State, Civil Society Empowerment and Human Security: Evidence from Bangladesh

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Introduction

The resurgence of interest in civil society since the 1980s and its intersection with development and security concerns has begun to stimulate a growing body of empirical research and academic reflections. Most notably, the relations between the state and civil society underwent considerable changes since the early 1990s in many developing countries largely because of a relative decrease in state repression, the lessened impact of global factors in domestic politics and the downsizing of the state apparatus in the process of economic liberalization. It is argued that the issues of security and development are no longer confronted with only one dominant interlocutor, the state, but now faced a variety of actors, such as local governments, central government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), social movements, citizens’ groups, social networks, bilateral and multilateral donors, business community, etc. Civil society empowerment captures a prominent position in wider ranging debate on the relations between state and society in order to organize collective action. Although, there is a considerable debate about defining civil society empowerment, none can deny its growing importance for security and development at various levels of human actions. The relationship between state and civil society actors is basically marked by contradictory patterns of cooperation and conflict which has profound implications for human security. While the state is generally not at ease with human security paradigm, civil society does have positive relationship. Some of the critical concerns of human security such as poverty, human rights, literacy, healthcare, social awareness and mobilization, and cultural diversity are being addressed by the civil society actors better than the state.

Against this backdrop, the paper strives to make a critical assessment of the complex and dynamic linkages between state, civil society empowerment and human security in the empirical context of Bangladesh. Bangladesh appears to be a relevant case for investigating the linkages between state, civil society empowerment and human security. The country is widely known for enormous growth of third sector led by the non-governmental organizations since the late 1980s. It is assumed that observations based on Bangladesh may provide critical insights to understand the multidimensional and complex relationship between state, civil society empowerment and human security. The fundamental hypothesis of the paper is that the civil society empowerment leads to mitigate the concerns of human insecurity, at the same time, it generates tensions in state-civil society relationship. The paper uncovers both conflictive and cooperative dimensions of state-civil society relationship and shows how the human security paradigm could be a bridge between the state and civil society in their pursuits of common goals such as democracy, social justice, and governance. The empirical evidence analyzed in the paper shows a wide variety and multiplicity of civil society actors at work in diverse issues and

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contexts. By grounding the experience of civil society empowerment in an empirical study of NGOs operations and social movements in Bangladesh, the paper demonstrates that civil society empowerment is closely linked with the mitigation of human insecurities in Bangladesh. The paper has also made a critical revelation that both the government and the donor community tend to reduce their relations with civil society to the NGOs. The paper contributes to the study of the transformation the GO-NGOs relations into state-civil relationship through identifying the emergence of a range of civil society actors as agents of change not the ‘objects’ in change. It looks for the possibility of mutually reinforcing relations with dual autonomy for addressing the threats of human security.

The paper is organized into five sections. The first section deals with the conceptual understanding of civil society empowerment and human security while the second section highlights the challenges of human security in Bangladesh. The third section provides a theoretical and empirical knowledge and background about civil society empowerment in Bangladesh. In the fourth section, the role of civil society actors including the NGOs is analyzed in order to grasp the relationship between civil society empowerment and human security. The final section deals with the pattern of state-civil society relationship focusing on its development and contradictory trends.

I. Understanding Civil Society Empowerment and Human Security

Despite the conceptual debate about its meanings, civil society continues to dominate theory and praxis of social research agenda in the contemporary world. Everyday, the civil society literature is growing with new insights and directions. Ironically, there is a marked absence of intellectual engagement with the concept of civil society empowerment. Until now it remains an approach to development largely promoted by the international development community (IDC). The civil society empowerment (CSE) as a new approach to development has been dominating the policies of IDC since the 1980s. As Tropp points out, during the last two decades the empowerment of civil society has become a deliberate and targeted activity of international donor and aid organizations (Tropp, 1999: 116). Northern non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have approached the civil society debate in terms of empowerment, an effort to redress the relative capacity of grassroots organizations to influence the lives of their communities (Patron, 1998: 187). Stiles (2000) has a major contribution to the literature on CSE. His understanding is dominated by the perspectives and interests of IDC. Stiles points out that for the IDC CSE is an attractive approach as it does not involve many risks. Rather off-loading responsibility by sub-contracting some functions to NGOs and to ensure cost-effective, human rights and capitalist oriented development policy at the same time. Thus CSE does not cause the decline in donors’ authority. The model is based mostly on the successful INGOs such as Oxfam and nurtured by local NGOs such as the Grameen Bank (Stiles, 2000: 32). According to Stiles, these grassroots organizations have proved capable of significantly improving the living conditions of their members, opening public space for women and the poor, and diminishing the need for constant flows of aid from national and international public agencies (2000, 32). The CSE incorporates ‘good governance strategy’ of the World Bank and ‘democratization’ agenda by western powers. Some have embraced the principles of CSE as a means to achieving widespread social justice
and human rights. In his view, the approach has appeal to both the left and the right (Stiles, 2000: 32). Stiles points out that two major factors have contributed to the emergence of the CSE approach – (i) disappointment with failed large scale, state centered projects and (ii) syndrome of shrinking public development budgets among both donors and developing countries (2000, 33).

The IDC approach on civil society empowerment suffers from several limitations. First, it takes a linear view about development as they emphasize only neo-liberal capitalist economy and Western liberal political order. They have simplified, Westernized and idealized concepts of civil society and development that are applicable in their own societies (The Dutch Report 2001). The role of civil society has been fitted into this neo-liberal framework. Hence, it gives a narrow understanding of its scope and power in society. The main thrust of IDC approach is on the efficiency of NGOs in service delivery functions in which many of the developing countries have miserably failed. Second, the IDC tends to equate civil society with NGOs for their excessive dependence on the latter. Even if they want to go beyond NGOs, the IDC and Northern NGOs take a selective approach in civil society empowerment. It is a matter of activating or reactivating parts of civil society that meet their interests and agenda. Third, the IDC approach is applied in the context of donor-recipient relationship and asymmetric power. It fails to perceive traditional or informal structures because they were less easy to recognize or because they bore no resemblance to the structures they knew (The Dutch Report 2001). Fourth, it misses the fundamental issues in empowerment such as resource, agency and structure. Resources represent the pre-conditions for making real choice, in other words, choices in the presence of alternatives, while agency is understood as the ability to define and act on one’s goals. Resources and agency together constitute what Amartya Sen refers to capabilities (Kabeer, 2003). To the IDC, empowerment has largely meant ‘training’, an element considered fundamental by both Southern and Northern NGOs (Patron, 1998). Patron thinks that terms like “empowerment” and “aid re-engineering” are part of lexicon of aid business (162). Finally, international donor agencies have pushed the idea of civil society against the failure of governments in the developing world to pursue vigorously economic reforms in the shape of structural adjustment programs. The overriding emphasis on ‘good governance’ in the narrow meaning of accountability of government has rather overlooked the socio-economic dynamics of the recipient countries. It is seen as a bargaining chip for the IDC to use civil society actors against the state in support of market forces for which IDC has invoked the issues of good governance, accountability, transparency, political and institutional development agendas of the 1990s.

