Parliament, Public Engagement and Poverty Reduction:

The Bangladesh Experience

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1. Introduction

This paper arises from a research programme (Parliamentary effectiveness: public engagement for poverty reduction in Bangladesh and Ethiopia') jointly funded by the U.K.'s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department for International Development (DFID).[2] The programme spans from February 2014 to January 2017, so approximately half of the fieldwork has been completed. This paper offers some of the preliminary findings of the Bangladesh part of the project, focusing mainly on: (a) one case study of the process of developing the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers 1999-2008 and, (b) interviews and discussions held in constituencies with Members of Parliament (MPs) and their constituents. The overall goal of the project is to explore how parliament and parliamentarians engage with the public when aiming to achieve poverty reduction.

Donor agencies and scholars on development assume that the issue of poverty does not remain the concern of government alone. Parliaments, which traditionally did not have much involvement with issues and policies related to poverty, are now thought to have the potential to contribute to its eradication. Getting involved with poverty reduction processes is one of the important ways of engaging with the public, a function that has not been adequately recognised and researched until recently. There are several reasons for legislative involvement in the formulation and oversight on the implementation of policy. It is needed, among other things, to ensure country ownership, to enhance accountability and transparency, and to encourage public participation and consensus building (Sharkey, Dreger and Bhatia, 2006, pp. 4-5). Greater parliamentary involvement in the poverty reduction process helps to ensure that a country's

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poverty strategy is generated, implemented and evaluated through national institutions with adequate political legitimacy to ensure ownership and sustainability (Report on Wilton Park Conference, 2006).

Much of the success of poverty related programmes will depend upon the extent to which MPs are able, among other things, to engage the public with the planning, implementation and evaluation of public programmes. Public engagement can help parliament and parliamentarians make informed decisions at different stages of the policy process – diagnosis, deliberation, monitoring and evaluation, it has been argued (Kroon and Stapenshurst, 2008: 2). Such engagement may be direct, for example, through holding surgeries, organizing public hearings and organizing meetings seeking public input on issues and problems confronting the constituency/nation, and/or mediated through CSOs. In recent years many CSOs, especially those advocating different kinds of reforms, have sought support of MPs to promote important issues, among other things, by inviting them to be present as chief guests/guests of honour at consultative meeting held at the grassroots and/or organizing dialogues/meetings with groups of MPs to deliberate on important issues. CSOs can help MPs undertake different important functions in an effective manner. Many MPs may find it difficult to deal with issues, which have both technical aspects as well as general implications partly through lack of knowledge and experience. Moreover, many MPs maintain intermittent contact with their localities, among other things, due to too few staff and other facilities in their constituencies. CSOs can help them improve communication with the electorate. In return, CSOs can legitimise their involvement with poverty reduction policies by collaborating with parliament including through its committees.

This paper is divided into five parts: part two deals with the methodology of the research; part three introduces parliament and explains MP's engagement with the preparation of PRSP in Bangladesh; part four will report on the role of the MPs in their constituencies; and part five provides some brief and tentative reflections.

2. Inter disciplinary research, aims and methodology

The main objectives of the research are to:

- undertake a mapping of relationships between MPs and members of the public involved in poverty reduction initiatives within Bangladesh;
- explore the extent and effectiveness of public engagement by parliamentarians in poverty reduction through two specific case studies. An in-depth study of the interaction between MPs and development actors through:

- o the parliamentary process of scrutinising policy-making, budgets and legislation that aims to reduce poverty;
  - o representing constituents and distribution of funding in constituencies.
  - o assess from the perspectives of various stakeholders the role of parliament and parliamentarians in poverty reduction.
- facilitate the development of researchers' capacity in three countries to measure parliamentary effectiveness.
- hare the findings and recommendations about parliamentary effectiveness with stakeholders in South Asia, Eastern Africa and the UK.

The research is by nature inter-disciplinary, drawing from anthropology and political science, and building closely on the expertise of the researchers, Professor Nizam Ahmed, who has been researching parliament and constituency in Bangladesh for 25 years, and Professor Zahir Ahmed, who has been researching rural social relations and poverty in rural Bangladesh for over 20 years. Two junior research assistants and number of local researchers are also involved in order to collect localized information from constituencies, a process that has to be carefully handled given the politically fraught situation. The methodological approach of the project aims to be innovative as well as flexible. Anthropologists have not worked in Bangladesh Parliament before, with all the challenges research with elites brings, and there have been more development issues, diversity and contestation to consider than is usual for political science or public administration.

