in the focus groups did raise some minor concerns about a deteriorating law and order situation in the locality in relation to small-scale theft and harassment.

Issues and findings

The focus group discussions expressed a mainly positive view of the economic opportunities afforded to them by the country's higher growth economy. One woman from the poor focus group with two sons told us that one has gone to Dhaka to work in a factory and that another now has a small shop there. Another told us of her son working in construction in Dhaka. There has also been some international migration from this community to the Middle East (including Qatar and Jordan) but it was not clear what the mix of migrants was between the poor or non-poor families.

The women we heard from were generally very positive about the scale and terms of the NGO loans available for starting up small enterprises (to the value of around one lakh Taka) and the micro-credit loans that NGOs make available (which range from Tk10-60,000). Unlike in 2004, we did not hear complaints about unreasonable loan repayment pressures or loan 'recycling' (people taking loans and then 'lending on' to other people in order to make money). Nor did we hear about people taking several loans from more than one organization, and getting into difficulty with repayments. From the non-poor women we also learned that around a dozen women and men from this village have gone to Dhaka to work in garment factories. One person has migrated to Malaysia using a special migration loan of Tk5 lakh from an NGO, which is repaid in instalments along with each remittance sent. Although people told us they saw value in NGOs as loan providers, little role for NGOs was envisaged beyond this – such as becoming more involved with *shalish*, or protecting human rights.

28 However, we did hear of a land-grabbing case in which a wealthy Hindu land owning family have recently been deprived of some of their land by political interests (including an MP and his supporters) so that it could be used for industrial purposes.

Poor women gave a view of the local power structure that placed at its centre the formal power of male office holders. The UPZ chair was seen as the most powerful individual in their community since he was affiliated with the ruling party and had been elected as UP Chair four times in this area. He is described as being honest and running a fair *shalish*. Most local disputes tend to be successfully resolved through this informal system, involving some combination of the UPZ and UP chairs, UP members, village elders, and members of the Bazar Committee.

As an example of why the UPZ Chair's judgment is respected, we heard that he had acted to support a widow living on a small plot of government *khas* land for 10 years who had suddenly faced action by local youths to force her off the land. He intervened to prevent them from stealing the land. However, in another case a widowed woman had tried to formally register land that she had inherited from her deceased father in law (legally purchased from the UP chair's uncle) but was unable to do so.

Women's property rights continue to be difficult to enforce, with many people in all the study sites reluctant to make it possible for women to inherit paternal land, even though this is her right under the law. Even when women do secure some land, it can be difficult to hold onto. One woman told us that in her view poor women do not yet have strong enough land rights in cases like this: *'Rich people are powerful and they have 'money power'. We poor people are unable to challenge the rich, even when they are breaking the law'*.

When it comes to local public services, ordinary people's access here is once again personalised and increasingly party-linked. Road repair and renovation projects are directed towards leaders and activists of the ruling party. The UP chair and members these days implement only a small proportion of such projects. The UP's Standing Committees, which are supposed to widen local decision making ensure effective oversight of local development activities, are generally less active than we found them during the earlier study (which was the case in each of our study areas).

A key person discussed by poor women was Mr B., the UP member who allocates social 'safety net' resources and decides who is eligible the '40 Days' employment support programme²⁹, Test Relief (a programme

29 The Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest (EGPP) was established as a safety net programme by the government in 2008 to provide 40 days of short-term employment support each year through public works. One third of recipients are women.

offering food for small scale work like pond cleaning and road repairs) and other types of welfare programme. The UP member is mostly seen as fair-minded, but there are some critical comments made about some needy people in the community who are unable to access what they see as their due social security entitlements. For example, we heard about a woman with two disabled children unable to access an allowance, and another similar case of a woman entitled to maternity payments.

The poor male focus group was made up of people with little or no owned land whose livelihoods came primarily from rickshaw pulling, labouring or sharecropping work. All agreed that their financial positions are stronger than they were ten years ago. They said that agricultural income had been enhanced by producing more high value winter crops such as onion, garlic and vegetables in addition to paddy, and by more opportunities in small-scale agribusiness. The new motorised pedal rickshaws and the improved auto rickshaws are also more profitable. Finally, they too explained that international migration has made a significant difference to local livelihoods, so that ‘five times as many people’ were able to access migration opportunities than was the case 10 years ago. Around 60 people from the village are now believed to work overseas and are sending remittances to local households (see Box 4).

Box 4: International migration loans from NGOs

One focus group member was keen to talk to us about his positive experience with an international migration loan from BRAC Bank. Mr K is from a middle class household. He has one son who works for the Bangladesh Border Guard (BGB) and another who has worked in Saudi Arabia since 2015. In order to facilitate this migration, he explained that he needed a total of Tk9 *lakhs*, which is a huge amount of money for a rural household. He had heard that BRAC Bank had established a loan programme for international job seekers, and so went to talk to the manager, later submitting the required paperwork. BRAC Bank gave him a Tk2 *lakh* loan, which he was able to supplement by mortgaging some of his family land, selling some trees and taking an additional loan from his son-in-law. We learned that BRAC Bank’s migration loan is a recently introduced scheme that is having an impact in many rural areas, with an easy payment scheme that allows the borrower to repay money in easy instalments. In the village there are reports of at least five other people getting this type of loan and that they are very satisfied with the scheme.

In discussing their views of the power structure, the poor male group told us that powerful local families continue to hold power in the community, but that these are now more closely linked not just to elected local officials but also to political parties. The UPZ Chair sits at the top of the local power structure, and although he is AL affiliated he manages to maintain a fairly good relationship with the UP Chair, who is BNP-affiliated. One dimension that makes this easier is that they are relatives (uncle/nephew). As a former UP Chair from this community, the UPZ Chair has previously worked with the current UP Chair and the latter’s reputation has been enhanced by their association. Another is that the local MP is unpopular here (he seen by many people as predatory and unruly) and appears to be part of a different AL faction, and a rival of the UPZ Chair. Nevertheless, quite a lot of local power is invested in the informal role of local ruling party activists. The local AL leader is both a relative of the UPZ Chair and a former ‘freedom fighter’ (from the 1971 Liberation War) and seen by the poor groups as particularly powerful, despite having no formal status in the UP or UPZ.

The poor men’s focus group also confirmed that the modernised informal *shalish* system was relatively effective and inclusive (as we had reported last time). But some people were concerned about the growing dominance of local ruling party activists over more traditional local leaders. It was reported that it is not unusual for convened by leaders of the Chhatra League AL student wing, with local officials present. This is because the UP chair is a BNP member whose authority is now bypassed wherever possible.³⁰ One person remarked: ‘*Whatever the president and secretary of the Chhatra League say, the UP chairman and members tend to carry it out*’. However, once again there were different views expressed in the group about this and another view was that only if UP members were from the ruling party would they involve the Chhatra League.

Some alleged that MPs only give key jobs and responsibilities to people within their own party and not those affiliated to the opposition, and that an informal payment often needs to be made in order to secure even small jobs. We were told of many such alleged cases, including a rumour that a recent appointment to a maid’s job at a local college had required a substantial informal payment to be made via the college’s Management Committee.

³⁰ The non-poor male focus group perceived that while the local Mosque and Temple Committees were active in religious activities, their roles in wider community institutions was not extensive and probably declining as the power of the ruling party has increased. For example, while they were invited to take part in some *shalish* work their role was seen as largely ornamental and their voices did not generally count for much in decision-making.

The AL also has a direct link to the Bazar Committee through its President, a ruling party local leader and businessman who has good connections to the UPZ Chairman. Management of the committee is tendered each year and government people end up with the lowest bid and control the market and its revenue (*'the people in power guard the tender box'*, it was said). There is similar control of local water bodies and land leases. In one reported case, a large area of land that earlier had been leased to a group of landless people during the BNP government period is now completely controlled by an AL leader. The landless household group no longer have access to it.

The space for organising political opposition and protest has become narrower. Opposition activists in this community say they are effectively prevented from organising demonstrations or other local action through the AL's control of the local police. They say the police are likely to harass them if they try to organise an open event. If they try to organise more 'low key' activities, they say that in today's political climate they may risk being labelled by the police as extremists or terrorists, and face the use of force by police to repress meetings.

While the research was going on there was an example that illustrates continuing problems around forms of day to day sexual harassment, but also a favourable public settlement and outcome. This was a case of stalking of a female student at a local school, who was regularly threatened by a group of local boys as she walked home from school, and later subjected to unwelcome calls from these boys on her mobile phone. With the help of her brother who started to accompany her to school, she was able to make a complaint to her teacher, who followed it up with the School's Management Committee and a *shalish* was called with the parents of those involved. The outcome was one that ruled in the girl's favour and undertaking that they would desist from the harassment, which at the time of the field visit appeared to be successful. It was felt unlikely that such an outcome would have been secured so easily a decade ago.

It was reported, though we did not have data to support this, that both economic empowerment and NGO awareness raising had contributed to a recent increase in the incidence of divorces initiated by women. As female education levels have also increased, we were told that some women divorced because they would no longer put up with mistreatment and a lack of mutual understanding. They were now more likely to raise their voice when previously they lacked both the confidence to do so and the necessary knowledge of the law and of local services. On the issue of child marriage,

both poor men and poor women discussed the fact that the practice continued and officials could do little to prevent it. Underage marriages are sometimes conducted in secret and can remain unregistered, so that the UNO remains unaware of them. The UP is unlikely to report them. There are believed to be 50 or 60 child marriages in this village (see Box 5).

When it comes to accessing welfare services the male poor group confirms the view that the distribution of VGD cards and social safety net entitlement cards remains personalised as before, but has now also become more politicised. The UP members draw up lists of those people eligible, but now the UP chair also puts aside a proportion (believed to be around 50%) for distribution among local party leaders and activists. When it comes to the leasing of local water bodies and other resources such as the market license allocations, we heard that opposition leaders know that at the moment it is futile to participate since the ruling party controls the process.

For the non-poor women, critical insights were offered regarding the value of the reserved seat appointed female UP member. They were unanimously of the view that she was answerable mainly to the male UP officials and played little role in the Standing Committees, or in wider decision-making.

They also valued the UNO's role as School Inspector, something that was not mentioned by other groups. However, they complained about the way jobs at the High School were allocated, based on informal payments. We were told for example that it had been alleged that Tk3 lakhs had changed hands to secure the post of Head Teacher, and Tk50 thousand for an Assistant Teacher job. There was a requirement for a formal recruitment test for such appointments, they explained, but the result for each candidate counted for nothing. We also heard from the discussion that the MP is directly involved in such appointments, and that informal payments are believed to take place between MP, the School Principal and members of the School Management Committee.

Most people mentioned the relatively good law and order situation in the area, but voiced concerns about the ruling party control of the police leading to cases where there was only a partial application of the law. For example, one participant recounted a story of a robbery at her house when she had been at home. She had managed to phone a local teacher who brought help and the ten or so thieves had fled, taking jewellery and money. The family went to the police to file a case, but found they were pressured a few days later due to the connections of some of those involved to change

their statement so that it only named four persons (making it a less serious crime of ‘snatching’ rather than robbery, with lower penalties).

Finally, non-poor men talked about aspects of the formal and informal aspects of the power structure and the ways both elements sometimes reinforced each other. For example, it was felt that the MP’s control of both the local Police Administration and the local College Management Committee are important strategies to extend his power.

Box 5: Migration, gender concerns, and clan politics

We met a forty five year old female resident of the well-connected village whose husband has worked in Saudi Arabia for the last ten years. While he only manages to come back to the village every two or three years, he has been able to send money back regularly to the family. They have one son and two daughters. The son is the eldest child, married three years ago and now lives separately adjacent to his father’s house. Since this was effectively a female-headed household, and they felt insecure, they decided that eldest daughter should be married off at a very young age - when she was in class nine and only 13 years old. This went ahead even though it was an illegal child marriage under the country’s law. She now lives at a home with her mother in law and youngest daughter. However, she had become involved in an extra-marital relationship with a young man, nephew of the UPZ chairman and an AL student activist. Her mother in law filed a complaint to the leaders of the Bazar Committee and a *shalish* was held, attended by members of the Bazar Committee and other UP members. However, in their deliberations they were mainly critical of the daughter, not the young man. He was warned not to visit the daughter’s house again but many villagers apparently considered the verdict too lenient simply because he was the UPZ chairman’s nephew. Clan politics continues to play a role in the local power structure, and contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal norms.

NGO credit facilities are now providing people with easy access to loans, which are larger than they were in 2004, and these days NGOs support small business development rather than poverty reduction as their priority. There were no complaints over NGO loan repayment disputes being brought to the UP authorities (that had been a frequent complaint from local officials last time). It was also reported that there was less need today for poor people to resort to exploitative informal moneylenders than had been the case previously.

