

# Wellbeing and the Rotten Foundations of a Development Success

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## Key Points

- Bangladesh has reached a point of conflict and political breakdown, yet conventional indicators mark it out as a development success.
- Researching wellbeing in Bangladesh exposes the rotten foundations of a development success.
- Governance analysts and advisors must carry out reality checks to understand how governance is changing and how this affects the ability of poorer people to pursue and realistically achieve wellbeing.

In many respects, Bangladesh can be considered a development success. But what has this success meant for the wellbeing of its poorer men, women and children?

Over recent years Bangladesh has enjoyed a period of good economic growth (with GDP growth averaging over 5% per annum since 1990). This has been fuelled by strong foreign investment, high rates of exports and a resurgent agricultural sector. At the same time, official statistics show that the incidence of poverty has steadily declined and good progress has been made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

According to these indicators, this has been a golden time for Bangladesh and the success could generate a solid foundation for future development. But in 2007, in the run up to new parliamentary elections, the country was dragged to the brink of chaos and anarchy. Political rivals were locked in street battles that brought everyday life to a standstill and left hundreds dead or injured. On January 11th 2007, the President declared a state of emergency and set up an army-backed caretaker government. The new government cancelled the elections, banned all political activities and launched a crackdown on corruption.

Given that the international community has invested massively in 'good governance' in Bangladesh over the

last twenty years, and given the country's success in terms of conventional development indicators, how are we to understand this social and political conflict and collapse? The fact that the country reached such a point of conflict and political breakdown is an evident development failure.

The current situation is an indication of the failure of the current, conventional development paradigm to properly take account of a broader range of development concerns. The research that was conducted in Bangladesh under the wellbeing programme offers important understandings of the rotten foundations of this development success. It provides important evidence on how the 'real' conditions of governance actually affect men, women and children. For many people, the result has been worsening conditions for wellbeing and increased alienation, fear and insecurity.

This briefing paper is a corrective for contemporary governance analysts and advisors: it argues that it is necessary to carry out reality checks that give us insights into how the dynamics of governance are changing and are affecting the ability of people, and poorer people in particular, to pursue and realistically achieve wellbeing. Such a view of the foundations of governance must not be displaced by the conventional but ultimately more limited focus on ideal and over-simplified models of governance.

## Governance and the Politicised Management of Competing Interests

The achievements in economic growth, poverty reduction and social development helped push Bangladesh in 2003 into the UNDP league of 'medium human development countries'. This success has been matched by significant progress in the political life of the country. Since the re-introduction of democracy in 1990, Bangladesh has held three parliamentary elections organised under caretaker governments, and recording very high voter participation. All three elections resulted in a transition of power from one party to another, and this was managed peacefully. Successive governments have introduced important administrative changes aimed at promoting a more inclusive political culture. Currently there are four levels of elected government (village, Union, Thana and District), which are entrusted with a wide range of development and welfare responsibilities. Finally, Bangladesh has a vibrant civil society sector and one of the largest NGO communities in the world today, all of which have assumed important roles in public life.

Since 1990, the main political parties have actively sought to increase their support base by extending their presence to the grassroots of rural and urban communities. One of the ways they have managed to accomplish this has been to establish party-affiliated interest-based organisations such as trade unions, farmers' cooperatives, youth and women's groups among communities, and to use these to recruit new members. The level of interaction between these various organisations is high, and coordinated by local party representatives who have direct relations with the main constituency politician. In our research we found that, despite not having formal roles in local government, party leaders have increasingly exerted considerable influence on decisions related to key activities including the distribution of relief (see Box 1), the delivery of key public services, the implementation of development projects and

the allocation of construction contracts. In seeking access to these public benefits or goods, people reported that the support of party activists was more important than that of those elected to carry out local government responsibilities. Elected officials of local government also acknowledged the influence of political party leaders pointing out that their connections with national politicians made them almost untouchable and unaccountable.

Politics in Bengali literally translates as '*rajniti*', i.e. the rule or custom of the king. Today it is the rule or custom of the network linked to the party in power or the MP in office that imposes itself locally. The result is a winner-takes-all style of governance. For citizens, therefore, having the correct political affiliation or connection significantly strengthens entitlement claims or increases the chance of wellbeing needs being met. Equally for those with the wrong political connections, the possibility of exclusion is high. As a local community leader told WeD researchers, "in our country *rajniti* means one person has all the power. It will always be that way here. *Rajniti* has nothing to do with ordinary people". This reality then shapes both what people can aspire to in terms of wellbeing and also the way that they invest their already scarce resources in a strategy to achieve wellbeing.