The understanding of civil society empowerment must go beyond the IDC approach. In IDC perspective the overwhelming thrust is given on NGOs and their comparative advantage for poverty alleviation and service delivery. Civil society as such remains less focused. Howell and Pearce argue that the World Bank’s conceptualization of civil society was in practice confined to NGOs for a long time (2002). However, overtime, the IDC approach has been broadened to incorporate ‘advocacy’ and pressure group’s role of civil society as their relationships with state and civil society unfold. It too remains narrowly perceived as their main focus is on neo-liberal economic reforms in the
recipient countries. Stiles’ view of the CSE gives good insights. In his view it offers a ‘pluralist global model’ which borrows loosely from the various pluralist models of domestic government as well as some of the ‘global governance’, ‘neo-liberal institutionalist’ and ‘epistemic community’ literature by emphasizing the importance of non-state actors (Stiles, 2000: 34). In his conceptualization, distribution of power and resources is critically important to understand the CSE. Nevertheless, Stiles’ understanding is considerably influenced by IDC perspective and the central role of NGOs. For better understanding of CSE, it is necessary to define empowerment. Empowerment question arises from a situation of subordination, exclusion, silence, and patron-client relationship. Kabeer (2003) defines empowerment as a process of change by which those who have been denied the capacity to make choices become enabled to do so. These changes can occur in a number of different, but interrelated dimensions, each of which, contributes, and benefits from, changes in the others (Kabeer, 2003). Thus civil society empowerment is conceived as an ongoing and dynamic process by which the civil society actors get access to resources, play agentive roles and thus altering social realities. It signifies the creation of spaces for civil society actors in socio-economic and political arena at various levels from local to global. It is not just becoming empowered as many suggest (Kabeer, 2003), it must go beyond. Empowerment requires skills, knowledge and education along with democratic principles and practices. The importance of civil society empowerment becomes critical in view of the fact that the governments and market forces in many countries of the South have largely failed in poverty reduction, social integration, political stability, sustainable economic development, and building democratic society. Even the IDC acknowledges that the ability of the 'state' to tackle social problems is increasingly doubted, especially from the 1980s onward (World Bank, 1991). Similarly, the 'invisible hand' of the market as well is not able to eradicate human suffering through its 'trickle down' mechanism.

It is against this backdrop the concept of human security has emerged and evolved into a new tool for the universal quest for security in human society. The term human security was introduced by the UNDP as late as in 1994, but the underlying concerns are as old as human civilization. Idea of human security as opposed to highly state-centric security paradigm has historically evolved with some major global initiatives for development and peace in the world such as the Club of Rome report in 1968, the Brandt Commission's two reports, North-South (1980) and Common Crisis (1983), Olof Palme,’s Common Security: A Blueprint for Survival (1982), and the Commission on Global Governance report: Our Global Neighborhood (1995). Besides, the concept of human security overlaps with other major categories of security such as ‘comprehensive security’, ‘cooperative security’, ‘non-traditional or non-military security’ etc. which have drawn considerable attention in the post-Cold War era. Alkire gives a useful overview of critical themes in wide-ranging debate on the conceptualization of human security (2003). The study refers to 25 definitions by major global reports, scholars, statesmen, and NGOs. Although it not conclusive lists of contributors to the idea of human security, it certainly reflects a rich and diverse array of thoughts on the subject. Two global reports are particularly significant to understand the notion of human security. The 1994 Human Development Report sponsored by UNDP has articulated the idea for the first time in lexicon of security discourse. According to the Report, human security is defined as: safety from chronic threats such as

To protect the vital core of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment (2003, 4).

The Report further elaborates:

Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms – freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people’s strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood, and dignity. The vital core of life is a set of elementary rights and freedoms people enjoy. What people consider to be ‘vital’ – what they consider to be ‘of the essence of life’ and ‘crucially important’ – varies across individuals and societies. That is why any concept of human security must be dynamic. And that is why we refrain from proposing an itemized list of what makes up human security (2003, 4).


Table 1: Basic Parameters of Human Security

Security for whom? Primarily the people and individuals

Security of what values? Personal safety and well-being and individual freedom – freedom from fear and freedom from want.

Security from what threats? Direct and indirect, intrastate and global concerns, particularly those of indirect and intrastate.

Security by what means? Promoting human development, democratization, good governance

Source: Partly taken from Waisove 2003.

The basic parameters of human security as identified in Table 1 clearly challenge the traditional assumptions of security – dominated by state. It shows that sources of threats are primarily intrastate and they can be both direct and indirect. Human security is best understood through identifying the threats or situations of human insecurity which are
linked to survival of human beings. The UNDP gives a comprehensive list of threats to human security: economic security (unemployment, job insecurity, disparities in income and resources, poverty and homelessness), food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security and political security. In its report, Human Security Now, the Commission examined six broad areas from a human security perspective: the condition of people in conflict situations; people on the move (refugees, migrants, and internally displaced populations); the transition phase between war and peace; economic security; health; and education (2003). Fukuda-Parr (2003) highlights new threats to human life. These are global crimes, human trafficking, financial crisis, labor market instabilities, spread of disease, and intrastate conflicts. This comprehensive list of threats has strong relevance for understanding human security. Human security is basically understood as a way to reduce or eliminate the multidimensional threats, risks and vulnerabilities for individuals and people. It is particularly a high priority issue in the socio-economic and political conditions of the developing countries.

