



## Non-Technical Briefing Paper No.2

### Exploring Civil Society and Social Justice in Bangladesh

*Professor Paul Chaney (Wales Institute of Social, Economic Research, Data and Methods – WISERD, Cardiff University), Dr Sarbeswar Sahoo (Indian Institute of Technology Delhi) & Dr Seuty Sabur (BRAC University, Dhaka)*

<sup>1</sup> This briefing is from the ‘Exploring effective practice’ project 2018-19 funded by the Academy of Medical Sciences and the Global Challenges Research Fund. It reports on the findings of fieldwork, including a workshop held in August 2018 at BRAC University with civil society organizations (CSOs) in Bangladesh. *Inter alia*, study participants represented different religions and those working to advance gender equality.<sup>1</sup> The workshop was aimed at: exploring civil society and gender rights in Bangladesh; examining the key issues, progress and challenges in relation to civil society organizations’ work in advancing gender rights; and understanding the role CSOs play in upholding states’ obligations under international rights treaties. The research responded to three pivotal questions: How did CSOs define citizenship through their actions? What were the major trepidations for CSOs to be effective on the ground as well as negotiating with the state? How are CSOs applying their organic methods/language outside state/UN-mandated vocabularies to ensure social justice? The following sets out some of the key findings from the research.

- **The need to understand the local etymology of the term “civil society”:** Civil society activists from different segments of social life in Bangladesh noted that, given the fact that “situated knowledge” is of vital importance in understanding the challenges facing the civil sphere today, it is important to understand the concept of civil society, its etymology and contested meanings in a Bangladeshi context. In particular, this requires an understanding of the local history of civil society. In the Bangladeshi context, it can be defined in two different ways: (1) *shushil samaj* or ‘civilized society’, and (2) *nagorik samaj* or ‘citizen’s society’. The activists argued that civil society as it exists in Bangladesh today is a product of the Western concept of ‘good governance’ and neo-liberal governmentality. Many of the NGOs took up the USAID’s notion of civil society, which promoted *apolitical* governance. According to this viewpoint civil society is equidistant from state and market – constituting “a third sector of

---

<sup>1</sup> Participants’ names and affiliations are withheld as a condition of ethical research approval.

associative life". Activists argued that because of such notions, meaningful citizen advocacy to the state by civil society is being undermined. In response, they called for a revival of the Gramscian notion<sup>2</sup> of civil society where civil society is *political* and acts as a counter hegemonic force to hold the state to account.

- **Nurturing civic space through intergenerational and intersectional dialogue:** Activists and NGO leaders expressed concern that in recent years, the state has become increasingly powerful and authoritarian. In consequence, they noted that it is imperative to protect civil society space by acting as a collective of academics, activists and practitioners. While some academics blame activists of lacking theoretical orientation, activists accuse academics of being removed from grassroots social reality. In the face of this, study participants said the core emerging question is: how can we work together? One way of addressing this that emerged from the discussion of contemporary NGO practices is to start an *intergenerational and intersectional dialogue*. The message that emerged from the workshop was that pursuing this path will not only bring people from different generations together to talk about civil society, citizenship and social justice, it will also involve different classes, castes, religions, and ethnic groups. This will break down artificial barriers currently limiting civil society influence. Study participants also called for an ongoing collective conversation between activists and academics locally - as well as globally.
- **Civil society needs to act as an intermediary to ensure state accountability and to represent the voiceless:** During our research NGOs and civil society activists in Bangladesh raised questions about the role of civil society in the contemporary world. Several study participants argued that the major objective of civil society is to act as an intermediary between citizens and the state. However, they asserted that a key question in this regard is *whose voice gets heard in the public sphere*. Traditionally, CSOs functioned as the mediators/enablers for the marginalized. One of the activists articulated, "in 1993 when Nurjahan was forced to commit suicide, it was the member of the Mahila Parishad who started the case on behalf of Nurzahan. Following that other organizations started mobilizing, which eventually made it a big movement against fatwas. Without CSOs' support it could be difficult for just the local groups to respond." But there have been many cases (i.e: Sex Workers Eviction in 2002 and simultaneous resistance from sex workers themselves and CSOs) where resistance came from the ground and worked as an open invitation for CSOs to work 'with' rather 'on behalf of them'. This allowed CSOs to initiate a discourse/movement around taboo-ed topic 'sexuality'. This also led the path for LGBTQ movements in Bangladesh. That is not the case anymore.