People dealing with the power structure need to negotiate with patrons if they are seeking to solve a problem or advance their interests. There is still flexibility and negotiation in the types of patronage arrangements that are in place. As we have seen, factional politics can still also help to structure how local governance processes play out, for example in relation to a recent struggle for control over the Bazar Committee (see Box 4).

As we had found in the peri-urban area, most of the radical development NGO activity we had encountered in 2004 has disappeared. Dispute settlement increasingly takes place in informal *shalish* settings rather than through the formal Village Court system, which is less frequently used. Local landless households who had been earlier assisted to secure title to *khas* land by NGO action seem to have been able to hold on to it.³¹ However, other such available land that has emerged in the period since has been illegally occupied by local elites as had often happened during the 1990s.

As Box 6 highlights, the absence of this type of formal civil society does not mean that concerned citizens cannot sometimes organise to take action to protect their, or other people’s, interests. We found some small-scale examples of informal civil society resistance to the expansion of local power by the ruling party occasionally taking place. Here for example a Press Club journalist group challenged instances where the MP and his henchmen have attempted to encroach on land that does not belong to them. This can be seen as taking the form of what Hossain (2011, p.918) terms ‘rude accountability’, suggesting that it is important to pay more attention to unruly types of informal behaviour (aggressiveness, impoliteness, shaming) as strategies used poor people for demanding better public services. The threat of ‘fear of exposure in the media’ is another form of pressure of this kind.

Box 6: Informal civil society: media action against land grabbing

Near one *bazar* we were shown an area of public land that people have used for decades as a football field. In 2013 people noticed that about 40 new small brick and tin roof shops began appearing on part of the field. This was seen as an encroachment on what was regarded as community common. During construction of these shops the local national Liberation War memorial monument was also damaged. It turned out that the new shops were being

31 *Khas* land is fertile unowned land that can emerge when rivers change course that the law requires to be distributed to landless households, but usually occupied instead by elites employing the use of force.

built with the support of the President of the Bazar Committee (who was also the General Secretary of the AL's local chapter), backed by the local MP. People told us this particular MP has a reputation for unruliness and is linked to a faction engaged in criminality of this kind. When he heard about this, the UP Chair contacted the General Secretary of the local Press Club who visited with five other journalists. Deciding to write an article in the press to draw attention to the injustice, they were immediately offered bribes by members of the faction not to do so (amounting to about Tk50 thousand). They refused the money and filed their news stories, which appeared in several national daily newspapers with the headline *'Politically influential persons collaborate with local administration to destroy the Shaheed Minar and grab football field land'*. It was alleged that each faction member had gained Tk1-2 lakhs from each prospective shop renter before starting the land grab, and had also passed kickbacks on to the MP and various other local officials. We heard from the General Secretary that they had allegedly got the go-ahead to do this by the MP: *'The UPZ Chairman was also aware about the conspiracy, but he did not raise his voice about it. We learned about all this from the UP Chairman, his cousin.'* Following the press reports, the independent Ekushi TV station sent a team to cover the story. The result was more pressure on the authorities to remove the construction - but the MP stopped the UNO from doing so. The TV people then responded with more stories, including highlighting other cases of illegal activity involving the MP. This drew the attention of a local activist NGO based in Rajbari. When the PM was due to visit the area, a human chain protest was organised in April 2014. Two days after the visit the illegal buildings were demolished. The MP's faction had been successfully pressured by a combination of local unruly action, help from an NGO and a key role played by local activist media. Even though the AL dominates civil society, space can sometimes be opened up within its factions in support of small forms of pro-poor change.

The current UPZ Chair (formerly a popular local UP Chair) continues to wield great influence here since he is now with the ruling party, having switched from his former Jatiya Party allegiance. The fluidity of these party allegiances is also illustrated by the fact that the BNP-affiliated local UP Chair is his nephew, which helps to create a smooth relationship. Kinship continues to structure local power relations within local families, but in this case also leads to factional tensions with the MP (see Box 5). During the recent UP elections it was reported that the UPZ Chair had even undertaken some campaigning in favour of his nephew.

The use of informal arrangements to 'coordinate' local efforts through party supporters also helps to enhance the power of the ruling party. While there is an ostensible commitment at the level of central government and donors to the strengthening of decentralisation structures and processes, on the ground a new set of informal strategies emerging. These create local arrangements for the extension of ruling party power at the local level.

Women are slowly moving into positions of power within formal decision-making positions in structures such as the UP and the UPZ within local decentralisation efforts. However, despite efforts to promote gender inclusion, we heard one woman UPZ member in our area report her experience that their scope for exercising power and decision making remains highly constrained by patriarchal culture (Box 7).

Box 7: Marginalisation of a woman UPZ member

We met a local UP women member, who had subsequently been elected to sit on the UPZ Parishad as a women member, and is also President of the Women's Awami League in her local Union. She said that knows the rules but still found it hard to be taken seriously as a women representative: *'In the Gazette many duties and responsibilities for women members are listed. But UP Chair entrusts me with few of these responsibilities. Allocation of VGF cards comes up twice a year, and VGD once every two years. When distributing the cards, the UP Chair says there are aren't any for me. But in the Gazette it says that women are entitled to one out of every three'*. However, being politically aware, she also pays close attention to the allocation process and tries to check the cards allocated for male members. She sometimes manages to increase her control over a small number of these allocations. When it comes to the 40 Days employment generation project (the public works scheme launched by the Bangladesh government in 2009), she explained that there are six committees organising payments to over 300 local people, but with no women involved in any of them. She has complained to the authorities about this without success. She resents the idea that a proportion of available 'safety net' resources is expected to go back to AL leaders, even though she is herself a party person. She insists that these resources should go to ordinary people. She is also concerned that there is no transparency around the use of the UP taxes, drawn from market and from land sales (a tax of 1% on each). No one knows where this goes - and it may be as high as Tk1 crore, she believes. But she is generally supportive of the UP Chair and says he comes to her village participate in a *shalish* if she asks him to. When it comes to her role in the UPZ, she says she is able to achieve very little. She was once called for the Coordinating Committee,

but then found they had not made room for her. She has complained to the UNO and MP to no effect. She says the woman Vice-Chair role is marginalised within most of the UPZ's activities and decision-making.

This area contains many Hindu families. Focus group discussions indicated a relatively high level of communal harmony and a lower level of tension than some national media reports might suggest in the country as a whole. The role of the UP chair in maintaining harmony and offering fair treatment in disputes between Muslim and Hindu households was recounted in a case discussed in the non-poor women focus group. One individual from the Hindu community had sold his homestead land to a Muslim neighbour with a condition that if in future the neighbour wants to sell the land he would sell it back to him, an agreement that was witnessed by the UP Chair. Later the buyer sold the land to another Muslim neighbour and the original owner lodged a complaint to the UPZ Chair and to the UP Members, who initiated a *shalish* to resolve the matter. As a result of its decision, he was ordered to return the land and he did so.

3.3 The remote village

We had found this environmental unstable location (the village is located in a *char* area) to be by far the most deprived area in the previous study. In 2004 it had recently faced devastating floods and every household had received relief goods from the UP, from humanitarian NGOs and from political parties. In this area, local power was most strongly politicised as well, perhaps because of its history as an area where Maoist groups had operated during the 1980s. Today there are still poor communications and weak infrastructure. The village is not far in geographical distance from Rajbari town, but it has been cut off by changes to the river system and there are no bridges that could give easy access to the surrounding area and the town. The gains from Bangladesh's wider economic growth are harder to detect here than in the other two locations. Local houses are mainly of the traditional build with tin roofs, and there are even a few thatched houses that remain.

This village continues to be a vulnerable place to live due to the severe environmental pressures caused by river erosion. Many local households are losing both homestead and farm land. It would be logical to assume that climate change is also contributing to these growing environmental pressures. For example, we learned that major river erosion events have led to around 40% of the original village land being lost since 2004.

Only around a half (100 families) remain in our study area compared with last time. Many of those affected have relocated to places nearby. Meanwhile a new *char* land area has emerged on the other side of the Padma River from the village, creating more than two hundred acres of new land. About 60-70 households from our study area have already started cultivating crops on this new land. Rice prices remain stagnant, but some of these farming households are now growing more high value cash crops like vegetables on this fertile *char* land.

As in the previous two locations the ruling AL party has succeeded in building closer links with local institutions through putting in place both formal and informal strategies. For example at the formal level local, Ward sabha (where there is supposed to be local input into decisions about public works projects) are mainly now overseen by the MP, who ensures top down control over local planning. However, we also learned from focus group discussions that most villagers broadly accept this changed state of affairs: since no one usually objects if useful local infrastructure improvements are the result. The presence of the MP also ensures that more resources are likely to be made available.

Women's position, and their livelihoods more generally, have improved less here than in the other two villages. Women face discrimination in labour markets and we learned for example that women's wages were much lower than those of men in this area, for example women working in the field receive Tk200 per day compared to men who normally receive Tk350-400. There are also lower levels of education, and poorer access to services. Perhaps because of this there are now NGOs working here to support women's livelihoods activities with small-scale business loans. This is different from 2004, when we found welfare and relief NGO work only. Despite the stronger NGO presence than before, there are still no NGOs doing rights-based development or social mobilisation NGOs working here. Access to justice is a problem for poor families. While doing the fieldwork we learned of a recent case of violence against a local poor woman by a member of a local elite family that was only partially resolved. The woman's family went to the local police to file a case against the attacker, but allies of the perpetrator were able to successfully persuade the police not to take the case and instead for the matter to be dealt with through a *shalish*, which simply required that an apology be made and no other action taken. The woman's family were obviously highly dissatisfied with this level of justice, and her sister said '*We had wanted to file a formal case of sexual harassment but due to the pressure of the local elites it had to be resolved by the shalish*'.

As in the other areas, there are nevertheless interesting examples to be found of informal local level civil society mobilisations or acts of resistance. When people belonging to a neighbouring ruling party faction supported by the MP tried to stock with fish a local flooded area to which villagers had traditionally had the rights, a collective action was undertaken by locals one night and the outsiders were made to withdraw.

Some of this might also be partly due to the unusual political history of this area, which has a tradition of left-wing militancy (see Box 9). During the 1980s and 1990s underground Maoist groups built local links in certain remote *char* areas like this one, based on a combination involving the community in problem-solving, empowerment and education, and sometimes intimidation. We learned that this history had led to relatively good law and order and respect for women's rights that is perhaps higher than other villages.

Issues and findings

Out-migration to livelihoods opportunities in Dhaka have been central to this community's efforts to maintain livelihoods in the face of deteriorating natural resource capital and continuing isolation. As with many other villages, some young women have gone to Dhaka for domestic and garment work. However, and distinctive to this location, we were surprised to discover extensive out-migration among young boys for tailoring opportunities in Keraniganj, Dhaka (Box 8). Here the boys work as informal apprentices so that they can gain tailoring skills to enable them to set up small business in the country's expanding domestic clothing industry. Parents value the economic opportunities that they believe this will provide in the future, even though this means their sons are withdrawing from getting an education. We learned that some village boys have already gone on to build their own profitable tailoring business and small factories in Dhaka bringing in high incomes. Other households say they are keen to emulate these examples.

Box 8: 'Informal vocational training': migrating for tailoring work in Keraniganj

The remote village has been hard-hit by high levels of riverbank erosion, centring on a major erosion event in 2007, leading to loss of village land and increased pressure on livelihoods. Households reported that they send increasing numbers of school age boys (as young as 10-12) to small-scale tailoring businesses near Dhaka. This informal small-scale work is quite distinct from the export garments factories that mainly employ women. It caters to increasing demand from local households - who are becoming more prosperous - for

locally-made clothing in line with more urban styles. Many households have sent one son as an apprentice. It was explained to us that in doing so they were making a trade off between dropping out of school early (which was regretted) and accessing what is considered a very good new economic opportunity (even if child labour is involved). It is considered that sending boys is more respectable than sending girls for this type of work. In one example, villagers told us of a particular boy who had first migrated to Keraniganj several years ago and had become very successful, owning five tailoring shops today. Initially these boys serve an informal training apprenticeship with a tailor where they learn the skills over a two-year period in return for food and lodging. They eventually graduate to working the machines and start to send money home. Some boys have been able to expand further and set up their own small tailoring shops and employing others in this expanding sector. We heard of one villager, who has recently established a factory and employs 29 people. He initially asked for Tk300 thousand from his father (who took out a land bond to raise the loan) to set up the factory and within a few years was earning a substantial annual return on his investment many times that amount and he now considers himself very well off.