It is observed that the agenda of human security is strongly pushed by the donors community and the UN agencies since the publication of the 1994 Human Development Report. Waisova (2003) identifies two main approaches to human security – the UN approach and Canadian approach. The UN agenda of human security is mostly incorporated into the works of UNDP and UNCHR. For UNDP the concept of human security is very significant because it prioritizes the individual over the state, and emphasizes the role of indirect threats (underdevelopment, environmental degradation, population displacement and resource scarcity). The Canadian conception of human security is based on the importance of the role of the state for the maintenance of human security. It focuses on territorial integrity and domestic good governance. It has same old stereotypes as it is targeted towards the governments of developing countries (Axworthy, 2001). Duffield argues that human security is a technology of governance to donor agencies and states (Duffield, 2005). The literature on human security frequently refers to conflict or war-torn societies, transition countries, ineffective governments etc. It has overlapping concerns and challenges of human development, governance and sustainable development. It has broad and comprehensive focus. In order to reduce the threats of human insecurity, two strategies are considered - protection and empowerment. Protection strategies, set up by states, international agencies, NGOs, and the private sector, shield people from menaces. Empowerment strategies enable people to develop their resilience to difficult conditions. It is assumed that people protected can exercise choices and people empowered help prevent and mitigate the impact of insecurities and devise improvements in the protection infrastructure (Ogata and Cels, 2003: 274). Finally, the notion of human security is also criticized on a number of grounds, particularly by the realists and neo-realists. They commonly argue that the concept of human security is vague and incoherent. As Buzan argues much before the notion of human security came to its current usage, the idea of security is easier to apply to things than to people (1991, 35). Another point highlighted is the arbitrary selection of threats to human security. King and Murray (2001) criticize the UN approach of human security as overly broad and fuzzy. These criticisms are common and do not obscure the critical importance of human security in the contemporary world. It is a new terrain of security studies with particular relevance for the underdeveloped countries.
II. Challenges of Human Security in Bangladesh

Bangladesh lies in the north-eastern part of South Asia. The country has one of the highest population densities in the world. Its 140 million inhabitants—as many people as ½ of the United States population—live in a land mass approximately the same size as England and Wales, or of the US state of Wisconsin. By the number of population it is ranked 8th in the world. It has combined population of France and Germany. Bangladesh is an ethnically homogenous society, with 98% of its people of Bengali descent. The villages of Bangladesh are home to 80% of the country’s population and 65% of the total labor force works in agriculture. Bangladesh is categorized as a medium human development country by UNDP, a low income economy (LIC) by the World Bank and a least developed country (LDC) by the UN, but by the size of Gross National Income (GNI) the country is ranked 51st in the world. Not surprisingly, threats to human security in Bangladesh are commonly observed and most of them exist in rudimentary forms. The basic socio-economic indicators as mentioned in Table 2 suggest that Bangladesh is considerably vulnerable to human security. As a low income country and as a politically unstable society human security is a paramount concern in Bangladesh. Although the challenges of human security are widely uttered both by analysts and activists, there has not been done much research on this issue in the social context of Bangladesh. The UNDP published for the first time a study on Human Security in Bangladesh: In Search of Justice and Dignity in 2002. This report deals with only legal aspects of human security threats in Bangladesh. According to the report, “most people in Bangladesh are simply priced out of the judicial system”. The enormous costs of going to court and delays in court proceedings, and the lack of legal aid facilities has made the judicial system virtually inaccessible for the vast majority of the poor and disadvantaged (UNDP 2002). The report further shows that people face enormous sufferings, if not impossibility, to seek legal remedies for violation of human rights. This is directly linked with personal safety of the citizens of the country. Blair’s work provides an important insight for understanding the challenges of human security in Bangladesh (2003). According to Blair, there are four clusters of security concerns in Bangladesh: destitution – food, shelter, clothing; disaster - environmental and health; crime - violence, extortion from mastaans and domestic violence; and state: police (esp. violence and extortion) and corruption. On the other hand, development concerns include: agriculture - growth and equity; human resources - education and health; family: gender and dowries; and infrastructure: roads, transport and energy. Sobhan conceptualizes existing scenarios in Bangladesh that have clear relevance for understanding human security challenges in this country. According to him, the major concerns for the citizens of Bangladesh include the persistence of mass poverty, unbridled corruption, the tyranny of patronized criminals, the alienation of the administration from the people, the commodification of law enforcement and the recent emergence of terrorism in the name of religion (The Daily Star, 23 May 2006).

Table 2: Basic socio-economic indicators of Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land (in sq. km.)</th>
<th>144,000</th>
<th>Population with access to sanitation (in %)</th>
<th>48</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population (in million)</td>
<td>143.8</td>
<td>Life expectancy at birth</td>
<td>61.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban Population 23.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Density per sq. km.</td>
<td>1079</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population with access to improved water sources (in %)</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross National Income (in billion US $)</td>
<td>61.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population below $ 2 a Day (% of Population)</td>
<td>82.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population below the national poverty line (% of Population)</td>
<td>49.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undernourishment (% of Population)</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult Literacy (% of Population)</td>
<td>58.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Primary enrolment ration (in percentage)</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infant mortality (per 1000)</td>
<td>46</td>
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<td>Under 5 Mortality (per 1000)</td>
<td>69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population below $ 1 a Day (% of Population)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Population with access to improved water sources (in %)</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Per capita income (in US $)</td>
<td>440</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internet users (per 1000)</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Computers (per 1000)</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone mainlines (per 1000)</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public health expenditure (of % GDP)</td>
<td>1.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public education expenditure (of % GDP)</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Military expenditure (of % GDP)</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total external debt (in million US $)</td>
<td>18,778</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total debt servicing-(of % GNI)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Per capita debt (in US $)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Agricultural land (in %)</td>
<td>69.29</td>
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Broadly, there are several specific dimensions of challenges of human security in Bangladesh. The first and foremost human security challenge in Bangladesh is existence of pervasive human and income poverty. The population below one-dollar poverty line increases over the years. In 1981 26.2 percent of population in Bangladesh was below $ 1 a day poverty line which increased to 36.0 percent in 2000. On the other hand, based on national poverty line, population below poverty line is 49.8 percent in 2000 (World Bank, 2005; SAARC, Secretariat 2004). In both criteria population under poverty line represents a staggering number of poor people. Incidence of poverty by head count ratio on the basis of Food Energy Intake (FEI) reduced from 44.7 per cent in 1999 to 42.1 per cent in 2004. On an average, the annual poverty declining ratio was about 0.5 per cent. During the same period, at the urban level, the poverty declined by about 1 per cent (Report of the Poverty Monitoring Survey, 2004). About 50 percent of the households are functionally landless while six percent of the land owning households controls more than 40 percent of the total land (SAAPE, 2003). The incidence of rural poverty is still high. The 1995-96 Household Expenditure Survey based on the cost of basic needs (CBN) method suggested that about 40 per cent of the rural population were below the lower poverty line and about 57 percent were below the upper poverty line (BBS, 1995). This is compounded by the problems of undernourishment and access to sanitation. The second biggest source of threats to human security comes from unemployment and underemployment of huge labor force in Bangladesh. The size of the civilian labor force in Bangladesh is 56 million of which 45.8 million are rural and 10.2 million are urban. The number of men that constitute the labor force is 34.7 million while the number of women is 21.3 million. There are 1.4 million unemployed, but of total employed population more than one third is underemployed (SAAPE, 2003). Besides, working conditions in various sectors pose human insecurity situations in Bangladesh. Garments workers, particularly women, and unskilled and low skilled laborers work in considerably unsafe and risky conditions.
Third, personal security is now a big concern of the citizens given the rising tide of crime, political violence and religious militancy in the country. The perennial confrontational political behavior by the major political parties further worsens these negative tendencies of Bangladesh politics and society. It leads to gross erosion of democratic values and norms in political environment. Hartal\textsuperscript{1}, a political weapon widely used during the colonial and autocratic rule, has become a major feature of present day politics. It directly hinders daily life, personal safety and economy of the country. It is a unique source of threats to human security in Bangladesh. In addition, there are widespread abuses and infringements of civil rights by law-enforcing forces. Fourth, the crisis of domestic governance is exacerbating human security concerns in Bangladesh. Referring to the 1999 Human Development Report for South Asia Huda states that the politician-criminal-bureaucracy nexus has hijacked processes of governance with the result that the common people's access to resources and justice are denied with impunity. In such a scenario, the state itself becomes a threat to human security perpetrating crimes against its citizens (2006). The patronage and rent seeking behavior of the state has been perpetuated amid continuing problems of accountability, transparency, and corruption. State remains repressive and non-responsive for the poor, low income and middle class citizens of the country. Discriminatory and sloppy enforcement of political, civil, economic, and social rights contributes to a poor state of governance. Fifth, economy is dominated by corrupt practices and state patronage. Widespread tax evasion, non-compliance of rules and regulations, non-payment of bank loans, black money and informal activities dominate business sector. According to a one estimate, black money in Bangladesh amounts to Tk. 175 thousand crore which is equivalent to national budgets for a couple of years (Amardesh, Dhaka, 1 July 2006). Specifically, loans defaulting culture is strong in Bangladesh. Finance Minister, M. Saifur Rahman, in mid November 2003 declared that Banks in Bangladesh are in fact currently stacked with US $ 3515 million in default loans. (The Daily Star, November 17, 2003). Loan defaulters are also politically powerful in Bangladesh. The poor and low income people face the ultimate burden of these immoral and unlawful business practices. Sixth, environment and natural disasters particularly floods and cyclones undermine human security in Bangladesh causing enormous sufferings for the millions of farmers and low income people. For instance, a devastating cyclone in 1988 submerged 80 percent of Bangladesh and left 25 million people homeless. Every year flood submerges about 25 percent of Bangladesh. Besides, in Bangladesh, deforestation has doubled the area vulnerable to flooding-- to nearly two-thirds of the country's territory. Seventh, arsenic water in Bangladesh has emerged a major hindrance to access to safe drinking water. Of the estimated 10 million wells in Bangladesh, over 1 million are thought to be affected by arsenic contamination. It is believed that some 30 million people are drinking contaminated water with risks of diseases such as keratosis, pigmentation disorders, conjunctivitis, bronchitis, etc. Eighth, although Bangladesh has improved in narrowing down gender gap, it remains a major problem for social development. The literacy ratio gap between women and men is 0.73. The net tertiary enrolment ratio gap is 0.50. By the UNDP gender empowerment measure Bangladesh is ranked 76 in the world. Female economic activity rate is 66.4% which is