Since the research is about parliament, the methods of investigation are inevitably entangled with power plays and political relationships. At the outset of initial workshop held in Dhaka in April 2014, we set up conventional ways to collect data. However, since then we struggled to map out different actors according to who talks to who, what influence they have and in what context. The result was disappointing for two reasons. Firstly; the two research assistants were not able to cover distant and diverse constituencies along with interviewing MPs and civil society members in Dhaka. Secondly, the allies and supporters of the MPs at the constituency level were suspicious about our research, assuming we will be disclosing their 'internal matters' to others. Naturally, we have gained access to some people and some domains, whereas we were denied access to others. In addition, political violence forced us to compromise, keeping our distance from politically difficult situations. As Stuart Kirsch points out with reference to political violence in West Papua, observation can never be neutral; within fraught political contexts anthropologists have to take sides (2002: 68). Within this context we were asking constituents about sensitive issues such as MPs involvement in development and public engagement. So unsurprisingly the methodology has entailed continual navigation of these sensitivities.

Anthropological research such as participant observation is our core approach but we are following adaptive strategies given the complex political situation. This has helped us to unveil some of the informal aspects of MPs' activities and the culture underlying their various

relationships with different sections of the public. Participant observation in constituencies has been the most useful way that the detailed contexts of citizens' lives and the ways that these unfold can be understood and it has only be possible with the aid of six local research assistants living in the constituencies. They have been working as gate-keepers in diverse and isolated landscapes, winning trust with people they already had connections to. The turbulence made travel difficult and time-consuming at times for the Dhaka-based researchers and the sensitive issues meant that people in communities did not trust us as strangers.

The following table illustrates the number of interviews with different categories of people and the number of focus group discussions (FGDs) held within constituencies. In addition to exploring constituency issues with two junior research assistants from Dhaka – one male and one female – we visited two areas in Norail and Kushtia (Northern part of Bangladesh) to find out about the history of the Domestic Violence Act. We met a dynamic NGO leader who was instrumental in influencing national NGOs to advocate for the Hindu marriage law – giving rights to Hindu women for the first time by registering marriage. This was interesting because it shows local-national connections and stresses the importance of valuing and investing in local NGOs not just Dhaka based national ones. In addition to the existing four constituency research sites, we have added two more – including one with a woman MP in Dhaka – which we started visiting in June 2015.

FGDs, Interviews, Case studies and Meetings carried out in 5 constituencies by June, 2015

Number of Interviews with others	MPs interviews in constit-uencies	Number of focus groups with others
20	3	12
Individual In depth interviews (civil society, Local Union council chairman, members, women councilors): One UP chairman, some poverty reduction programme beneficiaries in char areas in Noakhali 1 female UP members; 1 former UP male member, Three farmers in Laxmipur; Interviewed the MP in Kapasia, Three case studies of women beneficiaries and one meeting with		In five constituencies: Srimongol, Parbatipur, Noakhali, Lakshmipur and Kapasia) among three ethnic minorities: Monipuri and Khashia in Sylhet, Farmers in Noakhali char area about development and poverty Civil society members in Parbatipur, Citizen in Parbartipur about MP, democracy and development , Women elected members from different unions in Kapasia about election;

the local bureaucrats' and the MP		Victims of river bank erosion and fishermen in Lakshmipur about poverty and development
Interviews with tea garden ethnic minority employees in Srimongol, Sylhet		

Source: Fieldwork, 2014-15

The case study on PRSP, introduced in section 3, is mostly based on information collected from a range of sources, such as official reports on parliamentary proceedings, reports of parliamentary committees and studies carried out by other researchers. Proceedings of committee meetings are reported in a semi-verbatim way, while the House proceedings are reported in a verbatim way. Both these sources have long been ignored by researchers, partly through ignorance and partly for lack of access to these documents. It is very difficult to have access to parliamentary reports. A request by a University department for copies of parliamentary proceedings was summarily rejected by the Speaker, as reported by one parliamentary official, on the grounds that it will create a [bad!] precedent which could lead to other universities asking for such documents. We have succeeded in collecting parliamentary papers relevant for the purpose of our study through using different networks and sources. The two researchers have access to almost all parliamentary papers related to PRSP. Important reports available on the internet provide another source of information. We have started checking the actual scope of participation of different groups, particularly women, in qualitative terms, and also difference between MPs on basis of constituency, gender, age, and experience through interviews. The interviewing will continue during 2015 to fill in the gaps in our understanding of the history of PRSP so far.

3. Preliminary findings: Parliament, the role of MPs and PRSP

Bangladesh has a 350-member unicameral Parliament. Of the total members, 300 are elected directly; the rest (50) are reserved for women. Formally, the MPs can play a key role in legislation, oversight and representation. Experience shows, however, that they have a tendency to stress more on representational functions than on other activities. Part of the reason is that Bangladesh has adopted a majoritarian electoral system where representational functions, as a natural rule, assume greater importance than in other electoral systems. Second, competition for electoral support is also more intense now, signifying that the representatives will have to maintain greater contact with the electorate. The unpredictability of the behaviour of the electorate necessitates a continual public engagement between the politician and his/her constituents. In particular, the scope to intimidate voters decreased substantially between 1991 and 2008. This was mostly because of the introduction of the system of non-party caretaker government to exercise state power between the dissolution of a parliament and the election of

the next one. The constitution barred the outgoing government to exercise state power as a caretaker government, which has now been repealed (Ahmed, 2011).