There was widespread disappointment voiced among both of the female focus groups with regards the local UP women member, Mrs S. It was said that she had only visited them once or twice during the election and that they had heard nothing from her since. One person mentioned that her son had come to distribute VGD welfare cards to people on her behalf. As in the other locations, it was said that the AL MP and his party activists distributed VGD cards to supporters in order to by-pass the local BNP UP chair. But it was not possible to establish for what proportion of the cards this was the case. An informal *shalish* held in the nearby town is increasingly preferred as a more practical option by village authorities than the formal Village Court that would be required to be held at the UP which is located further away. It was agreed that Mrs S. does not usually play any role in the *shalish* proceedings.

They also talked about changing levels of respect in the community, and the fact that youths do not pay as much attention to the advice of their elders, and that decisions from the traditional *shalish* system are often not observed properly. The example is given of an abandoned woman with a child who tried to get justice and have the community insist that the husband took her back. He simply disregarded the decision, disappeared and was reportedly living in Pabna where he remarried. He has not divorced his first wife either, and does not visit for fear of attack by his wife's brothers. She now manages by working as a domestic servant nearby.

We learned from the female focus groups that there are different views about household decision-making. Some women told us that these days decision-making is a joint process between husband and wife, and that if they are unable to reach a decision they consult their older children too. But others felt that husbands often did not consult their wives or that if they do, they only act on the wife's opinions very occasionally and mostly disregard them. Indeed one man told us that *'it is not wise to share all of your problems with an illiterate wife'*.

We were also told about the persistence of child marriage in this community, driven in part by concerns about women's security and honour. By the age of 15 or 16 most people agree they should be married and there is a fear that particularly with the rise of mobile phones, that rumours about illicit relationships can start more easily and earlier with daughters, making it more difficult to get marriage proposals. No one wants to be the subject of rumours. One woman explains that she has married off her underage daughter because she was worried about risk to her reputation. She said *'I could not go anywhere leaving my adult daughter at home. So I made stronger tin walls for my house by taking out a loan.'* She recently married off her daughter out of fear losing honour and dignity, giving a dowry of Tk45 thousand and a Tk15 thousand gold chain at the demand of the bridegroom.

People were generally positive about the improving law and order situation in recent years, and it was observed that many people believed that the activities of the underground leftist party had historically created a community in which there was relatively less violence against women and fewer land disputes than in many other areas. However, a growing problem with youths and drugs is mentioned as a source of concern. While we were told there was little or no political violence in the area, we were given reports of small-scale theft and mugging. Some of this is related to gang violence between local youths of different areas. This lawlessness has occasionally led to cases of serious violence. For example, we learned of a recent case where one youth who had been involved in mugging over a long period was attacked and killed by victims who had been unable to secure redress, after it had been rumoured that he and his family had the protection of the local police due to a ruling party affiliation.

We heard that there was regular harassment of women in an area near the Padma riverbank. Gender violence often goes unpunished, particularly if it is perpetrated by wealthy against the poor. For example, we heard of a case where a boy had molested a sleeping woman through a window but the

woman's family had been unable to get justice or even to convene a *shalish* since the family was poor, and the incident went without consequences.

The local BNP-affiliated Chair oversees UP activities in general but we understood from focus groups that he is becoming more marginalised. For example, he does not appear to play much of a role in the informal *shalish*, which is increasingly the preserve of ruling party people only.

Surprisingly, one local former Maoist activist, Mr J. who had gained the respect of many people who live in the village, was elected in 2011 as a UP member for the ruling AL party (Box 9). He grew on good terms with the local MP and became active in assisting the AL extend its power further into the village, enabling the MP to effectively bypass the UP Chair. This strategy has smoothed a path for the AL to incorporate the village more fully into its patronage network, despite the strength of local support for this BNP-affiliated leader. By making a popular local political leader into a local client of the AL he becomes a valuable resource, offering a better way to secure influence than trying to impose power from outside. Mr J's story also illustrates the way the ruling party has managed to construct political alliances not just with local power holders in general but with leftist local political activists in particular, in an effort to incorporate them into its consolidation project.³²

We understood that Mr J. had become powerful, even though he only the office of UP member, as a well-connected AL leader close to the MP. He distributes relief goods, solar panels and road maintenance job opportunities in the community. Mr J. is also is gatekeeper for various targeted assistance programmes that end up being implemented informally by party activists rather than elected officials. One woman also reports that it is only due to his kindness that she was able to access the 40 Days earthworks programme, when her husband was unable to work due to infirmity. However, she also reported having to make an informal payment of Tk1000 to the programme office at the UP and Tk500 to a UP member in order to make this happen.

We found several NGOs operating in the area, including ASA and BRAC. These provide loans for productive activities, but usually only give them to those who already have some land. One group member recounted how her husband who is a fisherman was able to build a new boat with a loan

32 However, we later learned that Mr J. had not been re-elected in the 2016 UP election, suggesting perhaps that the informal arrangement was no longer needed now that the AL had increased its local representation.

from an NGO and this had successfully increased the household's income. One woman reported she had been able to purchase the new household asset of a cow, another a loan to enable the family to buy nine decimals of land. However, unlike in the other two locations, there were a few complaints voiced in the poor and non-poor women's groups about the pressures of loan repayments.

Given the vulnerability of the area to regular floods, provision of relief goods from the MP, and from NGOs working in the area, remain important to local livelihoods and the maintenance of local patron-client relationships. During one period of severe flooding a few years ago we heard from the poor focus group members that the MP had distributed Tk5000 cash and a substantial relief package that had included tin housing materials to each household. The MP's younger brother, the president of UPZ Chambers of Commerce and Industries, had also distributed blankets and tubewell equipment during this time.

The male poor focus group members confirm the earlier views about the power of the MP in that he controls the UPZ and UP, the police, and access to common property resources, and he oversees the distribution of the resources that flow into the village and surrounding area. One member complains at the way the BNP is losing power in the area despite the efforts of the UP chair: *'Police are now arresting BNP leaders without any cause and it's become their main business because now political cronyism and narrow political self-interest is everywhere. Our UP chairman is a BNP leader, but now he cannot undertake any local development activities'*. Another person is unhappy that road construction and repair often takes place without much local involvement from the UP, such as a nearby one kilometre stretch of road that was recently completed by the Zila parishad grants, managed by the MP and implemented by ruling party member Mr J. (Box 9).

Box 9: UP Member Mr J.: Informality, patronage and flexible allegiances

In the remote village, relations between the MP and the UP are not operating according to the formal rules. With a BNP UP Chair in post, the MP has instead decided to build a special relationship with one particular UP member named Mr J., who is aligned with the AL. A local activist, he was for many years underground political leader for the underground Maoist *Purbo Bangla Sharbohara Party* (PBSP) (formed in the 1960s) that has long had influence in this *char* area. In its heyday, the group had controlled the village - settling land disputes, extorting resources from government, and engaging in acts of political violence often in support of poor households. It is said that this type of politics

conditioned the villagers to have less crime and more respect for women's rights than other villages. Over time, the PBSP's influence waned and leaders such as Mr J. started to build tactical alliances with the AL, helping to get the MP elected by delivering local votes. However, he was arrested with some other activists in 2010 after an eruption of political violence and jailed. While in jail he was elected to the UP in 2011, and with the MP's patronage he was released from jail. As part of the deal, the MP also got him taken off the Rapid Action Battalion's (RAB) 'crossfire' political assassination list that would most likely have cost him his life in 2013, as it had his colleagues who were killed after they came out of jail. Mr J. now serves as a popular local leader with a direct line to the MP. He explained to us how his direct informal link with the MP allows there to be a 50/50 with safety net funds and entitlements that are supposed to go through the UP, with half going instead for distribution amongst local AL supporters. He was also recently given 40 tons of FFW rice directly from the MP for local distribution. He told us that he worked with the MP to manage local development work as well: *'We are implementing most of the road construction projects in the area, and the UP is not involved with this work at all'*. (Note: this data was collected before Mr J.'s failure to secure re-election later in 2016).

The non-poor women are extremely concerned about the problem of river erosion and the loss of family land. Some families who lost land where they lived in the village have moved to the nearby *char* area. They had compensated by the UP with Tk5000 after a member made effort on their behalf following the major erosion event of 2007. But another person in a similar situation reported only being given Tk3000 and she suspected the reason was political, since she did not have the same connections. The male non-poor focus group discussions confirm the fact that there was a distinction made in the distribution of relief goods between those sympathetic to the ruling party and those discriminated against and given a reduced entitlement. They also say that around ten local girls have gone to work in Dhaka garment factories, in addition to the 400 or so boys from the area believed to be working in in the domestic garment production centre near Dhaka. They explain that there are more NGO operating in this area than 10 years ago, listing seven different organizations all of which are giving loans.

The non-poor men also described the way the MP oversees a higher degree of the distribution of development and relief supplies in the village. They say that people receive around 70% of the distributed VGD cards through the UP and around 30% are provided through AL local leaders and activists. The UPZ chair informs all the UP chairmen of the MP's instructions. This is also the case with Test Relief and Food for Work

programmes. The local AL leaders draw up the TR and Food for Work project documents and submit them to the MP who then sends approval to local UP staff. In the case of FFW programmes, the Project Implementation Officer (PIO) at each UPZ assesses the allocations according to the MP's recommendations. AL leaders collect TR forms from the UPZ from the PIC then take recommendation from MP and submit it to UPZ Chair.

3.4 The urban study area

The settlement we chose for inclusion in the study is located in North Dhaka, situated on around 40 acres of government land, adjacent to a public hospital that is formally owned by the Ministry of Health. Squatters have continuously occupied the site for more than 35 years. The initial residents of the slum were low paid employees of what was then a brand new hospital, such as drivers and guards. There was no local community housing available, and so they squatted on the hospital-owned land nearby. The numbers are currently believed to have grown to be around 6,355 households on the site today, with a total population of more than 25,000 people. There is also a Hindu community in the slum, numbering around a thousand households. As in the case of the Greater Faridpur study areas, we heard no reports of tensions between religious or other minority communities.

Most households who live here have livelihoods that combine both informal and formal sector employment. Work includes rickshaw pulling, small-scale trading, domestic servants, garment factories, and administrative employment in public or private sector offices. Everyone is more or less employed, even though in the garment sector there have recently been some closures. The residents have not been able to acquire formal land rights.

A key form of vulnerability faced by many residents is the threat of eviction. Whenever government development plans for the area arise, as happens every so often, people begin to organise and resist, using a combination of local informal civil society action and patronage. Successful coalitions have usually been formed by combining community-based action with appeals for support from powerful outside figures. One example was when a high profile lawyer in 1997 filed a writ in High Court to successfully protect the slum. In February 2014 the CC mayor visited at the invitation of the WC, and announced that the slum was now to be formally named an 'ideal town'. This change is believed by many residents to have raised the status and profile of the community.

However, not all households are equal in terms of their security of tenure. Some households face an additional level of vulnerability due to the pattern of ownership. There are two main forms of residence status. Around one third are owners of property in the slum (having built their houses here when the land was first occupied) and most of these residents now own more than one room. The rest are tenants who are paying rent to these landowners. Of the slum households, around 30% today are 'landlords' and 70% are tenants. Tenants pay in the region of Tk2000-2500 per month for a single room house. Landlords each rent out on average around seven rooms to their tenant households. Some landlords still live in the slum, while a few now live outside.

Over the years the slum has evolved into a small relatively self-contained neighbourhood, with its own facilities. There are three *bazars*, a primary school, a secondary school, five mosques (plus two mosques with *madrasas*) and an NGO-run day care centre. Most local services are provided through a combination of legal and illegal private providers. Gas and electricity services are mostly obtained through illegal vendors. Services are generally inadequate for the high density of residents, with for example only one legal water connection per 15 or so households.

The local power structure here is completely different to the other study areas. Since this is an informal settlement, there are no formal local government institutions in place directly serving or representing the community. UPs do not exist in urban areas. Instead there is a City Corporation divided into 36 Wards, each of which is headed by an elected Ward Commissioner (WC). The City Corporation was divided into two halves in 2011, North and South, each with its own elected Mayor. The location of this slum places it formally under the jurisdiction of CC, which is nominally responsible for governing the slum. The community attracts attention from local politicians because it constitutes an important 'vote bank'. Informal governance arrangements has traditionally been organised in the slum around an urban variant of the village-style *shalish* system, with *matbars* attempting to recreate their roles as elders. People reported that they had grown frustrated with this *ad hoc* system and that its decisions had become compromised by undue influence from the local police, and by competing factions/gangs.

Although there are no formal local government structures in the slum, in other ways, the picture is not so different from the villages we studied in Greater Faridpur. There are extensive patron-client relationships, NGOs

that provide different types of services, and there are local households differentiated by different economic status. As we found in Greater Faridpur, the ruling AL party has recently become active in seeking and finding ways to extend its power more fully into the community.

