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**Parliament, Public Engagement and Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh and  
Ethiopia: some notes on management and methodology**

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**Introduction**

This three year collaborative research project (2014-2017, ESRC/DFID-funded) is posing the question, what is the relationship between Parliament and the public when they are aiming for poverty reduction? Responding to two national contexts of progress in poverty reduction but disillusionment with democracy, we question the assumptions made about the links between democracy and poverty reduction. It has been taken for granted by many policy-makers and scholars under the influence of Amartya Sen that good governance is required for effective poverty reduction (Sen 1999, DFID 2004). So a key to progress in the long-term would include a strong Parliament with effective links to its citizens. If that is so, then how is it that in both Ethiopia and Bangladesh poverty has been significantly reduced even though opposition is absent from Parliament and scrutiny remains weak? On the other hand, the increasing turbulence and tension in Bangladesh and Ethiopia respectively, may indicate that failing to satisfy citizens' expectations of democracy causes other societal problems. This raises some challenging questions. What are the risks of weak governance and what might be the indicators of strong governance in these two countries? Who decides, what are the differences of opinion and what are the political concerns and expectations of parliamentarians, citizens and others? Our research falls within the purview of these broad governance questions and while it is beyond our scope to address them all directly, we will focus on how relationships between Parliamentarians and both civil society and constituents as perceived from various viewpoints within turbulent political climates.

This multi-disciplinary research involves a coalition of political scientists, public policy / administration scholars, and anthropologists exploring the relationship between parliament, parliamentarians and individuals and groups within the public. Bringing together scholars from research worlds that often remain separate – development studies and scholarship on politics – we are responding to ESRC/DFID's interest in supporting

innovative and multi-disciplinary approaches to research. While our findings may be of interest to scholars and policy-makers concerned with all nations experiencing actual or potential political turbulence, we are as interested in the differences between our two cases as the similarities. We are posing the overarching research questions: How do MPs interact with different stakeholders? What roles do they play in poverty reduction and the promotion of equality? What do they, and others, recommend for the future to strengthen democracy: how and why? In this paper we will explain how this two-country research programme is being managed, and the methods designed by the team, so as to allow both comparability as well as differences to emerge between the two countries.

To achieve research rigour and innovation, we are building on the insights of past research that take multiple views seriously. First, research on Parliament in Africa and Asia is beginning to move beyond narrow confines as development scholars take political institutions more seriously as objects of study and political scientists consider development issues. Studies of the everyday power relations, practices and meaning of national democracy, and how it relates to development, have been extremely rare within studies of development. Many parliamentary reform initiatives have tended to consider powers, structures or procedures. World Bank and UN programmes to strengthen parliaments have had limited success (Ahmed 2011, Nijzink 2007, and Rahmato and Ayenew 2005) and the extent that donors should interfere with national governance is contentious (Kroon and Stapenhurst 2008, DFID 2004: 26). Although donor agencies encourage aid-receiving countries to strengthen democracy and tackle gender inequality – and even increasingly inequalities based on age, ethnicity, caste, or disability – governance reform often fails to take account of the imperatives facing MPs as constituency and party representatives (Power 2011). From the viewpoint of donors, they meet the resistance of elites when encouraging reform. It is clear that elite perspectives have to be explored.

Secondly, political scientists have long recognised that the under-representation of certain groups in parliament impedes development (Young 1990), even if in varying ways in different countries (Goertz and Hashim 2003). But better numerical representation of women in parliament does not automatically translate into feminist agendas (Campbell et al 2010). Male allies, elite support and links between women and minority parliamentarians and outside groups are vital for advancing their multiple and diverse interests (Nazneen and Mahmud 2012: 13). To understand what is going on within representative democracy, it is clear that we have to look beyond formal powers, structures and procedures within institutions and study the relationships between parliamentarians and between them and civil society and citizens.

Thirdly, to research democracy in a way that goes beyond ideals and claims, and to address why politicians and political institutions operate in the way that they do, the latest insights from political anthropology offer a fruitful avenue of enquiry (Abélès 2006, Crewe 2015). Ethnographies have greatly enhanced our understanding of how the state, especially government and bureaucrats, are embedded in society (Amarasuriya 2010: 33, Lewis 2004, and Crewe and Axelby 2012: 58-60). Olivier de Sardan's research into corruption challenges the idea of the state as a monolithic entity and probes everyday

practices and multiple voices to make the case against reform that hinges on top-down donor conditionality (2009). Participatory democracy initiatives have often been described as failures because they ignored pronounced structural power hierarchies in society and diverse cultural contexts (Mosse 2010). So our third source of theoretical inspiration is the anthropology of governance and democracy.