\textsuperscript{1} A report published by UNDP on 10 March 2005 calls hartal a vicious spiral and states that hartals cost Bangladesh economy by 3-4% of GDP annually. During 1995-2002 611 days were called hartals by political parties. More than 90 per cent people in Bangladesh think that hartals are damaging for the country.
76% of male. Female employment is largely concentrated in agriculture sector (77% which is 144% of men) and women contribute to 81% of family works (Human Development Report 2004). Finally, aid dependence can be considered another challenge of human security in Bangladesh. As table 2 shows, Bangladesh has US $18.78 billion outstanding external debt for which the country pays a huge amount for debt servicing (1.3% of GDP) annually. It is also estimated that per capita debt in Bangladesh is $10. Every year the government needs to rely on foreign assistance amounting between $1-1.6 billion for funding development programs. Aid dependence has implications for two major aspects. On the one hand, aid comes with a host of conditions in the shape of market oriented economic reforms. Most notably, over the last 15 years, Bangladesh has been exposed to the neo-liberal economic policy reforms introduced by the World Bank and IMF through their Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) and Enhanced Structural Adjustment Policies (ESAP) and currently through Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). On the other hand, it has implications for donor community's intervention in domestic political process in Bangladesh. Donor countries and agencies are becoming increasingly influential actor in Bangladesh politics. For example, the Tuesday group, an informal body, comprising the diplomats from the western countries often engages in sensitive political issues in the country. While this is not universal practice of diplomats, in Bangladesh it has become a common role for them. The opportunist political leaders and parties welcome such interference when they are in opposition. When they come to power, the same political parties behave differently and become critical about the donors. In this process, the government loses its moral power and guts to resist harmful and unnecessary conditions of donors while receiving foreign aid. This has direct impact on the people as they face it in diverse ways from price hike to income inequality.