Issues and findings

A key change in governance terms occurred in 2015 when the ruling party-controlled DNCC established an unofficial Unit Office (UO) in the centre of the slum. The UO is not a formal component of the local government system: it is essentially an *ad hoc* unofficial governance structure created by the ruling party as a means of extending its control, comparable to some of the arrangements we observed in the village areas. This provides an indirect mechanism for the City Corporation to address challenges faced by people in the slum.

A local party official, Mr A., oversees an elected Unit Committee (UC) that makes decisions on local projects and issues, and deals with community problems. A lawyer is also on hand to give advice on legal issues and disputes. The UO is housed in a disused temporary Ansar paramilitary security force office.³³ This building had been abandoned after its occupants were ejected by residents unhappy with the force's rent-seeking behaviour. The UO now controls the area as a *de facto* local government office (Box 10).

Box 10: Informal slum governance via the Ward Commissioner's 'Unit Office'

The UO is a relatively new informal governance structure established by the ruling party in 2015 as an outpost of the local ward. The creation of the UO establishes a mechanism that helps the AL to consolidate its power and connect with an important vote bank. The UO is resourced from the Ward, but also raises money through unofficial taxation. We do not know whether such structures are typical of other slums. Its emergence is perhaps due to this slum's large size, similar to a rural Union. We learned that around Tk20 per day is collected from each shop owner, and that the NGOs working in the slum also pay informal fees to operate. The UO also provides various services to residents that are charged for, such as dispute settlement and unofficial policing. There is a lawyer at the UO to advise and assist people. One example that was recounted to us was the recent case of a father who abducted his son after a family dispute and prevented him fleeing to Mymensingh. The family

33 The Ansar force was originally set up by the Pakistani authorities in 1947 and later revitalized by President Ziaur Rahman in the late 1970s.

phoned the UO authorities and they found and arrested the son, investigated the dispute and ended up fining the son. On the whole we found people were positive about the services and prepared to pay the charges. They told us they were less undesirable than the informal payments they used to have to make to the police where they got little in return. The ruling party is increasing its control over both urban and rural areas using informal structures. While there are clearly some benefits, the effect is one of reducing civil society space for independent action. NGOs must get permission from the UO to operate. This negotiation works both ways, since when NGOs bring in outside resources and improve conditions, this also reflects well on the UO.

The main problems faced by people in the slum reported in focus group discussions were the high cost of living, relatively poor access to services, and insecure tenure. Concerns about the rising cost of living contrasted with what we had heard in the rural areas, where people were less concerned with economic problems. Rents are increasingly high, and people say that they cannot easily challenge these increases. When it comes to services, drainage, sanitation and electricity are all problematic. Women reported that they face particular disadvantages in accessing and receiving good quality health services compared to men. Key problems remain around low levels of pregnancy care, advice about child rearing, issues of early marriage, and around violence against women.

There are only very limited efforts by the CC to address these problems. In the focus groups we learned that there have been some improvements in the provision of services (including from the new political arrangements described in Box 10) but that rising living costs mean that some people say they cannot now afford to stay here and are moving elsewhere. Box 11 provides a glimpse into the economic hardship of slum life for a female-headed household. Instead, it remains mainly down to outside organisations such as NGOs and informal sector private traders to provide essential services to people in this community. These private service vendors are also linked to the wider power structure, so that people also have to pay informal fees to the police and to the electricity and gas utility offices to keep their access to services.

As in Faridpur, formal development NGOs are found to be providing economic support in the forms of business training and microcredit. These NGOs are generally well regarded. While people told us they know that working for an NGO is a 'profession', with staff earning good salaries for their work, they felt that on the whole they *do* get useful benefits from the

NGOs. Many people take NGO loans and we learned that complaints are rare, since people say they generally earn enough to be able to pay them off. The president of the UO reported that the number of financial or loan disputes brought to the unit for adjudication is small and has declined in recent years, reflecting better conditions and local services.

The most common problems presented at the UO are cases of eviction, drug abuse, and domestic violence. It was felt that these problems were generally improving. Security is reported to have improved for most inhabitants. The male focus group reported that both the UO and the local police have become more responsive and proactive in dealing with local crime than before. A higher level of lawlessness had previously existed in the slum when governance rested on a more unstable combination of police, *mastans* and gangs. This has now been replaced by a more ordered top down system organised by the ruling party. Although it is difficult to establish precisely how people feel about this new arrangement, we found people were broadly positive about the fact that (a) law and order is improving, and (b) people are getting some actual services for their money. However, there were also a few reports of the UO being involved in small-scale extortion. Mr A.'s leadership is based on his earlier well-respected record of protecting slum dwellers from eviction, and his links with the WC who is generally popular. Mr A. has built a support base by leading processions to resist eviction, organising food distribution events, mobilising the media in support of local causes, and negotiating with authorities to support people's rights. He also helped his supporters secure improvements to their houses. If residents have a dispute they still try to solve it themselves at CBO level, but if this is not possible, they go to the UO.

The UO offers dispute resolution services, collects an informal tax (for example, each shop must now give Tk20 per day to the UO), sets prices for services, and has links with the local police station. The leaders and committee members are all AL activists. The emergence of the UO seen as a positive development by many slum dwellers because it has improved law and order. People reported that the police are less able to harass them, or extort money from them as they once did. Both services and security have improved with the installation of the UO. Reminiscent of the old idea of the traditional village 'net', the UO has now thrown a new 'net' over the community in the sense that very little can now be done in the slum without its agreement. There are still reports of rent extortion of various types faced by residents who try to modernise or improve their houses, or of payments enforced by buyers and sellers of property in the slum area. The *de facto*

landowners are building good houses, and adding second stories, and they also feel security has improved. It is not possible to evict them in spite of not having formal title to the land. Instead, they have improved their security through new patronage relationships built with the ruling party.

Box 11: A female-headed garment worker household

Our informant works as a machine operator at a large factory around a mile away where several thousand women are employed. She has two children but is without a husband, thought she did not wish to talk about what had happened to him. She pays Tk2000 rent for a room. Unusually, she is a member of a DSK-organised CBO groups even though she is a tenant. She told us that some local garment factories have closed recently due to tighter factory inspections following the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse and that work is becoming harder to obtain. This meant that some women in the slum had lost their jobs, and were now looking for employment further afield in Gazipur where there are many garment factories offering better working conditions. All of them though have been able to find jobs and have not faced unemployment. Others have started to work as domestic servants. We were told that garment salaries had increased from Tk4300 starting salary to Tk6700 per month. The tiffin allowance has also increased from Tk9 to Tk12, with more overtime, paid holidays, primary healthcare, and day-care facilities for children. These facilities are free and at her factory there are a dozen or so slum children using them, with free food also provided. She tells us that overall conditions for workers have improved since Rana Plaza, such as three months paid maternity leave now being made available. There is no formal trade union allowed at the factory, but we were told that there is an informal system where the workers elect representatives to work with management to solve any issues that emerge. There are five of these worker leaders, three female and two male, and she says she is fairly happy with the system.

NGOs working in the slum are now also subject to the UO's informal authority. For example, when DSK donated two rickshaw vans for the collection of solid waste it was agreed that each household would pay a fee of Tk20 per month for the service. The UO recently put this up to Tk50 and we learned that neither the NGO nor the residents felt able to do anything to challenge this. The composition of the NGOs working in the slum has changed over the years. Those working during the 1990s like BRAC and Grameen and Proshika were mainly concerned with credit delivery and limited health services. Work on water and sanitation only began in 2006 with DSK's contract under the UNDP programme. This NGO work has only managed to cover 30% of this slum with proper water and sanitation

facilities. The rest of the people remain dependent on private water, gas, and electricity vendors who are intermediary service providers.

Despite the weakness of the opposition, there is growing political factionalism reported within the ruling party. With the Ward Commissioner position currently held by a ruling party 'rebel', there is a continuing struggle to control the slum between 'official' and 'unofficial' AL candidates. The WC is under threat from an opposing faction, and the UO leader is his representative. There is potential instability in the fact that the Ward Commissioner is a rebel AL candidate whose victory relied heavily on the slum residents' vote (around 80% voted for him last year). The UO building was attacked recently (May 2016) and there was an attempt to set it on fire, though there were no injuries as no one was there at the time. It is believed that a rival AL faction may have carried out the attack, acting for the 'official' AL candidate who had lost control of this vote bank in the May 2015 election.

The ruling party has also made a closer connection with the NGOs than was evident in the other study locations. NGOs are seen by local politicians to play a useful intermediary role in the governance of the slum and in the maintenance of the community vote bank. The UO has built influence and control the NGOs, and we heard about cases of collusion and collaboration between the AL and NGOs. For example, the head of one local NGO is a former left party activist. Such people often have good relationships with the local AL, since the ruling party has built alliances with left leaders as part of its strategy to fragment the BNP and JI opposition parties. The NGO benefits from the relationship and helps it build a good working environment, but it also means that the NGO has also in some senses also become a 'client' of local political leaders. One indication of this is the recent price increase from Tk20 to Tk50 for solid waste collection by NGO-run vans. The NGO had little choice but to raise the price and people now have little choice but to pay it, even though it is a relatively large increase. While we might have previously expected an independent NGO to contest this on behalf of their constituency, as a client of the UO it is now unable to act.

A particularly interesting feature of the slum that is different from the rural areas is that there are active CBOs in the settlement. The existence of CBOs based on grassroots membership supported by NGOs as intermediary organisations is a distinctive feature of the urban study site. Such CBOs were only rarely found to operate in our rural settings, and were more likely to be credit groups rather than then fully fledged CBOs.

The origin of most CBOs lies with the UNDP's Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) project that ended in 2015.³⁴ The UPPR project has long been active in slums like this, working with the City Corporation to improve slum infrastructure, mainly water and sanitation, and provide credit services. The project has partnered with NGOs to help people set up CDCs (community development committees). These are community-based organizations provide vehicles for people to organise to improve provision and access to services and to access credit and savings, and these CBOs are linked into federations. There have been at least ten different NGOs active in providing services, including water and sanitation, credit, education, health care, and legal aid. Some NGOs are also working outside the UNDP project to create CBOs.

Box 12: Mrs S.'s story – The UO, CBOs, landlords and tenants

CBO leaders tend to be landlords who own and rent slum property. Mrs S. is one such local community leader who rents out a total of nine rooms. She has been closely involved with the NGO DSK, collaborating with them to install latrines in each of her houses. However, her leadership was recently called into question when she was accused of embezzling some of the CBO's funds. These had been contributed by local residents in order to match NGO funding for service improvements. This may have been true, or it may simply have been the result of a perception among some group members that the upgrading was moving too slowly and that Mrs S. had failed to deliver. Having lost credibility, she became the centre of a dispute. It was widely believed that she had appropriated the money and tenants approached the UO to make a complaint. The UO filed a legal case against her. Mrs S. responded by claiming that she had been the victim of a sexual assault by some of those taking action against her in this matter, and this claim was investigated. However, she later withdrew the allegation under pressure. Whatever the truth of the dispute in this particular case, such tensions reflect the landlord/tenant hierarchy, the factional competition for scarce outside resources among community level groups, and a lack of trust in relation to management of the matching funding that has to be generated locally. Factions emerge and clash, and another leader P. has now taken over the CDC that Mrs S. used to lead. Mrs S. is now fed up with the Unit Office and describes them as 'criminals', since she feels they should have defended her more effectively.

³⁴ UPPR has worked to enable low-income households to develop stronger capacities to improve urban livelihoods through better security, business skills training partnerships, and community-based organisation and education. Overall, over 800,000 households have joined more than 2500 specially created Community Development Committees (CDCs), which are mostly led by women.

CBOs have been organised by NGOs working with the residents (see Box 12). We were surprised to find that the CBOs are usually formed and dominated by landowner households, as opposed to the tenant households. Very few of the tenants are actually involved in the CBOs. This makes sense if we understand that landlords have been most proactive in engaging with the NGOs. They have worked hard for the opportunities to improve their own houses, and increase the value of those they rent out. While landlord households were initially residents, as they have improved their positions and many now live outside - while keeping rental properties in the slum. The CBOs are therefore essentially landlord organisations, while the tenants have no real organisations of their own. The same local CBO leader might also be president of more than one such CDC/CBO. The CBOs tend to be led by women from these landlord households. They have been incentivized to access resources that will help them to upgrade their properties. Tenant households are left in a weaker position since they are not directly involved in building grassroots organisations that can help them further their interests, or reduce their vulnerability. The landlord households, through their connections been able to ensure that modern latrines and clean piped water is first installed on their own properties.