Many NGOs argued that, as elsewhere, 'ordinary' people in Bangladesh have become largely voiceless. In part, this is because the political parties - who are supposed to represent people and articulate citizens' interests, have become weak and dysfunctional. One activist asked, "Why have political parties become so weak in Bangladesh?" They continued, the "brain drain has happened in the political arena; there has been a deliberate separation of

---

<sup>2</sup> A useful account of Antonio Gramsci's work in this field is: Thomas R. Bates (1975) 'Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol.36 (2), pp.351-366. This could be downloaded from [https://www.jstor.org/stable/2708933?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2708933?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

intelligence from politics. All brilliant brains are now to be found in civil society". According to this view, unprecedented importance now attaches to civil society playing a central role in addressing citizenship rights and social justice in Bangladesh. Study participants also emphasized that, in their words, "*policy is political*". In other words, for them, the role of civil society is to speak on behalf of - and act for - the people in the formulation and delivery of public policy. In this context, a key emerging message was that - in the context of growing state oppression and intolerance, civil society should rethink new ways of organizing and advocacy. Ordinary people feel that civil society organizations and journalists can articulate their concerns and give them voice when negotiating with the state on their behalf. Yet this calls for a **new civic mission** - to find new and better ways of reflecting social diversity and pressing grassroots demands on state ruling elites.

- **Rethinking the role of media as a key civil society actor:** An emerging view from our research was that the media, which is an important pillar of civil society, is now increasingly controlled by multinational corporations overly motivated by profit - at the expense of representing socially diverse interests in civil society and upholding the rights and freedom of expression. Study participants also noted that a large part of the media has been co-opted by the state; it is no longer engaging with the grassroots in communities across the country - nor is it effectively advancing civil society claims on those in power. Some of the major newspapers paid a price for their brave reporting; journalists were arrested; photojournalists were beaten up; and editors were silenced. In this regard, it was pointed out how over recent years the media has become increasingly political savvy - it is conscious of what to report and what not to report for fear of antagonizing the state. Given this, study participants urged the media to reappraise its role as a civil society actor and do more to hold the state to account on issues such as land rights and local movements.
- **Social media and 'self-censorship':** NGO leaders and activists taking part in our research pointed out that in a context where mainstream media organizations have either been corporatized and/or co-opted by the state, online social media platforms (such as Facebook) provide valuable opportunities for civil society expression, advocacy and mobilization. However, such opportunities are constrained by surveillance - both by state and extremist elements. Study participants spoke of being at a 'political moment' in Bangladesh's history when many people are afraid to use social media platforms to campaign and protest. Hitherto, the sole preserve of the street, recent years have seen mob hate campaigns against civil society activists replicated in social media. This has resulted high profile violence and murder of civil society activists. In consequence, there is a widespread fear of online expression. As a result citizens are now exercising 'self-censorship'. This undermines the critical, democratic role of civil society in campaigning for citizen rights and holding the state to account.
- **The state and "millennial capitalism":** Our research participants pointed to the link between state suppression of civil society in Bangladesh and wider, global politics. In particular, they referred to the negative effects of the current unfolding of the new neo-liberal political order. According to them, in different ways, 'millennial capitalism' has heavily fractured old certainties. Not least because civil society activists are frequently placed under surveillance as, often expressed through a nationalistic discourse, the state plays an increasing role in

seeking to de-radicalize civil society and silence dissenting voices. Longstanding democratic institutional structures are now being dismantled - for new laws and police practices are placing increasing constraints on the operation of international civil society organizations in Bangladesh. Law enforcing agencies have become highly politicized. Our study participants articulated how civil society space is shrinking and the state is becoming increasingly unaccountable. They asserted the need for civil society organizations to reassert their independence, reclaim lost ground and for future constructive dialogue to take place between the state and civil society.

