



DEMOCRACY, GOVERNANCE AND WELLBEING
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“Politics determines how resources are used and politics are made. And politics determines who benefits. In short, good governance is about good politics”. With this statement, the recent DFID White paper on *Making Governance Work for the Poor* affirms the importance of effective political systems capable of responding to the needs of the poor. Although there is now a strong consensus that good governance is a core development value, the task of implementing sustainable governance changes has proved to be difficult. Insights from WeD research in Bangladesh highlight an important aspect that is overlooked in governance considerations yet is central to the way politics works and develops. The research found that formal local systems of governance and their operations were underpinned by more informal processes in which political activists and their supporting networks exercised an unusual level of influence. The implication of our findings is that we need to focus more on these informal relationships, practices and actors if we are to promote effective governance change.

Bangladesh's Governance Trajectory – Causes for Optimism.

The removal of President Ershad in 1990 following a sustained mass movement led by the two main political parties inaugurated an era in which Bangladesh made some remarkable progress in terms of establishing a stable democracy. In January 2007, the country will celebrate its fourth parliamentary elections since 1991. The three preceding elections were all held under caretaker governments, and each election resulted in a change of government. Voter turnout was high and all the elections were judged to be free and fair. Successive governments also introduced important administrative changes aimed at promoting a more inclusive political culture. Currently there are four levels of elected government bodies (village, Union, Thana and District), which are entrusted with a wide range of responsibilities related to the overall wellbeing of the population. Finally, since 1990 there has been an exponential growth in the number of NGOs and other civil society organizations, many of which have assumed important roles in public life.

Governance and the Politics of Wellbeing

Findings from our research into the politics of wellbeing point to important institutional effects that derive from two converging processes: the organised expansion of political parties at lower levels of society, and the emergence of *mastaans* or musclemen as a key factor of political life. Since the early 1990s the main political parties have actively sought to extend their reach into society. One of the ways they have managed to accomplish this was to patronise different interest-based organisations (trade unions, farmers' cooperatives, youth and women's groups and so forth) within communities, and to use them to recruit new members. We found high levels of interaction both vertically and horizontally between these various organisations. In this way, party activists in villages are coordinated by union, thana and district leaders with the latter normally having direct relations with the main constituency politician. We also found that these networks of party activists played an increasingly important role in the organisation of everyday life in communities, and in producing new community leaders. They also exerted considerable influence on the local elected government bodies responsible for a range of wellbeing related issues including the distribution of relief, the delivery of key public services, the implementation of development projects and the allocation of construction contracts. In seeking access to these benefits or goods, people reported that

the support of party activists was more important than that of elected officials. And indeed elected officials complained that political party networks had become the last word in local government decisions. The

activities of local party networks reflect the strong confrontational political culture that is evident at the national level and which encourages a winner-takes-all style of governance. As a consequence it is the network linked to the party in power or the MP in office that is in the position to impose its authority. For citizens therefore, having the right political affiliation or loyalty can significantly strengthen entitlement claims or increase the chance of wellbeing needs being met.

These evolving political arrangements have created opportunities for different groups to organise and mobilise. One of the salient groups to emerge is that of *mastaans*, a term that in Bangladesh is normally associated with organised criminals. Our research highlights two important characteristics of *mastaans* that impinge on the way the local political system functions. First, there is considerable overlap and interaction between *mastaans* and local party leaders. This implies that *mastaan* organisations can be linked to the highest levels of state organisation. Political activists deploy *mastaans* in order to capture or retain power within their constituencies. *Mastaans* use the relationship to promote their own political careers, or protect and extend their different rackets. Second, the interaction between *mastaans* and political leaders allows the former to directly capture important aspects of the state and governance. For example we found that many recipients of government relief first asked local *mastaans* to intervene on their behalf. In other cases we found that *mastaans* were approached to resolve issues such as access to health and education services, dealings with law enforcement and judicial systems, and the protection of business interests.

Our research therefore identifies an unusual governance arrangement in which party political networks and groups of *mastaans* have considerable control over wellbeing related goods and services, the responsibility of which lies with formal institutions managed by elected leaders. Relationships between these different actors are highly organised, often informal, and in some cases supported by the use or threat of violence. While the institutional effects of this on poor people's livelihoods vary, this form of politics seems structurally versed to satisfy private or partisan as opposed to common interests.

Implications and Challenges

- It is now accepted that global relations (including those related to development aid) influence how state-society relations evolve. How then do we know that our interventions do not negatively affect the governance trajectories of the countries where we work? To answer this would require political impact assessments of all our interventions and assistance.
- Our research highlights the connections that exist between different political actors operating at various levels of society. The implication of this is that we need to move away from governance interventions that deal with political actors or institutions (e.g. parliamentarians) in isolation from their wider networks or chains of command.
- Local context matters! For us this refers to the deeply embedded nature of formal political systems. From a governance perspective, this invites us to focus more on the relationships and actions, often informal and sometimes shadowy, which underpin formal political organisations and processes – a governance approach that goes beyond the provision of material resources and technical solutions.
- The embedded nature of political systems does not lead necessarily to inertia or pessimism. A single political system can generate a range of institutional arrangements. However some arrangements are better placed to respond to the needs of the poor. For effective governance, the challenge is to identify and support the right kind of political arrangement.