The MPs have to devote considerable amount of their time and give higher priority to seeking projects and benefits for their districts and acting as intermediaries between their constituents and the bureaucracy. Third, the scope for MP involvement in the policy process is limited more because of structural and political constraints than for cognitive limitations of lawmakers. The constitutional restriction on floor-crossing and independent voting disadvantages the MPs vis-à-vis their parties and government. Article 70 of the Constitution provides that a person elected as an MP at an election at which he/she was nominated as a candidate by a political party would vacate his/her seat if he/she resigned from that party or voted against that party (GoB, 2011).

In Bangladesh there exist several means for engaging the public with the Parliament, of which two deserve special attention. First, the Constitution, first framed in 1972, provides for pre-legislative scrutiny of government bills. The Parliament can engage the public with the law-making process and the Rules of Procedure of Parliament (hereafter *Rules*) empower the Parliament to set up different types of committees including select committees which may hear expert evidence and representatives of special interests (Bangladesh Parliament, 2007, p. 67). Provisions also exist for eliciting public opinion on bills and other legislative measures. Second, the *Rules* allow the public to petition the Parliament on a bill that has been introduced in the House or any important matter connected with the business pending before the House (Bangladesh Parliament, p. 35). Both mechanisms have remained mostly ineffective, as stated elsewhere (Ahmed, 2012; Ribeiro and Islam, 2013). Other mechanisms used to encourage public engagement such as parliamentary website, social media, leaflets and other printed material, and reports on parliamentary activity, also do not have much impact (Ahmed, 2012). There is a tendency among parliamentarians to get things done in haste. The importance of consultation does not have much recognition among MPs.

In recent years CSOs/NGOs have emerged as an important medium of public engagement, often aggregating public demands and communicating those to the lawmakers. Many poverty reduction programmes/policies originate in CSOs/NGOs, which they try to bring to the notice of the lawmakers. Previously these organisations maintained links mostly with government departments, and contact with MPs was sporadic. But many CSOs/NGOs use MPs to justify their advocacy for many important issues, poverty-related or otherwise. They help organise many activities such facilitating public hearings on bills and/or other matters awaiting parliamentary approval, which was unthinkable even a few years ago. Such hearings can provide an important means of public engagement. CSOs/NGOs have the capacity and expertise [to identify and analyse complex issue] and access to academic … if MPs develop personal relations with these organisations, they can prepare [policy] briefs for them and proposals during the budget process" (Wilton Park Conference, 2004).

Over the years, several poverty-related programmes have also been introduced in the rural areas by the government; these have broadened the scope for greater MP engagement with the public. Each MP, besides seeking to influence the process of allocation of resources for poverty reduction by different government agencies, has also access to different other sources over which they have direct control. Some of these important sources are: discretionary grant given to each MP every year, SSN program quota allocated to him/her, and constituency development fund (CDF) allocated to each MP. These programmes should allow an MP to have more engagement with the public than before. Many MPs also spend a huge amount from their own sources to help the poor. Personal face-to-face contact still remains the main form of MP-constituency linkage, supplemented by contact by cell phones. Only a few MPs, especially the new generation ones, have access to and often use different web-based communication technologies, e.g. blogging, emailing, and social networking such as face book and texting to mobile phones. But the old generation MPs still find personal contact and contact by cell phones very important. Notwithstanding differences in mode of public engagement, it is now widely recognised that the MPs can ignore this important function at the risk of their own peril.

Bangladesh prepared three PRSPs between 1999 and 2008: an interim PRSP titled A National Strategy for Economic Growth, Poverty Reduction and Social Development (2003), PRSP-1 styled Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction 92005) and PRSP-II titled Moving Ahead: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction which was finalized in 2008 and revised in 2009. These were prepared in accordance with the advice of WB and IMF; the main objective was to make the country eligible to obtain access to debt relief and other financial support provided by these two institutions. The PRSP was considered to be a "home-grown plant; not an imported hub". Stress was placed on country ownership by the World Bank and IMF, and in fact, all those involved with the preparation of the successive PRSPs were 'locals' – mostly economists. The General Economics Division (GED) of the Planning Commission was in charge of the preparation of the PRSPs.