## **Research aims**

Through an in-depth and multi-disciplinary study of Bangladeshi and Ethiopian MPs, we will enquire into what makes parliamentarians effective in engaging with the public when trying to reach social and economic development goals from the perspective of different protagonists. In this comparative research we will specifically explore the relationship between Parliament as embedded in society, diverse parliamentarians, the multiple voices of the public and CSOs representing them and their ideas about their respective roles in poverty reduction. We have selected two populous low-income countries, with high levels of both poverty and aid, histories of conflict, relatively new democracies (Bangladesh since 1972 but with gaps, Ethiopia since 1995), first-past-the-post systems, quotas for women, and weak or non-existent oppositions within their parliaments. Both countries make claims about huge progress on poverty reduction despite democratic deficits. At the same time, our case studies will provide evidence of the danger of blueprints because the relationship between Parliament and public engagement is different in each place. In Bangladesh MPs are extremely active in their constituencies while backbenchers play a limited role in parliamentary scrutiny, and in Ethiopia national MPs rarely connect with their local-level constituencies (whereas regional level politicians do) although legislation is more thoroughly scrutinised.

Our overall goal is to explore how Parliament and parliamentarians engage with the public when aiming for poverty reduction. Five objectives are enabling us to attain our goal:

1. *Exploring 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:
  - the parliamentary process of scrutinising policy-making, budgets and legislation that aims to reduce poverty; – How much does public opinion, including that of CSOs and poor people, influence the development of new policies, budgets and legislation, if at all? What role is played by (i) opposition parties and (ii) poor women, men and young people, (iii) NGOs and social movements, (iv) the private sector, (v) the media? Who dominates and who is excluded in these processes? Does engagement with marginalised groups – women, elderly, ethnic/religious minorities, Dalits, young, disabled – contribute to pro-poor budgets, policies and laws and according to who? How could it be improved from different perspectives?

- representing constituents and distribution of funding in constituencies; – How do parliamentarians consult with, help and respond to different groups of poorer and marginalised constituents? How does the relationship between MPs and their constituents vary between parliamentarians and how much is it changing? How does representation by national politicians relate to patronage networks, development goals and aid funding? To what extent do the rural poor have access to patrons, such as MPs, and how are they disrupted by other powerful actors, including those in the private sector (Gardner, Ahmed, Bashir and Rana 2011)? How does representation affect national MPs' relationships with local politicians and government bureaucrats? How can the effectiveness of parliamentarians in representing different groups constituents (for instance, based on income, gender, age, ethnicity, religion, caste) be measured and who decides?
2. *To assess from the **perspectives** of various stakeholders the role of parliament and parliamentarians in poverty reduction*: How do different MPs, and others, conceive of the role of MPs in challenging poverty and inequality? What moral judgements do they make about each other? Parliament is made up of various components and groups of MPs that relate in different ways in different countries. According to MPs in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, how important are the following to a well-functioning democracy and how can they be measured: (a) the opposition in parliament, (b) public consultations, (c) distinct political parties, (d) a thriving civil society and (e) a parliament that is representative of the public, including those in poverty. For example, given that women MPs make up less than 28% in Ethiopia (since 2010) and 20% in Bangladesh (since 2008), but over-represented within those facing poverty, are the interests of the poor neglected partly due to this, according to different MPs? Does the long-standing female leadership in Bangladesh strengthen the commitment to gender equality? What is the political will for protecting the status quo versus reform towards more pro-poor public engagement and why?
  3. *To undertake an **analysis of relationships** between MPs and members of the public involved in poverty reduction initiatives within Bangladesh and Ethiopia*: The desk-based mapping exercise will review existing data about how MPs engage with government, opposition, political parties, civil society (members of the public, NGOs, schools, students, the media, social movements), private sector and other MPs within poverty reduction initiatives. This review will collate existing research and project findings on the nature and impact of the interaction and flow of resources between parliament/parliamentarians and others and how relationships are embedded in existing and changing social relations. How are existing power hierarchies and patronage networks maintained or challenged, including those based on gender, income and ethnicity? What new forms of social relations are being created? What are the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion?
  4. *To facilitate the development of **researchers' capacity** in three countries to measure parliamentary effectiveness*. Building up capacity within civil society to explore questions of parliament/MP's public engagement is one component in strengthening

their effectiveness. This project will provide opportunities for the three linked research sub-teams in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and the UK to become experts in this topic and to work with other scholars/governance specialists to broaden their understanding of public engagement.