The two tier hierarchy we encountered in the slum reflects the distinction made by Banks (2016) between two main forms of patron-client links: those made by relatively better off people with strong external networks seeking to improve household livelihoods via further resource accumulation, and those made by vulnerable people who lack connections and are simply trying to survive:

Households make considerable efforts to establish and maintain the reciprocal networks and patron-client relationships they need to cope with ongoing livelihoods insecurity... These hierarchies illustrate the critical difference between those in the upper two tiers with accumulation networks and those at the bottom of the hierarchy who receive limited or exploitative returns through their survival networks.

While the extension of ruling party power through informal means here is comparable to what is taking place in our rural study sites, there are also some differences. Compared with the rural areas, local infrastructure is very poor. However, there is more 'social capital' in the slum in the sense that there are grassroots community-based organizations that are both

relatively active and women-led. In the absence of formal local governance structures these groups managing provision of NGO services have also established horizontal solidarities supported by these NGOs to challenge the threat of slum eviction. However, these groups too are now becoming more accountable to the UO and less close to the NGOs, especially since the flow of resources from these NGOs has lessened since the end of the UNDP project. A pro-UO faction dominates and DSK and other NGOs support the UO and the Commissioner.

DISCUSSION

CHAPTER 4

This section is organised across twelve themes that follow broadly areas framed in the terms of reference for the study (Annex 1). Table 3 below summarises a comparison of the original findings and those of the re-study, organised by theme in the terms of reference. It also identifies the wider implications of these findings for future policy and practice. Findings from the new portion of the study that was carried out in the Dhaka slum community have also been integrated.

4.1 How the power structure is perceived

Most people continue to understand the local power structure as a highly personalised set of formal and informal relationships with more powerful people, including but not restricted to, elected or administrative officials. It is widely perceived as difficult to deal with, and as changing in ways that are often unfavourable. Poor people in particular regard it as unjust such that *‘we poor people are unable to challenge the rich, even when they are breaking the law’*, that local party activists *‘get things done by shouting and threatening’*, and that older forms of local leader such as *matbars* *‘are not shown much respect any more’*.

Dealing with the power structure requires the constant effort to build connections in order to access opportunities and resources: people *‘can only get and do things via their connections to more powerful patrons’* (Gardner, 2012, p.41). The importance of connection and connectivity remains central to people’s efforts to improve their livelihoods and wellbeing. These informal relationships are used to strengthen existing formal claims on resources - such as an entitlement to a social safety net benefit – as well as to secure access to new opportunities, such as a contact enabling a person to take a up a migration opportunity leading to a job. What is different today is the wider range of available people, information and connections that

can be made, the greater flexibility in the ways in which connections can be constructed and influenced, and the range of resources that exist – financial and technological – that can be deployed in the struggle to build such connections (see 4.3 below). But what is also different today is the growing party political dimension, which extends more deeply than before into local level power structure in both rural and urban localities.

The institution of patronage, in its many forms, remains central, with ‘... [with a] complex web of informal patronage relations from the top to the grassroots level of the society’ (Feruci and Parnini 2014). In the earlier study we found that patron-client relationships were still pervasive but were growing less rigid. This continues to be the case. Landlord patrons, who previously locked poor rural people into long-term exploitative relationships of sharecropping, domestic labour and indebtedness, and who captured resources coming into the village, have less of a grip. The phenomenon in which some loan-providing NGOs were acting as petty patrons in local communities and occasionally visible in the earlier study seems to have declined. New forms of patronage, such as forms of media support to small struggle local struggles over land, might be emerging. People’s access to information is improved by technology and infrastructure, and at least in theory, there are more patrons with whom to elaborate relationships.

Our findings therefore continue to support the continuing evolution of what Mannan (2015: 30) terms a ‘multifocal power structure’, as distinct from the land-based ‘unifocal’ one that had existed earlier (BRAC, 1982; Jansen, 1987). In this new context ‘no single patron is able to dominate the rural power structure as in the case of erstwhile land-centric patrons. The competition among patrons created a situation of balance ...’. In other words patrons continue to dominate local village level activities and people’s options, but these power holders are today are more diverse and connected to wider business, politics, and civil society elites, deriving their power to a lesser degree from landholding and agricultural wealth. Yet local and national elites retain clan solidarities and kinship links that maintain elite solidarities, as the links between MPs and local leaders in two of our three rural settings highlight (see Table 2 above). Overall therefore, while people in general have better links to economic opportunities, their opportunities for civil engagement and political participation have not increased to the same degree.

4.2 Main actors and relationships

The picture that we encountered in 2015-16 is in some respects similar to the one reported in 2004 (see Table 1), but it has changed in three important ways. First, the ruling party has consolidated its control over local institutions as the main political opposition BNP remains in disarray, having failed to contest the last national election. Second, the conditions of political competition have shifted from the previous duopolistic partyarchal system (involving both AL and BNP) towards a monopolistic one dominated by a single party.³⁵ Third, the MP’s local power has increased since in this new scenario MPs assume a stronger role as gatekeepers of resources (continuing a trend we had also observed on a far smaller scale in 2004).

This gatekeeper role has been an important factor that has made the UP less central to local democratisation and development efforts. Despite the fact that its staff work hard to vary out its remit, and there have been enhancements to its local role (such as providing information services), the UP is less central than before as a decision-making and resource allocation body. This phenomenon is particularly visible in our original study area where many UP leaders and members – at least until recently – were affiliated to the BNP opposition, and where MPs have built strategies to bypass them and build direct relationships with supporters and communities. In our urban site, a comparable situation exists with the use of an informal strategy to extend ruling party influence in the form of the Unit Office.

Finally - with the exception of the urban site - formal civil society in the study areas has generally become more business focused and less diverse. Control by MPs is not only being extended over local government structures but also over local private sector groups such as Business Associations and local civil society such as local committees. Instead of the rights-based development NGOs engaged in land rights and social mobilization that we encountered in 2004 (such as Samata), we mainly find credit-based work to support small enterprise development and economic livelihood strategies. In the urban site there is evidence for the co-option of local NGOs as well. The interplay that we had previously observed between unfolding processes of decentralization and civil society action to support pro-poor change - such as pro-poor coalition building between NGOs and local UP leaders - has

35 This ‘partyarchy’ also extends into civil society groups, such as associations of lawyers and doctors, where factions loyal to each political party have interacted in a zero-sum fashion, with the ruling party faction able to monopolise rents and privileges.

faded. The overall diversity of civil society actors and activities has been reduced.

If this is to be challenged, then as *WDR 2017* suggests, we will need to look beyond technical ‘capacity building’ of local government, decentralization and civil society to engage with power relations.

4.3 Governing access to political and economic opportunities

There are more economic opportunities for all groups across all of our study sites. People are more connected to markets than in 2004 and the high level of economic growth is creating new opportunities. With economic growth, better transport infrastructure and improved communications poor people now seek to obtain opportunities that can help them advance their interests - through establishing small enterprises, migrating locally or internationally, and getting involved in political activity. For ordinary people, there are many more economic opportunities to choose from beyond agriculture and a wider range of potential patrons to turn to in order to secure access, including local political leaders, NGOs, and business people. However, it was notable that in the Dhaka urban slum location people in the focus group discussions (unlike in Greater Faridpur) raised concerns about the rising cost of living, particularly in relation to increased rents.

Where women’s empowerment is occurring, our findings suggest that this is now more due to increasing economic participation than to the direct social or political organising we observed in the earlier study. For example, there is evidence that NGO loans to women for small-scale business such as cow rearing and milk production and marketing have been beneficial. New income and skills from training opportunities have led to more respect and decision making power within the household (from focus groups). On the other hand, women elected to the UPs or UPZ report that they are often marginalised when these bodies meet. They have to fight very hard for a share of any resources on offer that they can control to establish projects, or to distribute as benefits. It is also striking that economic empowerment is taking precedence over political empowerment among youth. Young people are less wedded to the ‘government job mind set’. Instead they are realising that they will have to build opportunities and learn skills beyond school and college (such as the graduates we talked to working in the Faridpur town hotel sector looking to work in the business/services sector). Many younger people want to move away from the farming and find new ways to earn a living.

As we have seen, in both our rural and urban study locations, patronage has become more politicised. The AL controls most of the points through which central resources are allocated (through its MPs, local administrative structures, or by-pass arrangements) and the points at which local resources are collected (such as Bazar Committees and Business Associations). Previously these might have given poorer people a widening range of opportunities for alternative sources of patronage and power. Today people’s choices are more limited, and there are fewer patrons for weaker sections of the community to play off against each other in the competition for connections and resources than in 2004. For example, the Rickshaw Association is more tightly affiliated to the AL, and the *shalish* is less balanced between AL/BNP interests. A growing economy and more open power structure seems to benefit all groups, but at different rates, and this is likely over time to contribute to further inequalities.

4.4 Union and Ward level relationships with local formal institutions

Moving to the changing role of the UP, a worrying finding is its increasing marginalisation as an important tier of decentralised local government. While the UPs have never been particularly strong, our earlier study had found encouraging signs of a growing inclusiveness and centrality as traditional local power relations loosened. There was little presence of either the UPZ or the Zila in the earlier data, and Union was at the centre of local development efforts and interacted with civil society around social and other issues. The efforts of the 2009 UP Act and subsequent local government capacity building efforts led us to expect a continuation of this trend but this is not what we found. In contrast to our previous findings, this time we heard from one local party activist that ‘*the UP’s glory is now in the past*’. Through the UPZ and the Zila system there is now more control of the UP through the MPs and local political leaders.

We did not find evidence that the 2009 Act’s envisaged closer collaboration between UPs and NGOs in local development work embedded in the 2009 Act has materialised to any significant degree. There is far less evidence today that UPs are able to develop synergies with formal civil society actors. However, there are some small amounts of additional NGO resources reach UPs and some small-scale joint work takes place. All the UPs can do to adjust to these new ‘rules of the game’ is to try to negotiate with local power holders as best they can.

We also found limited outcomes from efforts to strengthen the role of Ward *sabha* meetings as a local level forum for problem identification and participatory budgeting. This confirms the Government mid-term review of the UPGP and UZGP programmes that found problems with ‘systemic issues such as ambiguous division of roles and responsibilities and parallel management structures between the political and executive branches and tiers of government’ (p.7). UZPs were particularly hampered by tension between administrative and political personnel, and UPs had continuing weak capacity and few resources. At Ward *sabha* level, our evidence confirmed that participatory meetings intended to identify local needs were mainly unproductive since there were few resources available for them to work with. UPs are weaker because whatever funds do reach them are increasingly subject to personal negotiation and lobbying, and not to the formal accountability processes set out as their roles and responsibilities. Ongoing UP capacity building efforts will need to better address this political reality.

Women’s presence and visibility in UP and other decision-making forums is undoubtedly increasing, but not necessarily their effectiveness. In the peri-urban poor women focus group, for example, we heard a positive account of the newly introduced UPZ Women’s Development Forum as a space for increasing voice. However, the overall picture is very mixed. Women UP members say they are rarely given PICs to chair, and have few incentives to participate in UP meetings since they know they are unlikely to be given responsibilities for projects, or for the distribution of resources. They are often marginalised, with decisions made mainly by MP or by male UP staff. The view of one female focus group member that the power structure is associated only with men continues to be true. In small ways patriarchal norms *are* being challenged – but we learned that if women are too talkative in the meetings they are marginalised further - so they have to work carefully. The gender dynamics in Ward *sabha* meetings also restricts the space for women’s participation. But overall, there seem to be more women in more formal meetings, which is good news.

4.5 Union and Ward relationships with local informal institutions

The main informal institution relevant to the local power structure, as we have seen, is that of patronage. 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 activities. There were 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).

We found that people attempting to engage with the local power structure give strong emphasis to the importance of *jogajog* (‘connection’). In this perspective, a person is seen to be able to get something done because he or she is ‘so and so’s person’, and conversely that a person’s progress is likely to be blocked if they are *not* so and so’s person and therefore lack the power of connection. Resource-based patron client relationships structure the flow of resources and condition the responses (or not) of people with power to people’s problems.³⁶ Intermediaries are also very important because they can help to facilitate such connections.

These types of relationship extend to the activities carried on within UP and Ward structures, as we have seen in the study. Connections are used to access forms of social protection, and within the UP to control and distribute development resources.

It is important to continue to support efforts to decentralise local government decision making through the UPs and the Wards but these types of informal relationships need to be recognised in efforts to improve popular representation and build fairer resource allocation. This can only be done incrementally and by recognising the importance of informal roles and finding ways to harness them in more positive ways.

As Hasan et al (2015) write: ‘There is no silver bullet. These solutions depend on empowering local actors to establish justice in their communities, and to stand up against these interests. This will only come about through a sustainable social movement led by an enlightened political vision ...’ (p.88). There is a politics within the messy spaces of ‘political society’ in which people with relatively little power attempts to struggle, contest and negotiate. But aside from the cases of small scale local short-term collective action described here (journalists, action groups, vigilantes) our findings point to little yet in the way of sustainable progressive social movements or emerging vertical alliances that can challenge power brokers, or provide a different political vision of the kind these authors suggest.