Of the three, PRSP-I was comparatively more participatory than the others. Those charged with preparing PRSP-I adopted a participatory approach, seeking the opinion of different categories of stakeholders, including local public representatives (18.3%) and members of civil society, experts and academics (7.3%) to NGOs (14.7%), professional groups (5.8%) and women's organization's representatives (5.8%). PRSP-II was also initially prepared in a somewhat participatory manner during the rule of military-backed caretaker government, but it lacked any public input while it was revised by the AL government in 2009. In fact, no attempt was made to seek public/expert opinion on changes needed in PRSP-II to make it compatible with issues mentioned in AL's its election manifesto. Critics, however, argue that participation had been neglected in most cases and reduced to a few meetings with the character of mere information sharing and some consultation. More importantly, "where consultation had been held, the participants were dominated by professional, urban groups". A CPD study, however, observed that about 87 per cent CSO representatives interviewed thought that their participation in the

consultation process was useful in one way or other, and they had some enriching experiences through this process (Khatun, Bhattacharya and Rahman, 2013, p.19). At the same time there was not much scope for CSOs to play a proactive role. "CSOs and other stakeholders had to be reactive, giving response to what PRSPs proposed, rather than proactive, setting the agenda" (ibid, p.19).

Available literature in Bangladesh suggests that the Bangladesh Parliament had the least involvement of all the actors involved with the preparation of PRSP. The only exception was PRSP-II, which was placed in the Parliament after its revision by the new AL government in 2009 more for deliberation than for approval. The earlier documents (I-PRSP and PRSP-I), as critics claimed, did not have any input from parliamentarians. This criticism simplifies the history, from the viewpoint of the PRSP planners. Those responsible for the preparation of PRSP actually sought inputs from parliamentarians. For example, the draft PRSP-I was sent to 14 standing committees on the ministries, especially those who shadowed the ministries directly involved with poverty reduction programmes in the country. In addition, it was distributed among 151 MPs. Members of the formulation team, particularly the focal person – the head of the GED of the Planning Commission – attended meetings of different committees to explain the scope and purposes of PRSP in person and to answer questions raised by committee members. In addition, the formulation team members also made presentations to three workshops on PRSP organised by a UNDP – Bangladesh Parliament joint project, and responded to queries and questions raised by the MPs.

Proceedings of different committee meetings, however, show that committee deliberations of PRSP mostly lacked substance and depth. Meetings deliberating on PRSP did not last long. Rarely did any committee organise any meetings exclusively for this purpose. Most of the committees included discussion on PRSP as one of the agendas but most of the deliberations took place in haste. Most of the (committee) members did not really do any homework on PRSP before attending the committee meetings, although the document was sent to them much earlier. Committee meetings dealing with PRSP were something like 'question – answer' sessions, with members asking questions to the lead author rather than making critical comments or observations at least on issues that concerned the ministries that these committees shadowed. Framers of PRSP, however, had the opportunity to interact with committee members (MPs), study their mindset and priorities, gather views of the members on different issues they considered important and also explore their opinion on how to deal with problems that planners might confront. Compared with the committee deliberation on PRSP, the workshop for parliamentarians on PRSP was considered to be more useful. The MPs attending the workshop was seen to be extremely active, raising different important issues and bringing them to the notice of the PRSP framers. Cross-party consensus on different issues was also noticeable. Members of the formulation team appreciated the depth of insights provided by the MPs and readily accepted some of the proposals while pledging to look into the details of other recommendations (Rahman, 2005, p.23).

As stated earlier, PRSP-II, after its revision by the second Hasina government, was placed in the House for discussion. A general discussion on PRSP-II, lasting for three hours 23 minutes, was held on 1 November 2009. A total of 23 members including the Planning Minister, the Finance Minister and the Prime Minister took part in the discussion. None of the members from the main opposition (BNP) took part in the discussion. Members belonging to the Jatiya Party JP, however, were present in the House and a few participated in the discussion. The MPs raised many important issues that mostly concerned the interests of their electorate, although some of those had some national implications, for example, corruption, resource mobilisation for financing PRSP, gap between the rich and the poor, and the interventionist role of the Bretton-Wood institutions (BWI). Some members were extremely critical of the role of the WB and IMF as well as the NGOs. Some MPs stressed the importance of employment-oriented, job-oriented education, and proposed that if necessary, experts from Australia, New Zealand and other developed countries could be contracted and new educational institutions be set up across the whole country. One former AL Minister expressed concern about the way arable agricultural land was being used for constructing houses, buildings and markets and if this trend continued, there would not remain any such land in 20/30 years.

