

# IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the  
Institute of Development Studies

IDS WORKING PAPER 343  
JUNE 2010

## NGOs' Strategies and the Challenge of Development and Democracy in Bangladesh

In recent years Bangladesh has achieved rising rates of growth and a slow but steady decline in poverty, it has made remarkable progress on the social front in terms of health and education. However, it has performed abysmally on the governance front and is recognised as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. This paper examines an emerging view that Bangladesh's active development NGO sector has contributed to positive development achievements and asks why these organisations have not made an equivalent contribution to governance.

Compared to the 1970s, when most development NGOs had a commitment to social change, the vast majority of organisations in Bangladesh today are concerned with the provision of microfinance services. It is clear that there has been a considerable homogenisation of the NGO sector in Bangladesh driven by ideological predispositions and technical requirements of official donor lending.

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and Jairo Guillermo Isaza Castro, coordinator of the Research Group on Labour Economics at the Universidad de La Salle in Bogotá, Colombia, research the members of six organisations that straddle the continuum between microfinance and social mobilisation within Bangladesh. Three categories of organisation are examined: ASA and Grameen Bank who represent the minimalist microfinance end of the continuum, BRAC and Proshika the intermediate position, combining microfinance with social development inputs while Samata and Nijera Kori (NK) represent the 'pure'

social mobilisation. The research describe the history of each organisation, highlighting some of the their similarities in their approaches, such as the focus on group-based strategies and regular meetings, as well as the differences. The study carried out a survey of old and new members of these organisations and supplement it with interviews with NGO staff and group members.

The key research finding is that social mobilisation organisations perform far better than those concerned with microfinance in generating political awareness and action, participation in

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community decision-making and engagement in collective action to protest injustice and claim entitlements. More unexpectedly, Nijera Kori also performed well on economic impacts, such as access to paid work and asset accumulation, despite its focus on social mobilisation and capacity building rather than financial intermediation. These findings suggest that building the human capabilities of the poor in the broadest sense may not only enhance their political agency but also strengthen their ability to negotiate better livelihoods.

Along with analytical skills, dignity and sense of worth, these capabilities include knowledge of rights, awareness of social injustice and the collective willingness to challenge it on behalf of self and others. In building these capabilities, social mobilisation organisations have helped to transform their members from the clients of the rich and powerful into citizens willing to engage with the structures of power and to stand up for the rights of the poor. If the poor quality of governance in Bangladesh is to improve, it will be through the construction of these kinds of citizenship on a national scale.

## Key policy lessons

- Development NGOs expand the sphere of chosen rather than given relationships in the lives of sizeable numbers of poor women and men in Bangladesh. This is of particular

significance for women who are far more likely than men to be confined to the ascribed communities of family and kin

- What NGOs do and, more importantly, how they do it, has a strong bearing on their impacts. The idea that what matters for 'good governance' is the density of associational life rather than the nature of the associations is not supported by the research findings
- Poor people need both improved access to material resources and a strengthening of their political capabilities. An over-emphasis on social mobilisation without due attention to livelihood issues may promote grassroots participation but will not overcome the barriers to economic advancement. Similarly, a narrow focus on microfinance without enabling support services is unlikely to equip poor women and men to overcome structural barriers to their participation in economic and political spheres of life.

## Credits

**Naila Kabeer, Simeen Mahmud and Jairo Guillermo Isaza Castro (2010) *NGOs' Strategies and the Challenge of Development and Democracy in Bangladesh*, IDS Working Paper 343, Brighton: IDS**

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