III. The Growth of Civil Society in Bangladesh

Civil society remains less focused in the field of socio-economic research in Bangladesh. What is commonly seen is the proliferation of empirical and theoretical studies on NGOs. Lewis (2004) and White (1999) focus on the dilemma of understanding civil society in the context of Bangladesh. They show how the NGO community identifies themselves as part of civil society while simultaneously remain engaged in traditional activities of NGOs. White (1999) also highlights how NGOs extend their development and welfare activities to political goods of civil society and popular participation. Blair (2003) sees the NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs) as separate actors in the country. Kabir (2002) gives an overview of perspectives of Bangladesh scholars on civil society in Bangladesh. Jahangir (1995) views the growth of civil society in Bangladesh in relation to military society. It does not consider several other institutions in the country. Sobhan (1997) gives an opposite view about civil society making it all-inclusive. Even military is also part of his image of civil society. He tends to perceive civil society in a loose manner. Hassan (1998), Kabir (2002), Hye (1998) and Husain (1998) perceive civil society as a force outside the purview of state and market. In their understanding the NGO community is a part of civil society. According to Kabir, the civil society organizations have remarkably expanded in the 1990s. He relates the emergence of civil society in Bangladesh to the phenomena of globalization, good governance, economic liberalization etc. He also thinks that civil society was active during the authoritarian rule of Ershad regime (1982-1990). There was a combined
platform of civil society organizations and the three-party political alliance to dislodge the dictatorship of Ershad (Kabir, 2002). Khan and Farah Kabir (2002) directly deal with the issue of civil society empowerment in Bangladesh. They have not crystallized the concept of civil society empowerment in the context of Bangladesh. But they have clearly shown that market forces and political parties are not part of civil society. They have given an overview of functions and features of civil society primarily emphasizing the role of unorganized masses and some social movements initiated by them. Another point is important in their analysis that in order to identify whether a force or entity is part of civil society fundamentally depends on the contexts and the functions of that force or entity (Khan and Kabir, 2002). In this context, they have rightly captured the agentive power of civil society in Bangladesh. Mohiuddin has a critical view about civil society in Bangladesh. He conceives civil society as civil actions. In his view, mainstream civil society formations in Bangladesh include the philanthropic groups, citizens’ coalitions, professional bodies and the masses of the taxpayers, who are made subservient to the state apparatus (Mohiuddin, 2000: 2003). The problem of his conceptualization is the contradiction: on the one hand, he gives an exclusivist meaning of civil society vis à vis state and corporate sector, on the other, he extends civil society membership to political party or bureaucracy and NGOs provided they are not part of the establishment. While NGOs may maintain some autonomy, it is absurd for the member of political party or bureaucracy in Bangladesh as they are organically related to these organizations. Lewis (2004) gives a comprehensive analysis of the growth of civil society and its implications for Bangladesh. In defining civil society in Bangladesh context, Lewis states that the concept of civil society in contemporary Bangladesh is best understood as both a ‘system’ and an ‘idea’ consisting of both ‘old’ and ‘new’ civil society traditions, resisting tendencies to privilege only one (external, policy-focused) definition of the term (Lewis, 2004). Khondker (2006) invokes the dichotomy of ‘civil’ and ‘uncivil’ society to understand civil society. To him, civil society is not just the sum-total of the NGOs. Nor is it a club of the elite. It is foremost an idea, indeed a great idea that keeps democracy working. It is a space -- non-coerced - where people discuss freely issues of interest to them with an eye to collective wellbeing (Khondker, 2006). To him, there is a tension between forces of civil society and those of uncivil society. The deepening of democracy depends on the capacity of the civil society to sustain. Thus the civil society literature demonstrates an engaged debate on its conceptual and empirical aspects and provide a basis to understand civil society empowerment in Bangladesh.

The Bengali meaning of civil society is *shushil shamaj*, literally means ‘gentle society’ or *nagorik shamaj* (society for citizens). The history of civil society is long in this part of the world as the territory known as the deltaic land has deep rooted tradition of religious philanthropy, mass consciousness, peasants’ uprisings, community activities, voluntary actions and socio-cultural activism (Lewis, 2004). Lewis terms it as the ‘old’ civil society in Bangladesh (2004). The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971 has special relevance with the agentive role and power of civil society. The liberation of Bangladesh was the outcome of a truly mass struggle against military-civil oligarchy of Islamabad, Pakistan (Kabir, 2002; Goon, 2002; Khan and Kabir, 2002). The participation of people in various forms ranging from trained guerilla force to unorganized actions played a vital role in the war. The Indian support and the then ill equipped armed forces in
Bangladesh (known as East Pakistan) basically complemented the people’s struggle against the military assault. Three million people were killed in this war that clearly justifies the magnitude of people’s participation in this highest form of sacrifice. Most of these people did not belong to any political party nor even previously trained as members of insurgent groups or socialist party or guerilla force. Following the war, focus of civil society was shifted to mitigation of people’s sufferings from the natural disasters and post-war emergency situations. The formation of NGOs during this period formalized the relief works and basic social services urgently needed for the people. Paradoxically, the functioning of Westphalian system in its specific form in Bangladesh since its independence began to restrict the spaces of civil society. The political society became overwhelming particularly with the 4th Amendment of Bangladesh Constitution through which Bangladesh was transformed into a pseudo socialist country. The subsequent military coups on two occasions further strengthened the state to ensure a monopoly of government in every sphere of citizens’ life what Foucault terms as ‘governmentality’. The coercive power of the state disproportionately increased during the military and quasi military rule. The people who fought for the state have become victims of overwhelming state power exercised through various means – corruption, rent seeking and patronage; civil-military complex; crony capitalism; poverty and social injustice. Amid growing power of the state, civil society has flourished in Bangladesh as a contradictory trend.

Against this background, the NGOs as the major arm of civil society witnessed a substantive expansion in the late 1980s. According to the Hunger Project, the civil society initiatives including NGOs cover 78% of rural areas engaging 24 million people with their programs in Bangladesh. It is estimated that there are 19,000 NGOs in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has also 20,000 local people’s groups partly financially assisted by local and central government. There are many more who do not take support from government and thousands of traditional community organizations in Bangladesh. According to a World Bank report, there are 27,000 NGOs registered with Ministry of Social Welfare, Bangladesh. Between 20% and 35% of the country’s population is now believed to receive some services - usually credit provision, health or education services - from an NGO. NGOs began working predominantly in rural areas, but have now expanded their programs into urban contexts. Bangladesh is now home to the largest indigenous NGOs found anywhere in the world, with multi-million dollar budgets, high rise offices and not-for-profit business concerns. As Farrington and Lewis observes, there are probably more NGOs in Bangladesh than in any other country of the same size in the world (Farrington and Lewis, 1993). Civil society is among the strongest of all South Asian countries in Bangladesh. Some NGOs of Bangladesh have gone outside the country. From a small local organization, it became a national and now a global organization. For example, the Grameen Bank started its activities in a small village called Jobra in Chittagong, eastern part of Bangladesh and now its micro-credit model is replicated in the USA, India, China and many other countries. BRAC has started its operations in Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. The ASA model of

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2 Estimates of casualties differ considerably. Rummel terms the killing as democide and according to him the figure is between 300,000-30 00000. Some accept the number as 15,00,000.

3 The term ‘governmentality’ is meant here as the mentality of relying on the government to reproduce things with reference to Foucault.
microcredit is replicated in the Philippines and Nigeria by the UNDP and India and Indonesia by the World Bank.

Table 3: Growth of NGOs with membership in NGO Affairs
Bureau, Bangladesh, 1990-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Local</th>
<th>Foreign</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upto 1990</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994-95</td>
<td>790</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>882</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>1014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996-97</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>1132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997-98</td>
<td>1096</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>1239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-99</td>
<td>1221</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>1373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>1354</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>1518</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>1455</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>1624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001-2002</td>
<td>1500</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>1671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>1613</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>1791</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>1691</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>1875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>1789</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>1807</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NGO Affairs Bureau, Bangladesh.

Table 3 shows a spectacular rise of foreign donation receiving NGOs from 382 in 1990 to 1518 which is 397% increase. Since 2000-01, NGOs have been growing steadily.