## Governance and the Politics of Violence

In Bengali the term *mastaan* refers to a person involved in organised crime and with the criminal underworld. *Mastaans* are feared because of their use of violence and intimidation in pursuit of their own interests. While researching the dynamics of people's access to government services, the term *mastaan* frequently came up in interviews. It became clear that *mastaans* were highly organised in villages and were key figures in the way political life was organised in ways that were not evident 10 or 15 years ago. We found considerable overlap and interaction between *mastaans* and local party leaders. Thus political activists deployed *mastaans* in order to capture or retain control over populations in their constituencies.

*Mastaans* on the other hand used the relationship to the political parties to promote their own political careers, or protect and extend their different 'enterprises'. This relationship effectively allowed *mastaans* to manipulate important aspects of the state and governance (Box 2). For example we found that many recipients of SKSP relief (see Box 1) had asked local *mastaans* to approach the party representatives on their behalf. However, the support of *mastaans* was also sought to deal with everyday events such as accessing health and education services, dealing with law enforcement and judicial systems, and protecting business interests.

## Alienation, Exclusion and Fatalism

In seeking to improve their lives, poor people have to negotiate their way through the political terrain described above on a daily basis. This is the terrain of 'real' governance, a terrain that is as harsh as it is uncertain. While some poor people can benefit from the system, they do so on terms that they know ultimately will reinforce their dependence on those helping them. This is because the political terrain is organised to serve private or partisan interests, and to distribute favours

### Box 1. Sholpomulle Khaddo Sorboraho Prokolpo (2005-2006)

The Sholpomulle Khaddo Sorboraho Prokolpo (SKSP) is a national relief programme initiated by the Government and implemented through the Union Parishads (UP). The aim of the programme is to distribute rice at a subsidised rate among the poorest households. The Union SKSP Committee, comprising mostly of locally elected officials, is responsible for identifying beneficiaries.

WeD research into SKSP found that the list prepared by the SKSP Committee was replaced by another one prepared and sanctioned by the local representative of the ruling party. While the beneficiaries on the party list were mostly poor and therefore qualified for relief, they were also all activists or supporters of the ruling party. Being poor therefore was a necessary but insufficient criterion to be included on the list. For those not associated with the ruling party, the chances of receiving benefits from the SKSP were negligible.

**Box 2. Distribution of fertilizer and seeds**

In June 2004, floods inundated 40% of the total area of Bangladesh, affecting one quarter of the entire population and causing the death of approximately 800 people. As part of its post-flood operations, the Government allocated fertilizer and paddy seeds to farmers whose livelihood had been destroyed. Local government bodies were charged with distributing the fertilizer and seeds.

In the area where we were carrying out our research, local *mastaans* associated with the ruling party went to the local government office and demanded that the fertilizer and seeds be handed directly over to them. The *mastaans* claimed that they would distribute the goods in a fairer manner and that they would do a better job than the local officials. However we found that they went on to sell the fertilizer and seeds on the open market and pocketed the earnings for themselves. In a few cases those affected by the flood were also forced to purchase fertilizer from the *mastaans*. This arrangement was public knowledge but no-one publicly complained as they were frightened that the *mastaans* might retaliate.

instead of responding to rights or entitlements.

Clientelism has long been recognised as a problem for development in Bangladesh and in many other developing countries. The irony of this case is that, while superficially governance has improved, clientelism has become more of a problem.

Poor people in Bangladesh have not moved towards a status of greater citizenship, but instead have moved to a position of being even more tightly controlled clients. For the majority (including those fortunate enough to benefit), therefore, the world of politics is a contaminated, exclusionary and potentially violent reality. As a consequence, people's trust in the political system is undermined and their motivation to engage with it has been eroded. Politics is seen as the playground of the powerful, and ordinary people have become more cynical of, and apathetic about, the possibility that politics might lead to progressive change or fair outcomes (Box 3).

**Box 3. Fear and political apathy**

"If I go the local union to ask for some help, I am wasting my time. Members [i.e. officials] are weak and have no power in front of party representatives, so they cannot be trusted. Everyone is frightened of the party people and I don't know how to approach them. There is no difference between the *mastaan* and the politician. Politics in this country means business. If you are linked to politics, it is easy to become rich. They always talk about serving the poor but they cheat us. Because of politics, ordinary people become prisoners."