5. To ***share the findings*** and recommendations about parliamentary effectiveness with stakeholders in South Asia, Eastern Africa and the UK. We will collate findings and agree recommendations about strengthening democracy for poverty reduction from different perspectives. We will suggest a range of quantitative and qualitative processes and methods for analysing the effectiveness of parliamentarians and parliament in public engagement, including stakeholder recommendations on appropriate governance policy that DFID (and other donors) might adopt in countries with weak parliaments.

While our research aims and objectives have remained approximately constant, we have adjusted our methodology and approaches as a consequence of significant changes in both countries. In Bangladesh the January 2014 elections were boycotted by the main opposition party, leaving the Parliament entirely composed of ruling coalition party MPs. The country has faced periods of protest and violence since then. In May 2015 the ruling party won all the seats in Ethiopia. Fear of terrorism, and distrust between different organisations and groups of actors within the formal and informal political worlds, have reached new levels in both countries. Both governments face even more vigorous criticism for denial of human rights, free and fair elections and constraining civil society and the media in the last year as well as pressure from donor governments to broaden political space and foster democracy.

On a more positive note, Bangladesh continues to have a vibrant civil society and relatively free press, while Ethiopia's political freedoms have been more curtailed but independent scrutiny is still offered by leading organisations (such as Forum for Social Studies, Consortium of Christian Relief and Development Association, the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences, and the Ethiopian Economic Association). This raises questions about the extent to which we can generalise from case studies about the past or the present when the political situation is in constant flux and the future is so uncertain.

### **Methodology: innovating in challenging environments**

This research is a collaboration between SOAS, Hansard Society and Forum for Social Studies with researchers in Ethiopia and Bangladesh. SOAS/Hansard Society are co-ordinating the project with the intention of supporting the development of research capacity in the two countries. Our assumption is that every strong democracy requires academic scrutiny by its own scholars. Scholars from elsewhere can bring constructively challenging perspectives, and useful findings for comparative theorizing, but only long-term residents can offer the enduring commitment to a place required for thorough investigation. This programme had the methodological advantage of employing national researchers in both countries. In Bangladesh two senior researchers lead the project –

Professor Nizam Ahmed (Public Administration) and Professor Zahir Ahmed (Anthropology) – with a split in emphasis of responsibility whereby the former focused on Parliament and the latter on constituencies. They have employed three junior researchers, and six local level volunteer researchers, to assist in the fieldwork. In Ethiopia the senior researcher, Dr Meheret Ayenew (Public Policy), has employed two junior researchers to assist him in undertaking fieldwork.

In March 2014, month two of the project, we held a workshop in Dhaka with the Principal Investigator (Emma Crewe), Hansard Society researcher (Matt Korris) and the three senior colleagues from Bangladesh and Ethiopia as listed above. We jointly planned the programme in detail agreeing a research proposal including the mix of mainly qualitative methods we would use to tackle each research objective. In addition to interviews with MPs, civil society and citizens, we planned focus group discussions, observation of debates and meetings, and four case studies. The case studies would allow us to find out in greater depth about the nature of relationships between MPs and others and reconstruct historical narrative about this interaction. Rather than merely relying on MPs' abstract claims about the role of Parliament, and to achieve some comparability between the countries, we decided upon various case studies with at least some overlap: six constituencies from different parts of each country, one budget, one policy and one law.

By June 2015 we had recruited the junior researchers in each country – at least one woman and one man in each – to assist with the fieldwork. We created some documents to ensure consistency – a checklist for civil society interviews, a checklist for MP interviews, a checklist for focus group discussions and a template for recording fieldnotes – and created a Dropbox folder for all the project documents. To ensure that the plans were clear, and progress could be reviewed, we agreed an action plan. We discussed progress against this plan regularly in Skype calls as a whole team where possible or in smaller groups. The UK researchers have visited Bangladesh twice and Ethiopia once to discuss progress and methodological challenges and develop a better understanding of some of the findings.