- **Intergenerational relations and the need for new leadership in civil society:** activists and NGO leaders participating in our study agreed that – compared to previous generations, not as many of today’s young people are assuming leadership, mobilizing and advocacy roles in civil society. Thus, they pointed to the need for new leadership in the civil sphere. Furthermore, they asserted the need to increase young people’s awareness of rights violations and the important role that civil society can play in addressing them. They also pointed to the need for younger generations to understand the importance of these problems, to view them in historical context and to formulate a new sense of social justice. In the face of such challenges – and citing diverse examples such as Chittagong Hill Tracts issues, study participants advocated increased individual expression amongst the young - combined with collective strength. They spoke of the answer to the problems facing civil society lying in greater levels of self-organization. Moreover, they asserted that, in the face of state hegemonic practices, the creation of a new critical mass of young leaders will create a counter-narrative that will lead to a rethinking of prevailing state-centric discourses of global power dynamics, and, in turn promote citizenship rights and redistributive justice.
- 

### **Summary of selected Issues, Transferable Lessons and Changes identified by study participants**

- It is imperative to protect civil society space by acting as a collective of academics, activists and practitioners.
- There is a need to start an intergenerational and intersectional dialogue in civil society. Pursuing this path will not only bring people from different generations together to talk about civil society, citizenship and social justice, it will also involve different classes, castes, religions, and ethnic groups. This will break down artificial barriers currently limiting civil society influence.
- There is a need for greater, ongoing collective conversation between activists and academics locally - as well as globally.
- Many NGOs argued that, as elsewhere, ‘ordinary’ people in Bangladesh are largely voiceless. In part, this is because the political parties - who are supposed to represent people and articulate citizens’ interests, have become weak and/or dysfunctional.
- Study participants also emphasized that the role of civil society is to speak on behalf of - and act on – the people in the formulation and delivery of public policy. In this context, a key emerging message was that - in the context of growing state oppression and intolerance, civil

society should rethink new ways of organizing and advocacy. This calls for a new civic mission – to find new and better ways of reflecting social diversity and pressing grassroots demands on state ruling elites.

- NGOs urged the media to reappraise its role as a civil society actor and do more to hold the state to account on issues such as land rights and local movements.
- Study participants argued that meaningful citizen advocacy to the state by civil society is being undermined. In response, they called for a revival of the Gramscian notion [see Endnote #2] of civil society where civil society is political and acts as a counter hegemonic force to advance citizenship rights and hold the state to account.
- NGO leaders and activists taking part in our research pointed out that in a context where mainstream media organizations have either been corporatized and/or co-opted by the state, online social media platforms (such as Facebook) provide valuable opportunities for civil society expression, advocacy and mobilization.
- Such opportunities are constrained by surveillance – both by state and extremist elements.
- Study participants spoke of being at a ‘political moment’ in Bangladesh’s history when many people are afraid to use social media platforms to campaign and protest.
- Online mob hate campaigns against civil society activists have resulted high profile violence and murder of civil society activists. There is a widespread fear of online expression. As a result citizens are now exercising ‘self-censorship’. This undermines the critical, democratic role of civil society in campaigning for citizen rights and holding the state to account.
- Our research participants pointed to the link between state suppression of civil society in Bangladesh and wider, global politics. In particular, they referred to the negative effects of the current unfolding of the new neo-liberal political order. In different ways, ‘millennial capitalism’ has heavily fractured old certainties.
- Civil society activists are frequently placed under surveillance as, often expressed through a nationalistic discourse, the state plays an increasing role in seeking to de-radicalize civil society and silence dissenting voices.
- Longstanding democratic institutional structures are now being dismantled - for new laws and police practices are placing increasing constraints on the operation of international civil society organizations in Bangladesh.
- Our study participants articulated how civil society space is shrinking and the state is becoming increasingly unaccountable. They asserted the need for civil society organizations to reassert their independence, reclaim lost ground and for future constructive dialogue to take place between the state and civil society.
- The activists and NGO leaders participating in our study agreed that – compared to previous generations, not as many of today’s young people are assuming leadership, mobilizing and advocacy roles in civil society.
- They pointed to the need for new leadership in the civil sphere.
- Furthermore, they asserted the need to increase young people’s awareness of rights violations and the important role that civil society can play in addressing them.
- Study participants advocated increased individual expression amongst the young - combined with collective strength.
- They asserted that, in the face of state hegemonic practices, the creation of a new critical mass of young leaders will create a counter-narrative that will lead to a rethinking of prevailing state-centric discourses of global power dynamics, and in turn promote citizenship rights and redistributive justice.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors wish to thank the Academy of Medical Sciences/ Global Research Challenge Fund for funding under project No. 513744. They also wish to thank all the participants that took part in the research.

© PC, SS and SS, June 2019.