36 The practice of *jogajog kora* (soliciting friendship) pursued by bureaucrats and entrepreneurs seeking to harness the power of the informal sector is noted in Bear’s (2016) work in India, where it governs access to an informal zone of influence and contributes to the formation of unequal power relationships.

Finally, studies of local and national power such as Hasan et al (2015) emphasise the power of *mastan* brokers who serve as both facilitators and obstacles to processes of pro-poor local governance. Such intermediaries have multiple roles, spanning ‘party activist’ to local thug or gang leader, often combining creative problem solving on the one hand (including forms of political, economic and welfare entrepreneurship) with violent or criminal activities on the other. We found less influence from *mastans* than work from other areas of Bangladesh might lead us to expect. It was not a term that was much used by any of our respondents in the fieldwork in the three villages or the slum. Our findings support the important role played by brokers and intermediaries in governing access to information, resources and opportunities, but suggests that the role of *mastans* may be overplayed, at least if these are seen as distinct from local political party activists.³⁷

4.6 Local power and the wider ‘political game’

The extension of the ruling party’s influence means that local power relations in each of our locations have been further incorporated into the wider ‘political game’. The use of informality is a key tool for this incorporation. If there is an elected official in place who is inconveniently from the opposition party, we saw how they can be ‘worked around’ by creating an informal new ‘coordinator role’, or by appealing to a prior kinship or patron-client relationship. In the same way, key local civil society organizations such as Business Associations are being co-opted and controlled by placing politically affiliated individuals in charge. This co-option is not new, and was a phenomenon observed in our earlier study, but has now become more pronounced.

One result is that local political competition has been reduced since the earlier study. This is a cause for concern not only because it leaves people with fewer opportunities to represent their interests, but also because of fears that the opposition vacuum could be filled in the future by non-democratic political forces and/or religious extremists. It also makes less likely the possibility that future new independently minded local political leaders could emerge from civil society. Political competition is instead increasingly being expressed through growing local factionalism within ruling party, evident from the tensions between MP and UPZ/UP levels in the peri-urban site, or

from the attack on the UO in the slum. However, we did not find evidence of extremist political activity in our study areas.

The bypassing of local government structures has both positive and negative implications for poor people. For example, informal decision-making may be useful for the overcoming of political or bureaucratic hurdles, but in other contexts it may be coercive, extractive or exclusionary. The appointment of informal AL ‘coordinators’ to oversee local development and maintenance projects may lead to further opportunities for corruption in which public resources are used for private gain. But the informal division of available ‘safety net’ entitlements (such as VGD cards) between the UP and local party leaders to distribute to followers may also widen the distribution of such goods and services by serving more than one patronage network.

Supporters of government suggest that such by-passing and informality are often in the interest of the people. In the case of the urban slum field site in particular, where there was evidence that the creation of the informal Unit Office structure had largely positive impacts on peoples’ access to services and improving dispute settlement and law and order, such claims cannot be easily dismissed. The recent creation of the Motorised Rickshaw Association in the peri-urban village is a good example of this ambiguity in the context of civil society institutions and government rules - it facilitates the use of the new motorised technology that is not yet recognised by the formal licensing system, and improves livelihoods, but it is also an instrument of ruling party patronage and control.

In a situation where political competition is mainly structured by informality and patronage, competition remains limited. The gap left by opposition political parties and by formal civil society actors is a cause for concern because it leaves ordinary people with few proper opportunities for representing their interests politically. It also brings the threat of factional instability and even violence, as was observed during the UP elections and from time to time in the slum. On the other hand, increased intra-AL factionalism between official and unofficial candidates and may open up a wider set of political choices and allegiances and perhaps the emergence of new political parties. But there is a continuing concern about the political vacuum that remains justified.

More positively, our data suggests political extremism and religious tensions in both the Greater Faridpur and the urban Dhaka study area were lower than some recent literature might lead us to expect.

37 This confirms recent work by Jackman (2017) that finds that the role of the *mastan* was disappearing in a Dhaka slum, replaced instead by a local power structure more directly enforced through the ruling AL party.

For example, Khan and Stidsen (2014)'s SDC study found that 'fundamentalist Islamic mobilization is on the increase in all regions, and that the Government is increasing its hegemony through oppression of critical forces (close monitoring of non-government actors; court cases, arrests and killings of political opponents)'.³⁸ Our findings suggest that although there is a 'squeeze' as the ruling party extends its power, their other conclusions around conflict in our areas are not confirmed: law and order has generally improved, there are little or no reports of religious or majority/minority tensions in either the rural or the urban slum locations.

In the longer term, it is difficult to predict whether progress with decentralization and local accountability may be strengthened or put at risk if the dominance of the ruling party continues.

4.7 Local resource mobilization for local development

We found that there were some positive impacts from capacity building efforts undertaken with formal local government institutions, but compared with the optimism of the earlier study these were disappointing. For example, while the UP's role as a Union Information Centre provides an accessible certification service for local citizens, but inclusivity within Ward level planning processes remains more limited. This may be closer to the current government's plans for the type of decentralization it has in mind for the UPs – i.e. as 'deconcentrated' units for service provision, rather than as 'devolved' units of power and local democracy. But the provision of information services is important as it may be seen to increase the legitimacy and relevance of the UP.

We find little evidence of increased local resource mobilization that could drive local level decision-making and fund local projects. Instead, an increasing proportion of resources for local development arrive locally through the personal channel of the MP and the ruling party. Our 2004 data had suggested that the UP was slowly growing in significance as an

38 Their findings were based on data from Khulna, Rajshahi and Sylhet Divisions in relation to five 'conflict-prone domains': (a) Gender relations in domestic and public space, workplaces and political platforms; (b) Local politics in terms of party-political dynamics in and around local bodies; (c) Local governance in local administration and distribution of public services, and interplay between elected bodies, MPs and administration; (d) Dynamics of exclusion – the processes through which groups or individuals are deprived of resources or opportunities; (e) Local economic dynamics for small producers and small traders, and poor people's access to natural resources.

increasingly inclusive local institution. For example, there were some examples of poor people - including women - using it to further their rights and interests. Today we observed less interaction between UP Chairs and other local civil society leaders, fewer resources for UPs to distribute themselves, and despite the Ward *shabha* system, in practice there are more restrictions on planning local work accountably (such as the change to PICs noted below).

Capacity building support to UPs and UPZs has not significantly enhanced their capacity to raise revenue locally, despite the more buoyant local economy in three of our four study areas. Only in the slum area is there an effort to raise new local taxes - albeit informally - in an attempt to improve local services, and we found this to have been generally positively received. For example, there is some evidence that informal taxes raised by the Unit Office *are* contributing to improved refuse collection services, but there were also a few complaints about their imposed nature and the steep increase in cost.

The UPZ sub-district level remains weak and there are fewer resources available for allocation at the sub-district level. We found little evidence that the recent reform that requires two female UPZ Vice Chairs was making much of a difference. The woman member given this responsibility reported that in practice she still found herself operating in a male-dominated environment, where her voice was neither encouraged nor heard. This confirms the general findings from Hossain and Akhter's (2011) earlier research.

More optimistically, the buoyant local economy nevertheless does suggest indicate untapped potential for securing higher levels of local revenue collection that could boost UP access to resources for local development.

4.8 Central resource allocation and political interest

When it comes to accessing resources locally, the main site for patronage is the implementation of local government development projects, which are increasingly funded by central government resources. Resources are transferred to local areas through the local level offices of the twenty-nine different line ministries, or as is increasingly the case, via the local MPs (who increasingly control large public funds to use for purposes that are specifically approved by them alone). This is not to say that the use of these resources may not sometimes be locally guided, but when this happens it tends to do so within the overall framework of party politics.

Central resource allocation has therefore become more subject to political interests and capture. The stronger role of the MP and the greater influence of the ruling party has in some respects ‘recentralised’ local decision making pressures. For example, as we have seen, there has been an expansion of the provision of social welfare/safety net initiatives in since our last study. New forms of social protection have joined long-established welfare services such as the VGD/VGF, Test Relief, old age pension, and the widow pension. These new benefits are provided and allocated through the UP system and include the 40 Days employment programme, the disability allowance, and the maternity allowance for poor mothers. A higher proportion of these are now subject to allocation by the MP and local political party activists than before.

Political interests have impacted on other areas too. Few of the UP Standing Committees that had played key roles in local planning local development planning and implementation processes last time remain active. Our findings therefore confirm Saber et al’s (2009) study that found: ‘meetings are irregular, responsibilities little understood and few of the required Standing Committees actually formed’. Our findings too support Sowdagar’s (2010) USAID study that reported that local people say that they would prefer a locally-elected representative system in the Districts and sub-Districts because this might ‘make it possible for the government to respond to the diversity of conditions that prevail in different parts of the country’ (p.30).

We also found that there had been a politically motivated change of rules regarding PICs in the implementation of UP level local development and maintenance work. The PIC can now be convened without the participation of a UP member as the PIC chair as was previously the case. Such a change reduces the public accountability of local projects, and it means that no official may easily be held responsible if something goes wrong. However, one type of central resource flow that is less vulnerable to patronage or political diversion is the relatively small amount of directly-transferred donor funding that is provided as LGSP support for convening Ward level planning meetings and UP level training.

Overall, it was found that contexts varied: there is the possibility of improved services and user voice through party networks (as in the slum), but that in many cases people also face a reduction of service provider choice overall as range of available patrons contracts.

4.9 Local initiatives for development

These processes are impacting on local development in various ways. In Greater Faridpur, improved economic opportunities have been mainly driven by migration and small business development, supported by appropriate government and non-governmental services in the form of advice, training, and loans. Whereas small scale trading was the main form of local business before, there is now a more expanded landscape of local industries around jute mills, poultry, and brickfields. This has created new jobs with backwards linkages that feed into the informal local economy. In the Dhaka slum area, the growth of the garment industry has mainly driven local employment, along with the demand for domestic work among the urban middle classes.

As we have seen, development resources are mostly still coming from the centre, particularly in the three Greater Faridpur sites, rather than being raised locally at UP level through taxes. Local resources too are still mobilised in ways that still allow ordinary people relatively little influence or control over decisions. In the slum community, by contrast, local development activity has more of a ‘bottom up’ character, since there are CBOs formed by and working with the urban NGOs to improve access to and quality of local services such as water and sanitation.

Some areas of progressive social change have nevertheless been driven by government initiatives and NGO efforts. In particular, there have been some small gains for disabled people in terms of recognition and welfare benefits (an outcome in which civil society groups at the international level have also helped to achieve). At the same time the disability focus remains primarily at the level of the idea of entitlements rather than rights.

As we have seen, the gendered implications of local change processes remain incremental, complex and contradictory. There are small gains around women’s inclusion on local committee panels, and the observed NGO support to women through credit and support for small business development are positive, but there is far less evidence of rights-based work than before. There is no doubt however that particularly in the slum and in the well-connected study site, women’s economic participation is higher than ever before. This overall context can be seen to offer a test case for the power of markets and economic forms of NGO support to contribute to women’s empowerment.

4.10 Poor peoples' influence on political decision making and improving services

While people may be better off economically, opportunities to participate in decision-making and to shape service provision have been slower to grow. The anticipated progress towards citizens who are 'makers and shapers' of service provision as opposed to being merely 'users and choosers' (in Cornwall and Gaventa's 2001's terms) has not taken place. Deeper forms of participation and voice remain a distant prospect for most poor people, and women in particular.³⁹ There may be *more choice* in these communities, but there is also *less voice* as civil society space contracts. The exception is the example of community-based organizations in the slum, which have succeeded in driving improvements to services but they are also compromised by disproportionately reflecting the interests of better-off slum dwellers. Here there is a longer history of active, women-centred CBOs operating than in the other study areas, helping to support local improvements. But these too are increasingly subject to hierarchy and incorporation into ruling party networks.

One overall factor that constrains progress is the reversal of the signs in the earlier study that civil society was starting to play a role in decentralization. Evidence from studies elsewhere suggests this could be important. For example, in Bolivia, important gains arose from the decentralization process due to inclusion of civil society in local governance processes within 'oversight committees' (Faguet 2011). The quality of local decentralized decision-making was also improved by interaction with civil society and business groups. Political competition, central to the argument that democratic governance can be strengthened by decentralisation, also improved when new local political leaders with effective skills emerged from civil society groups and moved into local politics. More inclusive associations and committees can provide non-party political forms of competition that increase the participation of women and other marginalised groups in local decision making.⁴⁰ These conditions are not presently visible in Bangladesh, where pervasive patron-client relationships and an increasing single political party monopoly on both formal politics and associational/committee life

39 See Cornwall and Gaventa's (2001) useful distinction, which we drew upon in the earlier study.

40 However, Hossain and Akhter (2011) advise caution around assuming that civil society experience necessarily prepares women for local government participation, since in Bangladesh 'civil society actors are not believed to have a good understanding of the UZP system' (p.3).

provide a different, and more pessimistic scenario. But they have sometimes occurred in the past.