While huge progress has been made in holding interviews and focus groups discussions in Parliament and constituencies, three main challenges have caused some delays. In Bangladesh the political protests between January and April 2015 made it difficult to travel at all. For this reason we employed local researchers to collect information in their own localities, mostly trained in social research and in many cases in social anthropological research. In Ethiopia the General Election (May 2015) interrupted fieldwork. In both places it can be difficult to secure interviews with MPs who have little to gain from meeting with scholars of Parliament. The UK researchers have opened doors to some extent during visits, particularly in Bangladesh, as MPs seem interested in meeting foreign visitors so respond positively when British scholars make requests for interviews. On the other hand, the UK researchers' inability to read Bangla and Amharic means that fieldnotes have to be translated, which is costly in terms of time and funds.

Subsequently we have also decided to interview diaspora Bangladeshi and Ethiopians in the UK to elicit their views on the development of democracy in their countries of origin and see whether they have any influence on politics there. This element of the research will take place between September 2015 and January 2016.

<b>Research target for January 2016</b>	<b>Progress against target in June 2015</b>	
	<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>Ethiopia</b>
Literature reviews	Done	On-going
35-40 interviews with MPs	5 women, 20 men	9 women 7 men
Group discussion with MPs		1 (all women)
Interviews with civil society representatives	9	6
Meetings with donor agency representatives	5	3
Case study budget	On-going: 2015	On-going: 2015
Case study policy	On-going: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper	On-going: social protection
Case study law	On-going: Domestic Violence Act 2010	On-going: Charities and Societies Proclamation Act 2006
Case study 6 constituencies including focus group discussions with constituents and local government	On-going: 5 constituencies	On-going: 3 constituencies

In terms of outputs so far the team of researchers have produced:

- a. a press release by SOAS, <https://www.soas.ac.uk/news/newsitem92305.html>, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2015, various newspaper articles in Bangladesh, alerted people to the research (tweets, emails, facebook) and blogs on the Hansard monthly newsletter (readership of several 1000s)
- b. A draft journal article on ‘Interpreting texts and conversations in the ethnographic study of parliament’, by Emma Crewe, to be published in 2016

We plan the following:

- a. Various conference papers in all three countries explaining methods and findings including this panel at Wroxton College, July 2015
- b. A journal article about the methodology of running an international coalition and undertaking multi-disciplinary research in two countries

- c. At least three journal articles about the findings, one by the Ethiopian team and one by the Bangladesh team, and one by the whole research team
- d. Working paper: ‘Good Research Guide’ explaining the methods for the research in more detail, which might be used by other researchers to plan similar initiatives (to be published on the Hansard Society website)
- e. An edited volume on parliament, public engagement and poverty reduction with contributions from all the researchers in the core team, selected Advisory Panel members and other scholars
- f. A proposal for a BBC World Service radio programme about parliament, public engagement and poverty reduction in the two countries
- g. A series of workshops in each country, as well as meetings in the UK Parliament and Whitehall with parliamentarians, the House of Commons overseas office, parliamentary strengthening and governance experts and DFID/FCO, to explain and discuss findings

#### **4. Reflections on management and method**

##### **Research as a social process**

When running a coalition, good relationships within the research team are essential for achieving good quality research. An important aspect of developing and maintaining collegiate relationships is keeping up a continual channel of communication in part to discuss different approaches and assumptions directly or talk through challenges. When SOAS delayed the issuing of contracts, or political turbulence caused problems in Dhaka, keeping in regular contact made it possible to work around the difficulties. Regular team meetings on Skype were more difficult than anticipated, most often due to internet interruptions in Addis Ababa, but meeting face-to-face at the start of the project enabled a sense of coherence.

It was stressed from the beginning that the ownership of this research is collective even if the responsibility for making it happen rests with the PI and CI. When planning this research the UK researchers put the development of all researchers’ capacity as one of the aims, against which we will be reporting progress to the donor, to ensure that the PI/CI did not dominate decision-making or claim more recognition and the whole team took the interests of all researchers into account including the more junior ones. For example, the PI and CI proposed that publications would be jointly planned and that they would not use the data on Bangladesh or Ethiopia themselves to publish anything on their own. Every publication about the country research will be primarily authored by national researchers, although the PI and/or CI may be added if they make a significant contribution. Thus, aside from the ethical reasons for this approach of giving credit according to contribution rather than position on the project, it was also a way of creating incentives to ensure that all researchers aspired for high quality, strong rigour and intense productivity.