In identifying the reasons for the emergence of civil society actors in Bangladesh scholars-thinkers and activists generally argue that there are three key factors - national crisis situation immediately after the liberation war and natural disasters; growing interest of donor community; and state failure in Bangladesh (Lewis, 2004; Korten, 1990; White, 1999; Kabir, 2002; Khan and Kabir, 2002). These are particularly linked with the rise of NGO sector in Bangladesh, but it certainly influenced the whole gamut of civil society. The donor community encouraged the participation of civil society particularly NGOs in development process partly as recognition of government failure in the host countries and partly for the professionalism and efficiency of NGOs in service delivery function. As Kabeer observes, the nascent NGO-led microcredit movement in Bangladesh, with its stress on building a bottom-up “paisa capitalism”, appeared ideally suitable to donor community (2003). The other crucial factors are the long-spell of military and quasi military rule and market failure in Bangladesh (Kabir, 2002). Particularly, during the autocratic rule of Ershad regime NGOs and other forms of civil society expanded enormously. While these reasons are rightly identified for the emergence of civil society particularly NGOs, what is most import factor is the historical root of voluntarism, protest movements, and socio-cultural activism in Bangladesh. There is a strong element of religious duty of giving as it is called zakat in Islam. As a matter of fact, both the local conditions and external factors have facilitated the growth of civil society in Bangladesh. The local conditions play a crucial role compared to the external factors. Colonial exploitation, feudalism, regional disparity, cultural domination in the pre-liberation era and the continuing mass poverty, corruption, misgovernance, political instability and social injustice caused by state and market failure in the post-liberation period and above all,
natural calamities such as floods and cyclones provide compelling grounds for strong civil society engagement in Bangladesh. Donor community and global networks of civil society provide further impetus, often critical support, to the rise of social forces.

IV. Mitigating Threats to Human Security and the Role of Civil Society in Bangladesh

Although the current scenario of socio-economic development is far less satisfactory as well as a major source of concern, Bangladesh has achieved success in some vital indicators of socio-economic development over the past 15 years. If the socio-economic conditions of the country are compared between the 1980s and the 1990s onwards, it gives an impression of relative improvement in these indicators. One such indicator is human development index (HDI) which is closely related to human security. According to the Human Development Report 2005, since 1990 Bangladesh has recorded some of the developing world’s most rapid advances in basic human development indicators (UNDP, 2005: 46). As the report further goes, child and infant mortality rates have been falling at more than 5% a year, the fertility rate has fallen sharply, and malnutrition among mothers has fallen from 52% in 1996 to 42% in 2002. Primary school enrollment rates have reached more than 90%, up from 72% in 1990, with close gender parity, and enrollment in secondary education has been rising (2005, 46). The World Bank has similar view. According to a World Bank Report, the nonincome poverty reduction has been impressive in Bangladesh (2003). The most revealing statement comes from the Swedish Ambassador and SDC coordinator in Bangladesh, “No other country has developed economically and socially in the last 30 years as Bangladesh has – to the benefit of the poor”. Donors’ agencies particularly UNDP and the World Bank strongly attribute this socio-economic transformation of Bangladesh to the presence of vibrant civil society led by the NGOs. NGOs in Bangladesh have rallied the society and encouraged growth that benefits the poor. The UNDP has identified four strategies that contributed to Bangladesh’s human development take off – active partnerships with civil society; targeted transfers; extended health program and virtuous cycles and female agency. In all these strategies, the civil society actors had vital role (2005). The World Bank has specifically focused on the role of the NGO community for this success. Apart from the specific socio-economic sectors, the civil society actors remain deeply engaged in all critical moments of struggles by the people and nation – decolonization struggle, language movement, liberation struggle, anti-autocracy movement, and institutionalization of democracy movement. The civil society actors are also persistently involved in localized and micro-level issues linked with human security ranging from Nirapad Sarak Chai (We Want Safe Road) to anti-Acid throwing movement, fertilizer crisis, Osmani Uddyan Gach Kata Birodhi Andolon (anti-trees felling movement), Nirapad Khadya Andolon, etc. The fact is that the gradual empowerment of civil society since the late 1980s has enormously contributed to socio-political and economic changes in the country that would not have been possible at the hands of state. The significance of civil society empowerment is so profound that it requires some kind of redistribution of power in favor of non-governmental sector in Bangladesh (Imtiaz, 2002: 62). In this context, it is worthwhile to briefly mention some specific contribution and movements of civil society actors including NGOs in Bangladesh.
Economic and social empowerment

The most notable success of Bangladeshi NGOs lies with the betterment of socio-economic and political conditions of the rural poor in the country that government initiated programs have failed for decades. It is estimated that nearly 10,000 large and small NGOs are involved in poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, literacy, health services, and micro-credit programs among the rural and urban poor (Samad, 2003). As Kabeer points out, the NGO sector in Bangladesh has sought to compensate for various deficits which characterize the lives of poor and marginalized groups (IDS, 2003). Many analysts term it ‘empowerment’ of the millions of rural people particularly the poor and women. The NGOs have contributed to all dimensions of empowerment – economic, social and political. The economic empowerment came as a consequence of successful programs of micro-credit. Bangladesh is the birthplace of the *micro-credit movement*, spearheaded by Prof. Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank.

### The Story of Two Poor Women

Micro-credit has changed lot of poor women in Magura, Bangladesh. The women are Nabiron and Khurshida. Once life was miserable to them. Timely intervention of two micro-credit NGOs, *Srijoni* and *Jagoroni Chakra*, came forward and made their life meaningful. Fortune smiled on Nabiron, an abandoned housewife and mother of a son at Chhonpur village in Magura Sadar Upazila when *Srijoni* trained her and offered her a loan of Tk. 8000 (US $ 140) in 2002. Making good use of the loan, she set up a bamboo based cottage industry on the land of her father. She started making bamboo traps to catch small fish called “Ghuni”. She used to make a fish trap at a cost of Tk. 15 (25 cents) and sold it at Tk. 35 (58 cents). “Now I earn Tk. 3000-4000 each month and my son Shafiqul is attending school', said Nabiron. With the profit she also built a tin-shed house. Another women, Khurshida of the same village also became wealthy when *Jagoroni Chakra*, another NGO intervened about two years back. Two years back the poor housewife and mother of three children had to live in extreme poverty. Because her rickshaw puller husband could not feed his family of five members with his meager income. Jagoroni provided her with a micro-credit of Tk. 10,000 (US $ 165). Utilizing the credit she also started manufacturing “Ghuni”. Now her monthly earning rose to Tk. 4000 ($ 67) per month. Thus micro credit has not changed their life but also revived lost glory of bamboo-based cottage industry at Chhonpur and surrounding villages.

*Source: The Daily Star (Dhaka), 25 November 2004.*

As box demonstrates that the development of micro-credit in Bangladesh is a glaring example of reversing of the process of pauperization through local resources and institutions. This is regarded as the most successful initiative since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971.