There is some evidence of positive change in relation to the profile of disability rights, which are more visible in public discourse than we had observed in 2004. We found a higher profile than last time in our study sites for the rights of disabled people, though this was mainly expressed through claims on welfare benefits rather than that of broader social change. There are also increased resource flows in the form of provision of new social safety net entitlements around disability. This is an example of both government and civil society action and in many ways an outcome of longstanding NGO campaigning, with international support, to put pressure on the government to take disability more seriously. But our evidence suggests that the gains observed, though very welcome, are more welfare-oriented than rights-based in substance. The future may be an unbalanced one in which state and private sector institutions dominate, but where there is little independent civil society or 'not for profit' activity.

4.11 Implications of shrinking civil society space

In our earlier study we found a civil society had been relatively diverse, and occasionally politically focused, with power to sometimes influence local officials, and in some cases to secure land rights for households. Today rights-based development work that addressed structural inequalities has faded, to be replaced by smaller scale and niche-based activities such as legal aid.

The idea that civil society space may be shrinking can be understood in several ways. At one level, a pluralistic civil society continues to be diminished by the dominance of market based development activities rather than rights-based and social mobilisation approaches. Yet this area of civil society - business support, migration loans - appears to be thriving. However, NGOs are increasingly providing support to non-poor categories of borrower, and there is perhaps less emphasis today on offering micro-level loans for the poorest. At another level, this trend can be understood as a continuing narrowing of democratic civil society space by increasingly authoritarian acts of government power and by action taken against dissenting voices.

The decline of rights-based development NGOs is the result of many factors, including tensions with government, internal organizational problems, practical difficulties with local mobilization approaches, and changing donor support trends. Their relative absence – at least in the Greater Faridpur sites

– raises short-term problems for poor people seeking to advance their rights, as well as potential longer-term problems for progress with decentralization and local accountability. However, rights-based informal civil society action is still apparent in some of our Greater Faridpur data, such as local journalist groups helping with local protests. The situation was also slightly different, however, in the urban slum area. Here, we found NGOs that had moved from earlier credit-based approaches to also undertake sustained local organising for improving access to services.

Before, we found that when NGOs and local authorities worked together through productive coalitions or partnership arrangements there were sometimes positive outcomes for poorer people. Today there is less countervailing pressure from civil society visible on issues such as extra-judicial killings, because to do so would risk friction with local AL leaders. Nevertheless, the possibility remains that the government's 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 political cost. The cost however could be high, as we argue the power structure has become brittle rather than resilient.

There is also less civil society pressure to hold government to account on the implementation of progressive laws. This is apparent in relation to child marriage, for example. Efforts to address the problem of early marriage through stronger implementation of laws and through raising community awareness may however be circumvented locally, except in cases where such marriages are seen illicit. For example, we learned that the marriage registrar in the WCV was prepared to marry under-age women if they promised to return to get their certificates once they were over 18. But the official narrative around women's rights is still mainly one that focuses on protecting 'our women' (controlling unsanctioned relationships, protecting from harassment) rather than one that puts women's rights and agency at the centre.

Another important and concerning implication of shrinking civil society space relates to decentralisation, as discussed in the previous section. A weak activist civil society could damage progress with decentralisation and democratisation. The types of win-win negotiations we found in 2004 taking place between activist NGOs and local UP level leadership – around land rights for example – were contributing to the growing relevance of the UP as a legitimate site for governing local communities. Today, we find it subject to fewer countervailing pressure from civil society of business and

more likely to be by-passed by the MP. For example, protests by NGOs against extra-judicial killings are less common locally than they were. If civil society activists raise their voices they say they fear problems from the local AL leaders.

Finally, shrinking civil society space could perhaps also be understood in less negative terms. From the government's perspective there is value in 'co-opting' activist civil society groups into a more unitary and coherent official 'project' for local modernisation and development. With the nation heading towards middle-income status the government is seeking to build a more stable elected single party government. Nor is it the case that all civil society groups are fully co-opted. Some organizations are attempting to build strategic links with the AL on their own terms in order to access resources and maintain some room for manoeuvre without necessarily fully buying into the government's view. This may or may not turn out to be a productive strategy. Yet as formal rights based civil society actors are squeezed, with the risk that informal and/or 'unruly' civil society is the main context for opposition.

4.12 Prospects for change for poor people and gender equality

Some observers characterise Bangladesh's changing power structure in terms of a gradual transition from so-called traditional structures towards a set of new relationships and institutions. The actual picture is more complex. The assimilation of new political actors into the older power structure is just as possible as the transformation of the old one. Elements of the existing power structure, such as patron-client relationships, are continuing to evolve, adapt and take on new forms. Not is change necessarily linear. Patterns of change that we thought would be continuing trends, such as the growing centrality of the UP, and the productive interactions we observed between local government and NGOs, have now gone into reverse. The main constant is the continuing high level of national and local economic growth and this is the main source of optimism among people for the future.

Gender issues are a central theme in our study of how people try to engage with the power structure in pursuit of their interests. Our data suggests there are small ways in which the power structure is becoming more gender inclusive, through the creation of new local government spaces, and as a result of women's greater economic participation. Women's agency is increasing both at the level of household decision-making, and through small but growing levels of participation within official government bodies such

as local level committees and *shalish* dispute settlement systems. We heard from our informants that this participation is perceived as being driven by both the messages from NGO campaigns around equal opportunities and rights under the law, and also through women's growing participation in household income generation activities.

In the slum study site in particular, women's efforts are central to the struggle for tenure rights, better workplace conditions, and local services in ways challenge patriarchal norms. However, the problem we have identified in the study of declining civil society space provides poses problems for progress with gender equality, particularly in relation to the Greater Faridpur sites. There is evidence that the types of radical civil society organizations that we found in the earlier study but which are less present today may have negative implications for the rights of both women and men in relation to struggles over power. As Kabeer (2011) the community based organisations or grassroots groups formed by such radical NGOs are one of the 'vantage points' that make it possible for both women and men to reflect upon and positively challenge the 'gendered social order' (Kabeer 2011, p.525).

Feruci and Parnini (2014) suggest there is an ongoing struggle between 'traditional power holders and the new players' with the potential to contribute positively to future change: (i) private sector organisations may gain interests that go beyond purely economic objectives; (ii) growing numbers of urban youth may increasingly place economic opportunities above partisan politics and value more civic participation and inclusion in decision-making; and (iii) a media sector that is becoming more diverse and independent.

We would perhaps not wish to characterise the situation in terms of a binary between traditional and new actors and relationships, and see the situation as more complex and fluid, but we agree on the potential importance of emerging new business, media, and youth roles. We found so far little evidence of organised progressive activity by youth, though some young people told us they were unexcited by the idea of a traditional education as the route to an old-style government job, and were beginning to think more creatively about actively pursuing other more entrepreneurial opportunities – such as learning new skills and setting up a business. There was previously a youth club in the well-connected village, but now people say they have no time to put into it. Concerns around inter-generational tensions were voiced in both the Greater Faridpur and the urban slum communities, but nor more than might be expected in populations undergoing rapid growth and change.

Nor did we find evidence that the currently thriving private sector is impacting upon either social or political development in positive ways beyond the obviously important role of creating employment for growing numbers of people. Instead, the ruling party is co-opting the private sector and civil society into a new consolidated and politicised local power structure that is at the service of the AL's national development plan. Our data therefore supports the idea that things are hanging in the balance. Business associations are not playing a broader civil society role: they remain focused on self-interest, such as paying lower market lease fees, and predominantly male-dominated. Only occasionally are interests asserted to create public benefit (such as improved security in *bazar* areas). For example, political rent seeking on the bus businesses in Faridpur town has led to regular strikes. These are temporarily resolved when the Minister is brought in to negotiate and the local party is made to back off.

As we have seen, there was some evidence that independent media is playing a positive role. It is also becoming more diverse and playing new roles supporting new economic initiatives. For example, along with traditional print media, there are now growing numbers of TV networks providing useful new information and examples of good practice around new agricultural business opportunities such as milk production. Journalists groups are also playing active roles in campaigning around transparency, rights and accountability issues. There is perhaps a link between central government efforts to restrict certain critical media outlets at national level (such as the *Prothom Alo* and *Daily Star*) and the local media activists who challenge rights infringements (such as those driven by the MP's faction in the peri-urban area). Press clubs and associations remain sites of relatively independent civil society space and it is certainly difficult to turn back the growth of more diverse and independent media in the country.

Table 3: Main findings compared between the two studies

ToR Issue	Position in 2004	Position in 2016	Implications
1. Describing the local power structure	The power structure was less the rigid and predatory 'net' based on landowners and patronage described in earlier studies and more a loose and diverse web of relationships, with a strongly gendered division of labour.	A continuation of this trend, but with a wider range of patrons and connections, more politicisation and new forms of 'informality', and with some modest gains in gender equity.	While flexibility may give poor people more access to economic opportunities, politicisation may create a 'brittle' rather than resilient power structure.
2. The main actors and their relationships	A local power structure comprised of five main groups of actors: administrative, political, judicial structures and civil society (formal/informal).	Similar, but with increased power of MPs, the UP role less central, and formal civil society less diverse.	As WDR 2017 suggests, a need to look beyond technical 'capacity building' of local government, decentralization and civil society to engage with power relations.
3. Access to political power and economic opportunities for marginalised groups	The old system of 'land-centric' patrons that had locked clients into exploitative agricultural and domestic relationships was slowly losing ground.	A more diversified power structure with patrons drawn from wider range of elites; better infrastructure offering better market access; more inclusion and safety net services.	A growing economy and more open power structure seems to benefit all groups, but at different rates, and may over time contribute to growing inequality.
4. UP level links to informal community institutions	Positive links to building of more inclusive <i>shalish</i> ; the declining role of traditional <i>samaj</i> authority.	Continuing decline of <i>samaj</i> community structures and institutions, stronger roles for ruling party activists, a little more gender inclusivity.	Breakdown of traditional social structures good for women in short term, but a vacuum may be created into which conservative political/religious groups could move?
5. UP level links to formal local institutions	UPs in the ascendant, widening local opportunities and local leaders and bodies becoming more accountable and inclusive.	Tighter political control of local bodies such as School Committees and Business Associations via local ruling party members, and by-passing of local leaders if non-ruling party affiliated.	Local level civil society is 'captured' by ruling party possibly without short-term disadvantages for the poor – but there may be less positive long term implications?
6. UP level links to meso- and macro- level politics	The growing role of the MP with more control over local processes and allocations.	More resources flow directly through MPs and more bypassing of UPs to transfer resources to political clients. Declining political competition between parties, some factional competition within ruling party.	Progress with decentralization and local accountability may be strengthened or put at risk through the dominance of the ruling party – the evidence not clear on this.
7. Tax revenue and ADP budget	Evidence of low level gains in women's inclusion in UP level decision making forums; limited growth in tax revenue collection.	Still limited local revenue generation. Formal inclusion increasing, but actual decision-making power still low (eg women rarely given own PICs).	Buoyant local economy suggests untapped potential for higher levels of local revenue collection to boost UP resources for local development.

8. Allocation of state safety net resources and level of political capture	UP level leaders using services to build political support, but with some win-win outcomes for the poor.	Expansion of services, but more distribution of resources along party supporter lines with the result there are fewer 'win-win' opportunities.	The possibility of improved services and user voice through party networks as in the slum; or alternatively a reduction of service provider choice overall as range of available patrons contracts.
9. Gendered implications of local political processes and inclusion	Evidence of slow but growing gender inclusion in local structures, supported by government and NGOs.	Small gains around women's inclusion on local committee panels; NGO support to women through credit and business help - but far less rights-based work.	A test case for the power of markets and economic NGO support to empower women?
10. Efforts to promote participation and access to services/productive opportunities	Synergies between government, civil society and business were occasionally creating win-win gains.	Outside resources from government and NGOs to support small business, migration increasingly useful – but less synergy between public and private than before.	An unbalanced future in which state and private sector institutions dominate, but little independent civil society or 'not for profit' activity.