"PRSP was Bangladesh's home-grown plant, not something that was imposed from above" – this statement by planners was technically true in the sense that none in the formulation team was an outsider. Yet, the whole exercise was done in conformity with ideas and guidelines prescribed by BWIs – the World Bank and the IMF. Some of the MPs raised this issue of donor influence in different forums (e.g., standing committee meetings, workshop on PRSP and general discussion in Parliament on PRSP-II). MPs while participating in discussion in different forums also raised a number of issues, many of which did not receive any serious consideration, not because that the government was necessarily opposed to those ideas, but because of their lack of awareness that these were dealt with in the document in different places. MPs actually faced several constraints. For example, the document was voluminous and it was written in English; MPs thus found it difficult to comprehend what was written in the document. Second, MPs lacked time and resources, both of which are necessary to make an MP pro-active. In particular, no major staff support is available to MPs; hence, they found it difficult to make the best use of the opportunities made available to them.

The involvement of the MPs with the PRSP preparation process was thus more symbolic than real. Part of the reason is the lack of any mandatory requirement for parliamentary approval of a policy or plan. Consultation with MPs, however, was not a futile exercise. It helped the members of the formulation team legitimise their work, at least up to a certain extent. The engagement [with the MPs], as the lead consultant of PRSP-I observed, proved to be very useful in the finalization of the draft document (Ibid, p. 25). There were three areas where the finalization of the PRSP was directly influenced by dialogue with parliamentarians:

> *The first was to strengthen the focus on agriculture and the importance of policy support in areas such a subsidy. The continued and multi-level significance of agriculture for pro-poor concerns such as employment and rural development was underscored repeatedly. The final PRSP reflects this concern through a stronger formulation of the sectoral policy challenges. The second area where the dialogue with parliamentarians influenced the final formulation of the PRSP was on social protection. In response to the concerns raised by the parliamentarians a workshop was arranged in July 2005 to explore a comprehensive approach to social protection. This directly led to the inclusion of a new section on risk, vulnerability and social protection in the chapter on key issues. The third area to be influenced was on the theme of implementation. The draft PRSP already had an emphasis on this issue. The final PRSP concretized the focus through a more specific elaboration of the relevant policy matrix* (Ibid, p.25).

The extent to which parliamentary deliberation on PRSP-II led to any revision or improvement in the final document is difficult to assess. What was, however, certain was that the MPs, although critical of some strategies, nevertheless readily acknowledged its ownership. Many of them expressed satisfaction for the main reason that they had an opportunity to scrutinise the document. More importantly, many important issues that did not find prominence in the original document such as land reform including distribution of *khas* land, issue of housing/shelter and an operational plan for PRSP found special attention in the final document. One thing, however, to be stated at this stage is some MPs, as a general rule, had greater involvement than others in the deliberation on PRSP. Some issues had also received better attention than others. Reasons for such differences, and the relative influence of different actors (MPs and CSO representatives), will be explored in the next phase of the research.

4. Preliminary findings: constituencies

In the constituency case study six locations were identified with differing socio-economic and agro ecosystem properties. We expected different issues to arise out of (a) the different cultural and moral worlds of the constituents, (b) the nature of poverty reduction programmes, (c) economic and historical differences. The Noakhali and Laxmipur constituencies have similar agro-economic zone in terms of *char* land and natural calamities like gale, tidal bores, cyclone and floods. In Noakhali and Laxmipur areas we are focusing largely upon landless or land – poor households and the people who have lost their home due to river bank erosion. The Noakhali Sadar constituency has a number of development activities implemented by national and international organizations. So, as a domain of development, we have selected this site in order to find out about the direct involvement of MPs in reducing poverty. On the other hand, Laxmipur is highly affected by river bank erosion, leaving many people and properties at risk. Poverty is an everyday phenomenon for this area, where many poverty reduction programmes are taking place. It is interesting to see how MPs are involved in development and we are

interested in looking at the role of MP as a patron and the peoples' experiences of relating to him. By becoming physically displaced, will the poorest retain their access to these political networks, which are so central to their survival?

By contrast, Kamalgonj in Sylhet is situated in eastern part of Bangladesh. It has mix ethnic minorities including a large section of Hindu population. It is interesting for us to see how the MP in this constituency, who was a former Chief Whip and elected for five consecutive years, plays his role and responsibilities in such multi-ethnic and deep forest area. Parbatipur is distinguished by its natural resources, like coal mining, and it is situated in Northern part of Bangladesh under Greater Dinajpur district. It is also famous for local resistance to open pit mining run by multinational mining companies. The MP has been elected for five consecutive years and is now a Minister. In our second phase of fieldwork since January 2015, we have included two more constituencies. One is in near Dhaka (with a woman MP), and other one is in Chittagong.

During interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) in the four sites so far studied, we have found disagreements, contestations and debates whilst asking for constituents' views on poverty reduction, democracy, and public engagement. Different individuals have said different things; some villagers articulated a view that they had benefitted from MPs, and others argued they hadn't. Some suggested that the benefits of poverty reduction programmes of the government, such as food for work, had been appropriated by the ruling party leaders. Many local council public representatives complained that the bureaucrats and the political thugs influence the selection of the targeted people for poverty reduction programmes. We did not see it as our role as researchers to arbitrate between competing claims. What our preliminary findings suggest is that among constituents each group or individuals make their own claims in favor of their area. Similarly, the opposition-backed local union council representatives accuse the ruling MP of not allocating their wheat and many other material benefits.

One of the striking features emerging out of constituency research is that the ruling party women local council representatives complain about their party colleagues for not allocated their portions provided to poor people in their localities. This is because, as they have explained to us, patriarchal values cut across their own political affiliation. This has been seen at the national level too, for example, whilst we were interviewing women activists for putting the Violence Against Women bill into the Parliament. As one activist of a women's organization said, "due to patriarchy, it took a long time to take the bill forward, despite the great support of a female Minister of Women Affairs." Our focus is, therefore, upon how and why the poverty reduction programmes have made inclusion and exclusion of marginalized people in constituency as part of the Safety Net programme, but more importantly upon whether or not they are related to the MPs, where the claims to programme success and pro-poor public engagement are made.

Anthropologist David Mosse discusses exactly this particular kind of 'social relations of success' in aid projects, showing how rather than being an objectively verified state, a project's success is

socially produced, the result of carefully managed representations of reality, using particular formats and forms of knowledge (cf. Gardner, 2012; Mosse, 2005). In his description of the visits of VIPs and other prominent public figures to the Indo-British Rain-Fed Farming Project in the mid 1990s, for example, Mosse describes that '*The village is organised to resemble the project text so as to be pleasingly read by outsiders."* (Mosse, 2005: 165). Mosse focuses on the ways in which project 'success' is constructed. The MPs concern is not so much about poverty eradication; rather, the MP's efforts are driven to celebrate 'development performance' through maintaining relationships. More generally, the MPs seek 'reputation', both in terms of public relations between party followers and ordinary citizens.

We will give some examples. The MP conceives of their visits to their constituency, or their attempts to provide help at his/her Dhaka office, as fruitful public engagement. The nature of this engagement is inherently political, giving rise to constant controversy. As one MP told us that "You cannot satisfy all and it is really a hard task. Some people will always be behind you, nothing to do." Indeed, the perspective of the MPs we met indicates that neither the government nor individual MPs can ever fulfill people's expectations. Despite this, what is noticeable is that the MPs have some very good relations with their home areas; many have established reputations as community leaders and patrons over a long time. Their service to people (*jonogonersheba*) was continually referred to his or her kindness at times of need (e.g. bearing wedding cost, helping educational expenses for the poor and so forth). This image of benevolence is continuously being reproduced via their generosity to their public (*jonogon*). The ordinary public do not need to be linked to the MPs nor to be involved in so-called 'infrastructural development activities'. What they said they required was accountability over development activities, proper utilization of government money, and free and fair elections without external or political interference (this was particularly expressed in Parbatipur). In four constituencies we interviewed people within a wide range of categories and all desired to see representatives who are honest, committed, poor-friendly, and who are beyond political factionalism.

When the beneficiaries raised questions concerning the representation of actual 'public engagement' they also drew our attention to unequal power relations between the MP, political leaders, and other groups. We have collected plenty of examples where we found how 'giving' development benefits to the poor are not beyond political will. The nature of public engagement has become rhetorical, persisting traditional patron-client relations through which safety nets for the vulnerable stands on an unequal footing. Consequently, the close connections between the MPs, constituents, party workers and bureaucrats are altering social hierarchies in society. Some particular party activists receive benefits from MPs in the forms of providing motor bikes, repairing roads and culverts, collecting funds by extortion and tolls from local markets and transport sectors, and claiming money in mitigating local disputes. What is important is to notice that the district level ruling party leaders have become parallel to the administration. They have enormous influence in a number of ways. All misdeeds are justified and legalized if the party members show their loyalty during elections or they resist opposition's movement in more

violent ways. So, 'giving' and 'receiving' are two ways amongst the MPs and party activists that are deeply implicated in local and national levels inequality and difference, inclusion and exclusion. For this reason 'engagement' with the ruling MP and his allies, rather than the opposition, are desired by most ordinary people.