Ethics within this research is seen more widely as a socio-political process rather than narrow compliance with rules. We have the same rules as most qualitative social researchers. As far as possible we inform all participants about the aims, purpose and likely outputs of the research when asking if they are prepared to take part. We protect all information with special care, as much of it is political sensitive. Any attributed quotes will only be put in the public domain with the consent of the source. But the implementation of rules of consent can be difficult in qualitative research in practice and especially so when the research is directly concerned with political elites. The Association of Social Anthropologists ethical guidelines explain that in emergent social research getting written consent from all participants in your project, a requirement for some university ethics committees, can be impossible. You do not usually know whom you might encounter. When observing politicians in debate in the Chamber of Parliament, or when canvassing on the doorstep, you don't necessarily have the opportunity to seek even verbal consent from everyone you watch or even meet. So a strong ethics requires an on-going process of reflection and negotiation between researchers and informants.

A more complex aspect of ethics entails researchers' partiality. Although it is only possible to research and write from one's own perspective, informed as it is by one's own history, place in society and ideological assumptions, ethnographers try to keep a spirit of openness to the logic, rationality and values in the minds and cultures of others. As Gledhill puts it, examining

*'social realities in a cross-cultural frame of reference anthropology makes a significant theoretical contribution as a social science. In striving to transcend a view of the world based solely on the premises of European culture and history, anthropologists are encouraged to look beneath the world of appearances and taken-for-granted assumptions about social life in general' (1994: 7).*

When researchers rush to judge the morality of their informants, their insight into what is going on tends to be clouded by their political intentions. However, there comes a point – but only if reached gradually with care and intellectual rigour, after considering multiple perspectives – when what researchers find beneath the world of appearances deserves critical scrutiny. Social researchers have found that even people intending to achieve public good – aid workers, politicians, charity volunteers – can inadvertently create poverty or increase inequalities. When drawing conclusions anthropologists and other social researchers have tended to take sides with the marginalized, dispossessed and victims of subordination. This means that when moral judgments are made, it is the perspective of elites, and the organisations that they control, that receive less fulsome attention and sympathy in our analysis. Since in our democratic age power tends to be concentrated in organisations rather than individuals, our criticism tends to be directed at legally constituted entities. Social researchers have offered critical theories in the past about how aid agencies marginalize indigenous knowledge, corporate organisations harm the environment and increase the gap between rich and poor, and state planning creates havoc with people's lives, usually looking at the history of their impact from the perspective of those at the receiving end (Crewe and Axelby 2013). So what happens to ethics and critical theory when the elites and their organisations are at the centre of the

research, as they are in ours? Taking sides becomes far less straightforward. It may be that we need a different ethical process to the conventional rule-bound compliance that many universities demand. Ethics in complex social research implies that the researchers have to be (a) reflexive not only about their own history and influence, but about the relationships they are engaged in and, (b) able to theorise critically on the basis of what they find without rushing to judge on the basis of moral preconceptions.

Reflexive research requires an emergent approach. In this project such emergence has involved trial and error and working out our assumptions about Parliament, democracy, and poverty reduction, what questions we were interesting in, how we were going to pursue an inquiry into those questions, making sense of what we found and what people say, conceal or don't say, reviewing our assumptions, seeing what new questions we were interested in and so on. One implication of this is that not only will each study of Parliament be different, because each is embedded in different cultures, politics and time, but the study of the same Parliament will contain variations within it because of the identity of the researcher.

It is easiest to show how own history and identity influenced the research by giving an example. During an interview with women MPs in one of our countries, four researchers went into the interview: the PI (a white woman), a white man, a black or Asian man researcher and a black or Asian woman.<sup>1</sup> By prior agreement we agreed to stay in the interviews until the last few minutes when the two men would leave to see if this influenced how the women MPs spoke to us. While all the researchers were present, the MPs were determined to stress the strength of their party and government and their successful efforts at promoting gender equality. The British PI made several comments to stress that their intention was not to advise about strengthening Parliament, responding to a clear hostility toward foreign interference in politics. When the two male researchers left, one of the women MPs asked about the experience of British women MPs. The PI gave some examples of her view: British women parliamentarians thrive in the House of Lords, are severely under-represented in the Commons and portrayed in disparaging ways in the media.