**Implications and Challenges**

The research demonstrates that the everyday struggle for wellbeing depends more and more on people's ability to gain access to decision-making processes. Given that these have been captured by unelected elites and *mastaans*, the task of negotiating access to key resources and services for poor people has become more and more constrained by the threat of exclusion or violence. As a result, their ability to act meaningfully in life, to negotiate their livelihoods and to forge a sense of wellbeing has been eroded. There are, therefore, important implications and challenges arising from this reality:

1. Governance is central to a focus on wellbeing because it is concerned with the creation of political relations that facilitate the negotiation and management of competing interests in society. However, our research calls for a radical shift in the way we think about governance; away from a preoccupation with ideal models and systems to a focus on the real conditions of governance that people have to contend with in their everyday lives. Governance approaches that are driven by ideal models and systems risk displacing the fundamental governance question of how to enhance people's ability to act meaningfully and pursue their interests in life. The starting point for all governance discussions is how to strengthen structures, policies and processes that enable meaningful participation.

2. Giving priority to the ability of people to act meaningfully to pursue their goals in life, is a challenge for governance policymakers. First and foremost, policymakers need to undertake continuous reality checks, such as **wellbeing audits**, that carefully monitor their interventions (see WeD Briefing Paper 08/1). Crucially, this must start with an evaluation of the likely impact of their interventions on local opportunities and incentives **before** implementation. As our research into wellbeing illustrates, it is possible that apparently progressive changes introduced at a general level can create opportunities that further constrain people's ability to act meaningfully in their lives. We need, therefore, to achieve a greater level of policy coherence that at least begins to join up the different levels of intervention i.e. local, regional, national and international, and enables an assessment of the impact of interventions on different levels.

3. Giving greater consideration to the local context inevitably introduces a level of complexity to our discussions on governance and wellbeing because it forces us to consider specific details and arrangements. This is a difficult policy challenge but we would argue that it is a necessary one for two reasons. First, it is only in the local context where we can assess whether or not our interventions are producing the fundamental governance outcomes we desire, i.e. greater and more meaningful participation. Second, by tuning more into local political realities we can better identify the incentives and opportunities for progressive change that actually exist. Interventions that are built around such opportunities are likely to be more effective and sustainable.

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## The WeD Programme

WeD is a multidisciplinary research group dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in poor countries. The research group is based at the University of Bath and has an extensive network of overseas academic associates as well as specific research partnerships with institutes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. The initial research programme began in October 2002 and researched rural and urban communities in the four countries. The main fieldwork for the initial research took place over a period of approximately 18 months.



The purpose of the research programme was to develop conceptual and methodological tools for investigating and understanding the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in specific countries. The practical definition of wellbeing that the WeD group has developed through its work over the last five years is that:

*"Wellbeing is a state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one's goals, and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life."*

Research into wellbeing involves exploring the extent to which people can achieve this state of being, and the social conditions that either enable or block this possibility.

This is a hybrid definition that differs from many of the ways the term wellbeing is currently used in academic and policy discourse. It combines both objective and

subjective conceptions and transcends them by recognizing the way each is socially constructed. This definition means that any attempt to assess wellbeing or to understand the processes that affect it must take account of three dimensions of peoples' lives: the material, the relational and the affective/cognitive.

## Researching Wellbeing

WeD has developed a suite of research tools in order to research wellbeing. This toolbox comprises six distinct but interconnected research components. Each of these is intended to generate data on key elements of the WeD conceptual framework or the connections between the elements. The six methods can be grouped into three pairs dealing with outcomes, structures and processes.

**1 Outcomes** - studying outcomes for persons and households both objectively and subjectively  
 a) Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ)  
 b) Quality of Life (WeDQoL)

**2 Structures** - understanding the collectivities within which social human beings seek to achieve wellbeing, from the level of the community through the nation state to global structures.  
 a) Community Profiles  
 b) Structures and Wellbeing Regimes

**3 Processes:** investigating the processes that people engage in as they attempt to achieve wellbeing.  
 a) Income and Expenditure Studies  
 b) Process Research

More information on this methods toolbox can be found at <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/methods-toobox/toolbox-intro.htm>

## WeD Working Paper Series

A series of on-line working papers that illustrate the fundamental strategies behind the research programme and discuss the findings can be found at: [www.welldev.org.uk/research/working.htm](http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/working.htm).  
 Print versions are available by contacting: [wed@bath.ac.uk](mailto:wed@bath.ac.uk)

## Selected WeD Publications

- Devine, J. (2008) Governance, Democracy and the Politics of Wellbeing. *WeD Working Paper 36*
- Devine, J. Camfield, L. and Gough, I. Autonomy or Dependence or Both? Perspectives from Bangladesh. Forthcoming in *Journal of Happiness Studies*.
- Gough, I. and McGregor, J. A. (2007) *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- White, S.C. (2006) 'The cultural construction of wellbeing: Seeking healing in Bangladesh'. *WeD Working Paper 15*

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