As tables 4 and 5 demonstrate, big and small NGOs and grassroots groups have wide and sustained networks and infrastructure for extensive programs on family planning, basic health care, and education in the rural and urban areas. In primary literacy sector, the NGOs have outperformed the government and private schools. In the health sector, the role of the NGOs is expanding every year. BRAC health program covers all 64 districts in
Bangladesh reaching 31 million population extending various types of basic health care services such as pregnant women, HIV and HIV awareness raising program etc. In education BRAC has introduced both formal and non-formal education programs. BRAC schools have about 1 million students and 3.12 million students have already been graduated.

Table 4: Literacy rate by type of school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School type</th>
<th>Literacy rate (class IV-V)</th>
<th>Literacy rate (overall primary)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-formal (NGO school)</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madrassah</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5: The share of NGO health spending

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(as % of Total Health Expenditure)</th>
<th>1996-97</th>
<th>1997-98</th>
<th>1998-99</th>
<th>1999-00</th>
<th>2000-01</th>
<th>2001-02</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Health</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>65.7</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>64.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(as % of GDP)

| MOHFW                            | 0.9     | 0.9     | 0.8     | 0.8     | 0.7     | 0.8     |
| NGO                              | 0.1     | 0.1     | 0.1     | 0.2     | 0.3     | 0.3     |
| Household                        | 2.0     | 2.0     | 2.0     | 2.0     | 2.1     | 2.1     |


Social justice, human rights, decentralization and political empowerment

Blair (2003) identifies the role of civil society actors in some specific areas that have implications for social justice and over all empowerment. Civil society actors have been able to press local governmental units in such areas as distributing khas land, guaranteeing access to water bodies like tanks and jheels, enforcing minimum wage regulations and assuring a fair allocation of Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards (Blair 2003). While focusing on the Nijera Kori, a leading right-based NGO in Bangladesh, Kabeer demonstrates that micro-credit, for that matter economic change, is not sufficient for empowering and protecting the poor and affected people (2003). Social justice is fundamentally important for the deprived and poor people. The problem with Kabeer is that she undermines the role of micro-credit in this respect. Microcredits reduce economic vulnerability of the poor and women. This creates a situation where women get counted upon and gain respect in their own homes and within society. In Bangladesh rural poor people and women now have different perception about their power. It means that those who are powerful in society, those who have money, they can no longer do things in the same way that they used to. The rich cannot put pressure on the poor in the way that they used to (Kabeer, 2003). It cracks the base of patron-client relationship. Rights based civil society groups focus on the cases of human rights violation, child rights, child trafficking, women rights and women trafficking, fatwa of religious clerics, and social and legal rights awareness raising activities.
In the political side, the civil society actors take more proactive role. In fact, the programs for economic and social empowerment of the people have impact on political mobilization of grassroots people. About two decades of economic and social empowerment by NGOs have inspired particularly the rural women to compete in the local government elections in 1996. Civil society actors are mobilizing and organizing the poor to take control over their own lives. They press for decentralization of power and authority of government as it would provide an enabling environment. The direct political role of civil society groups are seen in two specific times in the post-independence era. Although it came belatedly, the mass movement against the autocratic rule of General Ershad drew the NGOs and other groups of civil society. They joined hands with political forces to dislodge the regime and finally succeeded to re-establish democratic government in Bangladesh in 1991. The second case is that some NGOs, through the umbrella organization, Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) and led by Proshika supported the opposition parties and participated in their political programs against the Khaleda Zia regime in the mid-1990s. In the election of 1996 ADAB coordinated a Democracy Awareness Education Program through which 15,000 trainers ran awareness raising workshops across the whole country. Proshika had made NGOs a political factor in Bangladesh for the first time (Chowdhury, 2001). The 1995-96 role of ADAB in support of opposition parties has created a big political controversy and laid the foundation for the subsequent disintegration of ADAB and worsening relations with the political regime. On the other hand, civil society’s role in the anti-Ershad regime remains less controversial and widely supported by all political parties and sections of people. Thus it is observed that civil society actors including NGOs are quite active in establishing social justice, human rights and a democratic polity and society.

Women empowerment

Women rights and issues such as gender discrimination, trafficking, acid throwing etc. are the major agendas for many general purpose and specific-purpose NGOs and civil society actors. There has been impressive achievement in reducing gender gap in Bangladesh over the last two decades contrary to popular view. This is clearly demonstrated in the World Economic Forum Report titled Women’s Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap. This study is a first attempt by the World Economic Forum to assess the current size of the gender gap by measuring the extent to which women in 58 countries have achieved equality with men in five critical areas: economic participation, economic opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, and health and well-being. Out of the 58 countries, Bangladesh is ranked 39, but topped among the Muslim nations and in South Asia (2005). More surprisingly, Bangladesh has outperformed Malaysia (40), Thailand (44), Italy (45), Greece (50), Brazil (51), India (53), and Korea (54). This performance is largely attributed to the works of civil society actors. Bangladesh has witnessed an enhanced decision-making capacity by women and participation in the democratic institutions at grassroots level like the Union Parishad. The Union Parishad Election of 1997 is a milestone in the history of political empowerment of women in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh enacted a law for direct elections to reserve seats for women in local level elections. In 1997 through an Act, the Government reserved three seats for women in the union parishad where women members are elected from each of the three respective wards. In the 1997 elections, Grameen borrowers and family members captured
6.5 per cent of the total union *parishad* seats in the country. Considering that one tenth of Bangladesh’s families are involved with Grameen this percentage reflects a growing political representation among Grameen members, who constitute the bottom 10 per cent of the country’s economy. Another innovative program for rural women empowerment introduced by the Grameen Bank is called Grameen Village Phone program through which women attached with micro-credit programs can acquire digital GSM cellular phones and subsequently resell phone calls and phone services within their villages. The Village Phone program is the first rural development micro-credit facility in a developing country to target the creation of *micro-enterprises based on information and communication technology (ICT) services*. In rural areas where isolation and poor infrastructure services are often the norm, telecommunications can play an extremely important role in enhancing rural social and economic development. The Village Phone program yields significant positive social and economic impacts, including relatively large consumer surplus and immeasurable quality of life benefits. The main reasons Grameen Bank members reported for using the telephone are discussions of financial matters with family, including discussions of remittances (42%) and social calls to family and friends (44%), accounting for 86% of all calls. Social calls to family and friends frequently involve transfer of information about market prices, market trends and currency exchange rates, making the Village Phone an important tool for enabling household enterprises to take advantage of market information to increase profits and reduce productive expenses. The Village Phone is a unique undertaking that provides modern digital wireless telecommunication services to some of the poorest people in the world.