11. Democratic space for CS and media	An opening up of new space with diverse civil society actors (services, rights, advocacy).	Less civil society space but renewed credit and business support (less rights work or advocacy); some evidence of increased small-scale local level media (press) activity around rights.	As formal rights based civil society actors are squeezed, informal and/or 'unruly' civil society persists and grows; local media plays an increased role even as national media more constrained?
12. Main trends around change and gender equality	Evidence of more inclusion within local government and civil society decentralization processes.	Higher visibility for women in public life, but relatively small changes in decision-making power.	A transitional period – but difficult to predict 'to what'? With economic gain there may be potential political pain – less political competition, more brittle structures, and less resilience.

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 5

5.1 Change and continuity in the local power structure

Our earlier study had reported a cautiously optimistic picture of a slowly changing local power structure in Greater Faridpur. We identified small but potentially significant ways that new institutional spaces were opening up that made it possible for some poor women and men to improve their situations. These opportunities centred on improvements to the functioning of local government structures, the evolving inclusivity of some local institutions, and forms of civil society action and coalition building that sometimes produced ‘win-win’ outcomes for both poor and non-poor people. Today, while we note that there has been positive economic change experienced by most people in the communities we visited (although the remote village continues to be marginalised), we are less optimistic about recent ways in which the power structure has been changing.

The new study documents both continuity and change. Economic dynamism has intensified since the mid-2000s, resulting in improved livelihoods for many people. Women’s market participation has increased as many continue to access new economic opportunities (often with the support of NGOs). Communities are more geographically and socially connected than before, and households have greater choice in the range and type of connections they seek to form. Local, national, and transnational communications and migration opportunities have increased. Progress with achieving women’s political inclusion into local institutions is occurring, albeit at a slow rate. Elements of an older power structure remain, with the persistence of patron-client relations, elite clan politics and patriarchal norms, but these 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 both limits participation and civic engagement but nevertheless offers up some opportunities for incremental inclusive change.

What is different today? Civil society space has become reduced, particularly that formerly occupied by radical NGOs and civil society groups addressing local rights-based development in relation to land, local political participation and civic engagement. As a result, there are fewer opportunities for the types of win-win coalitions we had identified and predicted would become more frequent in the earlier study. Local Business Associations, School Committees and other local civil society groupings are to a higher degree than before captured by political interests. This means that while there is a wider range of patron available (for example local media supported activism), opportunities for poorer people to build horizontal forms of solidarity remain limited. Connected to this trend, local level political competition has also diminished as the ruling political party has consolidated its control of local power structure and weakened any formal 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 government 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, from local activist journalism to community-level vigilantism, along with other forms of ‘rude accountability’ in which confront abuses by those with power and attempt to strengthen the rights of the marginalised. But the overall picture of economic gain has not come without cost, which takes 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 power contributes to this vulnerability.

5.2 The continuing importance of studying local power

In a context where forms of personalised patron-client relationship continue to dominate, and civil society space is diminished, people continue to face serious obstacles in their efforts to further their social and political goals. As *World Development Report 2017* (World Bank, 2017) reminds us, understanding how the local power structure works, and how it is perceived, continues to be important themes for mainstream development policy and practice. Power asymmetries contribute to exclusion, inequality and restrict equitable growth. As a result, there is a continuing need for policy makers and development agencies to prioritise support for 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 continue to be at risk of capture by elites who seek to maintain the *status quo*.

Our re-study found levels of coalition building between local government leader and civil society groups to be lower than those we 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. Our most concerning finding is the decline of the UP’s role and position as the crucial lowest institution of local government, a change that brings negative implications for poor people’s participation in decision making, joint government and civil society pro-poor coalition building, and increased local resource mobilisation. The implications of these should not be seen as a purely technical problem, but it does support WDR 2017’s insistence that we need to think beyond technical ‘capacity building’ of local institutions to engage more fully with power issues in supporting more inclusive growth.

Our analysis suggests a more brittle local power structure than we encountered during the mid-2000s. Today there is less resilience in the system in two senses: (i) an increasing concentration of power within a single political party patronage framework could fracture if subjected to future unpredictable pressure or shocks; and (ii) for poorer people in particular, the risk of falling foul of the ruling party’s patronage will have serious consequences, since there may be fewer alternative non-affiliated patrons available. Another element in this analysis is the possibility that while extensive, the social protection system is particularly vulnerable to political capture at the local level. Finally, there is a pressing need to protect those people who are left behind within the overall picture of positive growth, such as those in marginal locations and those with marginal identities, and

to enhance efforts to advance inclusion for women who face continuing marginalization within formal governance structures.

5.3 Facing the future

Our earlier study concluded with four practical insights for governmental and non-governmental agencies seeking to support pro-poor change in Bangladesh: the need to (i) recognise the importance of economic development as a solid foundation for progressive change; (ii) find ways of supporting local government and civil society jointly; (iii) understand and build upon local difference to avoid ‘one size fits all’ support strategies; and (iv) continue to identify new opportunities to support pro-poor coalitions involving local elites.

In the case of (i), 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 ‘inclusive growth’ remains a challenging goal. Our analysis highlights the risk that economic gain displaces issues of inclusivity, participation and rights (political pain). In the case of (ii), supporting local government and civil society in mutually reinforcing ways remains paramount. 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’ nevertheless provide some cause for optimism in this regard. With (iii), we still argue there is a need to avoid ‘one size fits all’ approaches and that it is vital to pay close attention to 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, (iv), 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 solve local problems. The media’s role in assisting the poor to challenge infringements of their rights by more powerful interest groups and build such coalitions may be increasing.

No one yet knows what will fill the vacuum left by a weakened political opposition – a new democratic politics, increased levels of factionalism and instability, or more sinister forms of extremist politics. The government has

so far been able to argue that economic growth takes precedence over the types of concerns about people’s relationships with the local power structure that we discuss in this report. Economic gain may currently be taking place with levels of political pain that has not yet been particularly severe, but these could become more acute in the future if these problems are not fully addressed.

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Acronyms

ADP	Annual Development Plan
ADR	Alternative dispute resolution
BRAC	A leading Bangladeshi development NGO (no longer an acronym)
CBO	Community based organisation
CSO	Civil society organization
DC	Deputy Commissioner
DDLG	Deputy Director, Local Government
DSK	<i>Dushtha Shasthya Kendra</i> , an NGO
EWR	Elected Women Representatives
LGRDC	Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives
LGSP	Local Governance Support Project
MOFDM	Ministry of Food & Disaster Management
MP	Member of Parliament
NDCC	North Dhaka City Corporation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NWDP	National Women Development Policy
PBSP	<i>Purbo Bangla Sharbohara</i> Party
PMU	Project Management Unit
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PSC	Project Steering Committee
TR	Test Relief (a food for work programme under MOFDM)
UISC	Union Information and Service Centre
UNO	Upazila <i>Nirbahi</i> Officer
UP	Union <i>Parishad</i>
UPGP	Union <i>Parishad</i> Governance Project
UZP	Upazila <i>Parishad</i>
UZGP	Upazila <i>Parishad</i> Governance Project
VGF	Vulnerable group feeding
VDG	Vulnerable group development
WDF	Women's Development Forum
WS	Ward <i>sabha</i> (council)

Glossary

Awami League (AL)	the ruling political party (headed by Sheikh Hasina Wajid)
Bangladesh National Party (BNP)	the main opposition party (headed by Khaleda Zia)
<i>Bazar</i>	market place
<i>Burqa</i>	a full body garment worn by some Muslim women
<i>Char</i>	exposed river land, often shifting when rivers change course
<i>Crore</i>	ten million
<i>Gram</i>	village
<i>Gram sarkar</i>	'village government' (now abolished)
<i>Gusti</i>	patrilineage clan
<i>Hat</i>	weekly or bi-weekly market
<i>Imam</i>	mosque leader who conducts the prayers
<i>Jama'at</i>	congregation of worshippers (Muslim)
<i>Jatiya party</i>	Political party set up by former military ruler General H.M. Ershad
<i>Jogajog</i>	connection
<i>Kabikha</i>	food for work
<i>Khas</i> land	land reserved for redistribution to landless households
<i>Lakh</i>	one hundred thousand
<i>Madrasa</i>	Muslim religious school
<i>Matbar</i>	informal village leader or 'elder'
<i>Mastan</i>	broker, criminal intermediary, gangster

<i>Nirbahi</i>	coordination
<i>Para</i>	neighbourhood of village
<i>Parishad</i>	council
<i>Poti</i>	congregation (Hindu)
<i>Paurashava</i>	municipality
<i>Quomi</i>	type of independent <i>madrassa</i> , lit. ‘community’
<i>Sadar upazila</i>	main administrative centre of the district
<i>Shalish</i>	traditional mechanism for village dispute settlement, less formal than the village courts
<i>Samaj</i>	religious community, brotherhood which helps to structure local village societal organization (also more generally ‘society’)
Taka (Tk)	currency (US\$1 is approx. Tk80)
Union	the lowest level of local government
Union <i>parishad</i>	union council
<i>Upazila</i>	sub-district
Upazila Nirbahi Officer	sub-District Coordination Officer
Upazila <i>parishad</i>	sub-district council
Ward <i>Sabha</i>	ward council
<i>Zila</i>	district

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Terms of reference

Objective and scope

The main objective of the restudy is to identify, analyse and describe formal and informal political, social and economic drivers of change in comparison with the original study. The scope and outline of the restudy should to a high degree remain comparable to the original study with two exceptions. A particular focus should be placed on the integration of a gender perspective throughout the study, as specified below.

The restudy will also add a study location in an urban slum setting in Dhaka in addition to the revisit to the three villages in Faridpur and Rajbari districts. If possible, the slum location selected chosen will include a number of individuals (such as labourers, garment workers) with migration links with Faridpur/Rajbari in order to provide coherence across all field locations.

The overall focus should be on the union/ward and its formal and informal power linkages to the village/slum and Upazila/city corporation levels. Also linkages to structures and actors at the national level affecting the local level should be included.

Relevant issues to be studied:

1. What do local power structures look like in the forms of patron-clientelism, social and economic relations, gender relations, as well as societal perceptions and the formal/informal mechanisms for exercise of power locally?
2. Who are the main actors involved in the political and economic power processes of local development? How do they relate to each other and how do they bond?
3. How do these formal and informal relationships and bonds affect the access to political and economic power processes of local development for women and marginalized groups (including minorities, older people, disabled)?
4. How do political power structures and relations at the UP/ward level relate to the informal village/slum level institutions of *samaj*, *jama’at*/poti and *gusti*? What, if any, are the gendered

implications of these structures and relationships?

5. How do political power structures and relations at the UP/ward level relate to more formal local level institutions as the *shalish*, mosque, temple and school committees? What if any, are the gendered implications of these structures and relationships?
6. How are local power relations played out at the union/ward and upazila levels interlinked with the political game at higher meso- and macro- levels of the Bangladeshi society? What if any, are the gendered implications of these structures and relationships?
7. How are taxes and other local resources collected, if they are collected, and how are they planned for in the ADP budget?
8. How (if so) are state allocated resources as VGD (Vulnerable Group Development Program) and VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding) cards and the similar initiatives used by local political actors for further entrenchment of their political positions?
9. How are initiatives or social processes having an impact on promoting key local political processes and local development? What if any, are the gendered implications of these initiatives and social processes?
10. Are there actors, processes and initiatives for strengthening of poor people's (women, men, girls and boys) participation and influence in decision-making as well as their access to social services and productive resources?
11. How does the shrinking democratic space look for civil society and the media? What effects if any has this had on local power structure and people?
12. What are the main trends, differences, success factors and obstacles for positive social and political change for poor people and gender equality in relation to the original study?

The restudy should identify and capture the dynamics of the present situation and make a comparison with the original study through an analysis of the roles and the agendas of strategic actors (agents for change, agents against change), as well as structures, initiatives and processes in local Bangladeshi society. Main emphasis of the restudy should be on the power relations played out at the union/ward and upazila levels in relation to local development and the annual development planning process, in particular related to primary education and basic health services. Important actors

and their relations to study are linkages between the union chairmen, ward councillor and union/ward members, the Members of Parliament, the Upazila Nirbahi Officers, other relevant Upazila administration officers, district/city corporation administration officers (e.g. the ADLG, the DC at Upazila level and the Mayor), LGED and LCDI staff, as well as private business interests, NGO and CBO actors.

There is also a need to look closer into the local activities of NGOs, CBOs, Chambers of Commerce, private sector interest groups, the local media, but also into the activities undertaken by the line ministries and their upazila level and district/city corporation administrations in sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, land registration and redistribution.

Throughout the restudy, the role of women should be highlighted, including a special focus on how all of the above mentioned relations, dynamics and processes affect women and girls in particular. The restudy shall also include reflections on the scope to specifically promote gender equality (e.g. end practice of child marriages, dowry and violence against women) with regards to findings.