Once it was clear that there was no pretence of British superiority, the conversation changed abruptly. They became far more candid about the hostility of some male MPs, quoted as typically saying: “Why do you always cry? The constitution already reflects the interests of all. Women's issue are already discussed so do not talk always about women”. Perhaps reluctant to show weakness in front of men, one of them tellingly said when asked what it was like being a woman MP: “When a woman gets up to speak in the Parliament she is always fearful, thinking ‘can I do this?’ whereas a man never worries.” Whether this was true or not – perhaps men are just as nervous but conceal it well – it was clear that this would not have been said in front of the men, and especially the senior black or Asian man. He happened to have taught one of the MPs at university so they were especially respectful to him. So gender, race / nationality and a history of hierarchy all played a part in shaping this encounter. This influence does not make the observations

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<sup>1</sup> We are using the vague term ‘black or Asian’ to disguise which country we are writing about.

made during this encounter, or the interpretations made afterwards, less reliable than a neutral encounter: there is no such thing as a neutral meeting uninfluenced by people's history, emotions and identity. As long as the researchers reflect on how their research is produced by relationships and assumptions, and record this in as much detail as possible in their fieldnotes and write it into their account, then rigour is more likely to be achieved.

### **Patterns: gaps, connections and contradictions**

Good research achieves its rigour and depth partly through its emphasis on gaps, connections and contradictions. To get beneath the surface, and make sense of multiple views, a researcher has to continually ask, “why is she saying that?”, because like anyone else politicians' statements are produced by their specific social context and a mix of cultural values, pressures, ideologies, norms, emotions, and aspirations. As well as asking about people's idealised versions about what they were supposed to do, or probing their representations of themselves, we are observing their everyday practices and interaction. This kind of open-ended inquiry means that we can find out what we perceive to be of socio-political significance to their informants and can then more easily analyse why patterns such as gaps, connections and contradictions exist, persist or change. It is in the endless analysis of similarities and differences between different aspects of social worlds that patterns emerge.

The two sites present challenges for methodology that reveal much about the unstable and divided political climate of the two countries. In both cases researchers found discussions with constituents were strongly influenced by who set them up and who was present. In Bangladesh the distrust of strangers can be so strong that we hired local researchers to act as gatekeepers and set up discussions and reassure community members that the visiting scholars from the capital were independent of political parties and could be trusted. In Ethiopia meetings arranged by local government created confusion in the minds of constituents about the purpose of the discussions. When arranged by local civil society organisations the encounters were perceived as more neutral and constituents spoke more freely. The political situation has made us more cautious about holding formal, high profiles meetings about the research in both countries.

Gaps often appear between what people say about their work and what they actually do. One of the MPs interviewed by researchers in a constituency in one of our sites claimed that he was a regular visitor and would be staying during that visit for several days. However, it was clear from the housing situation that he was rarely there. Furthermore, a local party functionary later suggested he spent less time there than he had told us, and according to the news he left the day after the interview with him despite the assurances that he would remain for several days. There are always gaps between the rhetoric promoted by social actors and organisations and the practice of fulfilling promises – whether political parties, charities or governments. Contradictions arise in democratic politics in part out of the inevitable conflicts between people – their divergent interests, preferences and ideas – so any politician or political organisation will face dilemmas

when trying to win support and if claiming to represent whole diverse communities or groups.

These everyday realities are understood as emerging in a particular time and place – in our case in Bangladesh and Ethiopia 2014-2017. Although both countries share an almost total absence of official opposition parties in Parliament, the contrast between them is as striking. Two clear patterns are emerging. First, the relationship between Parliament and civil society in Bangladesh ranges from minimal – as seen in the opportunities for civil society to influence the Poverty Reduction Strategy Process and Budgets – to intensive with the example of their impact on the Domestic Violence Act (2010). In Ethiopia there is far less reliance on CSOs to deliver services and the levels of hostility between Parliament and civil society is higher. Secondly, the way MPs relate to their constituents may vary within each country but creates clear patterns of difference when you take a comparative view as well. In Bangladesh not only are visits from MPs far more regular than they are in Ethiopia, but they are increasingly performing roles as non-professional shamans but in the economic and political realm rather than the religious one of professional shamans. As MPs dispense assistance and patronage in the context of a society deeply divided by the two main parties, Awami League and BNP, they are entrenching or even creating new social hierarchies within constituencies. Ethiopia is unusual in witnessing surprisingly little interaction between constituents and their representatives, a situation resented by many in the constituency. Although there are occasional formal meetings, the constituents we interviewed had not had any opportunities for discussion with their MPs – a pattern in contrast to most democratic political systems in the world.

As the research develops, and we analyse the enduring patterns, contradictions and changes within each country as well as the similarities and differences between the two sites, we hope to draw some conclusions that may offer implications, but not necessarily prescriptions, for all aid-receiving countries. We would especially value comments and questions at this stage in the research that assist us in improving the rigour, credibility and usefulness of our findings.

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