What happens when the local representatives of opposition, or those holding slightly different views to the ruling party, withhold important positions from those who are 'loyal'? The individual interviews suggest that they are ignored or denied. In a number of ways, our local RAs from four constituencies have revealed that the MPs' relationships with constituents who belong to their own party are quite to different to those allied to the opposition party. On one occasion, the MP's visit was specially made in order to sit on a selection board. In addition, he planned to visit a poverty reduction programme for ethnic minorities run by the government in the area. The plan was that the MP would renew his relationship with every local political leader from each union at the very least every two months. This regular visit was thus directly aimed at maintaining relations, justifying his role and responsibility and valuing the constituents with long lasting linkages to their 'home' communities. These visits significantly treated the MP as a benevolent human being who maintains different kind of social relations through: personalized connections, party links between local and national, and formal type of relation with the local administration. This type of visit also provides power to the local leaders who mobilize the constituents to seek all kinds of indulgences from the MP. In return, the MP receives the constituents' recognition and is highly acknowledged by his 'kind heart' for listening to them.

There are some who welcomed the development endeavors taking place in the area, whilst others in the FGDs we attended were vociferously opposed. When we asked who gets the benefits of government run poverty reduction programmes, such as widow allowance, food for work benefits and the like, the answer was straight forward. It all goes to the MP's own people and those who are loyal. "The MP is good and he extends his hands for help"—as many told us. They also informed us that the MP already gave large amounts of money to the constituents from his own bank, and was contributing to the building of a mosque, helping out those displaced by river bank erosion, but also that the fund would have been appropriated by some people. Many women beneficiaries, who had been selected for getting food and allowance as part of Safety Net programme, did not get anything but remained silent.

  As the above implies, the politics of giving and receiving in constituencies is based on patron-client relations. The MP`s role in the form of patronage to the constituents is complex, binding the ordinary citizen via political allies to a 'grid of loyalty'. This is not to say that MPs are portrayed as 'bad' people who are unable to engage the local people in providing a share of development. Rather, the majority of the respondents told us that the MPs are good and do a lot if they approach him or her. We have plenty of evidence that the MPs are undertaking infrastructural development activities, ranging from building village mosques or culverts to paying for school repairing, for which he had been committed. The FGDs and individual

interviews provide evidence about complaints against the MP and his or her allies as well. The personal donations are also seen as government's money and thus are interpreted differently within the community. Some perceive the MP being in danger of accusations of corruption or malpractice. This sense is exacerbated by the involvement of party people in implementing development projects or poverty reduction activities, which is viewed within localities in the constituencies with ambivalence and suspicion.

From this snapshot view of an MP's visit to constituency a clear contradiction emerges. On the one hand, as part of responsibilities, the MP takes care of the constituents in the guise of financial support, the distribution of clothing at ritual occasions, *tadbir,* employment and access to the share or contracts of development programmes and many other 'foods-for-works' progammes that take place in the constituency. Several sources confirm that the MP listens to his/her party members who are loyal and trustworthy. Those household members or individuals who do not belong to his/her party have scarcely any access to those domains and the financial gains that can be made there, so their relationships to the MP are thus unseen. The political affiliation and loyalty act as a marker to be included or excluded. MPs maintain good relations with the destitute people for a long time. The majority of the poorer people have access to this local leader and he or she in turn extends benevolence. Within the moral ideology of Bangladesh, the rich or powerful individuals have a duty to provide material and non-material supports at times of needs. Such relationships and the networks that they involve are often described as 'informal protective mechanisms' (c.f. Sabates-Wheeler and Waite, 2003: 17; Gardner, 2012), or 'informal safety nets' (Kabeer, 2002: 5). Other analysts simply gloss them as 'social capital'[3].

This type of social protection tends to provide a straightforward framework for consideration of pro-poor policy; but it does not pay attention to the complex hierarchic political channels that control and manipulate informal/formal social protection in rural Bangladesh. Indeed, debates centred around both social capital and social protection, have so far largely failed to engage with the classical anthropological discussions of patron-clients' relations which highlight not only 'the cultural and moral dimensions of hierarchy and reciprocity' (Wood, 2005: 13), but also different forms of interests and power that are being exercised through different web of relations, such as different layers of ruling party leaders, subjugated relations of local administrations to the ruling party and so on[4]. An MP's role and responsibility should be understood within this wider power and hierarchy.

Whilst poorer sections of constituencies expect parliamentarians' to reach out to them in the form of material support, their political exclusions by the MPs are perceived as negative, appropriating the benefits of development. This gap between the Parliament assigned

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[3] For a critique of social capital theory with reference to Bangladesh, see Wood, 2005; more generally, see Fine 2001.
[4] For ethnographic examples of patron-clientism, see: Gellner and Waterbury, 1976; Gardner, 1995: 150-159)

developmental goal (e.g. infrastructural development, food-for-work programmes) and exclusionary construction of vulnerable groups/individuals is a central aspect of this ongoing research. The MPs' manipulation of development funds and activities are the latest examples of such public disengagements, all of which have had highly uneven outcomes, leading to growing exclusion and impoverishment for some, whilst for others providing economic benefits and political patronage at the locality. To this extent, the ongoing research focuses on: the manipulations of poverty reduction programmes, patronage, exclusion and 'progress'.

5. Reflections

Since the MP's public engagement involves mobilizing people and winning support, the objective in both parliament and constituencies is also to glorify the ruling regime. It is often justified through narrating the development stories. The stories of public engagement are generally performed in international 'democratic' audiences by mentioning the great achievements of the regime, such as reducing child mortality, empowering poor women, increasing girls' enrollment and so on. For an MP these stories are conveyed at the constituency level too, displaying bill boards along with expensive pictures, narrating via reports and media that their claims for development visually. Mosse (2005) argues that the ethnographic question for the anthropology of development should not be *whether* 'projects' work but *how* they work. Rather, how development interventions are driven by the need to establish and maintain relationships is what is important. Such performances of success are central to the legacy of government, which the MP wants to convey.

Visiting constituency is also a part of their role to show their live presence to the audiences both nationally and locally. A key way is to convey government's achievements is to repetitively communicate: the state of democracy, the international awards received by the head of the state, the recognition of international forum in reducing poverty in order to achieve MDGs and so on. One notices that these achievements are celebrated via visualising through glossy reports, media documentaries, pamphlets, and billboards under respective Ministries on issues such as health, education, development, poverty alleviation, agricultural growth, remittance earning and the like. Technical issues such as digital computerizations are given top priority in achieving desired goals and quantifiable measures, such as training or access to computers, were presented repetitively as symbols of development. The continual refrain is that development has been possible due to the premier's hardworking efforts.

MPs tend to cite 'hard' quantitative data when making claims about successful poverty reduction, in relation to, as examples, increased nutrition, literacy rate, GDP, decreased infant mortality and the like. Within this constructed public engagement, we are looking at the meaning of those achievements by talking, asking, observing different/contested/multiple contradictory

discourses about the nature of participation, democracy, and the role of an MP. Some extracts are sufficed to illustrate the typical claims of MP at the national level:

> "Our priority is on poverty reduction and development issues. As a member of the parliament we are not apart from the parliament. We have commitment to ensure people's happiness. We are moving to achieve vision 2021. We are trying to achieve our election manifesto. Poverty reduction was the first issue in the MDGs. Now through different information technology services job sector is more connected."

> "Our per capita income is 200 Dollars. Our GDP is 6.3. According to IMF report, in comparison to India, Bangladesh has done a lot and in some cases Bangladesh has crossed India's success! Our women are highly empowered. Though the religious conservativeness and social conditions are against women empowerment, we have done a lot. People's purchase capacity is very high. The vision 2021 is a milestone for this government".

This national narrative echoes the local narratives that again claim credit for successes:

> "I have ensured education and health care in the tea estate area. I have established 37 primary schools in the last 5 years and these schools are now government approved schools. Now the children are going to school instead of working in the tea garden."

> "People in my constituency are getting community health care services. In my area there is one community clinic in each ward. There is one doctor and primary medicine there. Sometimes expert doctors visit these clinics. We have connected all clinics to metal roads. Now, pregnant women can connect easily to clinics at times of need."

> "In the village area, people are enjoying different facilities provided by the government. Information Technology such as using Skype, job application which is one of our election pledges. Personally, I have provided a desktop for each school to introduce students to computer operation. I want to introduce multimedia in classes as well. We have tried to keep everything updated. Now everything is in the mobile such as email, newspaper. All these things are the achievement of the PM."

Whilst not assessing these performances as true or false, rather we are interested in how these stories are integral to the rhetoric of public engagement. We are also interested how poverty reduction tales are carefully managed, a fact that has not escaped many locals. We were frustratingly told by several people, for example, that building new culverts, bridges, canal repairing, and road constructions – all development symbols of modernity – are in fact for winning over their political allies, rather than to alleviate poverty at the grass root levels. Many local people also told us that these activities are not for them and they do not have access to them. One farmer in a constituency bluntly asked us, "Are we going to beg money like a beggar

on this wider metal road"? This statement highlights the way that such performances are inherently political in nature. Thus, development is more political that it seems on the surface, while politics is more social than many assume.

Whilst posing the focused formal empirical queries of the MP's role to poverty reduction programmes in relation to public engagement in constituencies, the ongoing fieldwork will also investigate the following issues. These concern the informal roles of MPs with civil society and constituents, the relationship between interest groups at national and local levels, and the micro-politics of inclusion, exclusion and resistance in contexts. Indeed, information about the interface between MP and his/her party workers and local vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities, poorer section of women individuals have the potential to reveal much about the nature of political and economic differentiation, indicating how inequality and impoverishment are produced in 'political factionalism' in ways that reach beyond conventional understandings of 'the nature of public engagement' in poverty reduction on 'the grass-roots'.

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