*Environmental protection and legal aid*

Another strong presence of civil society actors in Bangladesh is observed in the areas of environmental protection and legal aid. Bangladesh is experiencing serious environmental degradation. Urban air pollution, ground water contamination (by arsenic, etc.), surface water pollution, encroachment of rivers and other water bodies, improper disposal of industrial, medical, and household waste, deforestation, loss of open space, loss of bio-diversity, and noise pollution are just a few examples. In many cases, the extent of degradation has reached crisis proportions (Islam, 1999). The government agencies, in collaboration with other organizations, are implementing several donor-financed environmental projects. But they are not adequate. Consequently, a good number of environmental NGOs have become active. Many large, general-purpose NGOs now also have environmental components. The intelligentsia and members of the civil society are playing a leading role in building up the necessary social movement. Many voluntary civic organizations are emerging with environmental protection as the goal. *Poribesh Rokkha Shoptoth (POROSH)* and Bangladesh *Poribesh Andolon* (Bangladesh Environmental Movement) are prominent among such organizations. POROSH and BAPA have been making considerable efforts to protect Dhaka’s lakes, greenery, and air. Many movements and organizations are emerging based on specific issues. One example is the recent movement to save the trees of the *Osmany Uddyan*. Similar movements are observed in other districts too. There have been movements against adverse environmental impact of shrimp cultivation in Khulna. Movements have been waged against structures built under Flood Action Plan in Tangail, and against misguided development plans in *Bil Dakatia* of Jessore. With regard to legal aid civil society actors are on the frontline. Although the Government started a legal aid fund in 1994, it is not functioning properly. No official figures
on the extent of legal aid provided by this mechanism are available. In fact, judges often refer legal aid cases to NGOs in the district, rather than to the official legal aid committee (Malik). As the UNDP report on human security observes, the main providers of legal aid to the poor in Bangladesh are NGOs. More than 300 NGOs registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau of the Government list human rights and legal aid as one of their activities. However, in most instances, legal aid and human rights activities are not the primary activity of these organizations. As far as we could determine, only two organizations have provided legal aid for litigation in more than 2,000 court cases. These are the Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) and the Madaripur Legal Aid Association (MLAA). Other Dhaka-based NGOs which have provided legal aid in more than 500 court cases are *Ain-O-Shalish Kendra* (ASK); the Bangladesh National Women’s Lawyers Association (BNWLA); the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Federation (providing legal aid to women garment workers primarily for litigation against their employers); and *Gono Shahajjya Sangstha* (GSS). As a consequence, citizens themselves are also becoming more aware of their rights and the obligations of national authorities in protecting them from insecurity, through the media and awareness raising campaigns of civil society actors.

**Relief and rehabilitation**

Natural calamities are common in Bangladesh and they constitute a major human security challenge. Bangladesh is arguably the most disaster-prone country in the world. Since independence in 1971 it has reeled under the effects of 200 disasters causing 500,000 deaths, directly affecting the lives of millions of others and causing disruption to livelihoods, economic and social development (The UN Flash Appeal for Bangladesh 2004). The 2004 floods have had a terrible effect on more than 33 million people, destroying houses, crops, livestock and essential rural and urban infrastructure. The civil society actors with a long experience and widespread network are major forces for mitigating the sufferings of the affected people. During the early years following independence, NGOs primarily focused on relief and rehabilitation, and as such the government did very little to restrict their growth. DFID clearly acknowledges the role of the NGOs in relief and rehabilitation works. In the aftermath of the devastating cyclone in April, 1991, DFID channeled fund to the NGOs for relief activities. According to DFID, the NGO programs financed by ODA were successful in preventing starvation and reducing suffering in some of the worst-affected areas. Almost all people received relief supplies within a week and there were no significant shortages while the relief program lasted. NGOs in Bangladesh provide a generally effective relief delivery system and are likely to continue to do so (DFID, 2004).

**Influencing the policy discourse in Bangladesh**

The civil society actors are becoming engaged in programs and activities to influence the policy discourse in Bangladesh. It is a new move by the civil society actors in the design and oversight of public policies as part of a process of promoting more accountable and transparent governance. Proshika ran a campaign for pro-poor financial reforms under the banner of ‘kaemon budget chai’ (‘what kind of budget do we want?’) which brought a range of individuals and organizations from political parties, trade unions and community groups – including landless rural women leaders – face to face with the Minister of Finance in 1997 and helped set in motion at least the rudiments of a more consultative budgetary planning process. Since then this process has been continuing through the involvement of
different civil society groups. Notably, the government has proactively started a dialogue process with different groups of civil society before formulating national budget every financial year. It is a major success of civil society initiative. Another major initiative comes from the Center for Policy Dialogue. The CPD initiated a dialogue process in 2001 among the civil society actors as to how they could contribute to influence public policy in Bangladesh. It was aimed at achieving two objectives: (1) promoting national policy dialogues to influence the domestic policy discourse in Bangladesh and (2) formulating a set of policy briefs to feed into the pre-election (2001) debate in Bangladesh (Sobhan and Rahmatullah, 2003). The major contribution of CPD as a civil society organization is the introduction of sustained process of dialogue involving the concerned citizens of the country. During the period of 1994-2003, the CPD organized 295 dialogues at the national, bilateral and regional level (Sobhan and Rahmatullah, 2003). A significant feature of the CPD dialogue process has been its capacity to bring together a broad range of stakeholders in the policy process ranging from bureaucrats to peasant leaders. In 2000 the CPD formed 16 Task Forces for the preparation of the Policy Briefs which involve intense dialogues and consultations in different regions of Bangladesh. Finally, the Task Force Reports were publicly presented to civil society and the leaders of the political parties through organizing the National Policy Forum in Dhaka on August 20, 2001. The process continued and extended to establish the National Policy Review Forum in 2003 with participation of Prothom Alo and the Daily Star, held 8 local and 1 national level consultations (Sobhan and Rahmatullah, 2003).

Again in 2006 this initiative has started with broader participation of citizens and NGOs leaders such as Prof. Yunus. It leads to the formation of the citizens’ group known as the Nagorik Committee comprising of 27 eminent citizens as part of a civil society initiative for accountable development. The Committee was formed on March 20, 2006 on the joint initiative of the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the Prothom Alo and the Daily Star. It represents a wide spectrum of interests and concerns. Based on the key objective of ensuring ‘Accountable Development Process’, the Committee has organized its activities to make the citizens aware of their constitutional rights – political and economic. An integral part of this initiative is the preparation of Vision Paper 2020 for Bangladesh in which the future of the country is envisaged as a just and democratic society. The meeting primarily identified six core areas for its vision paper – general economic issues, social issues, information and technology, external issues and organizations, human rights, rule of law and institutional reforms, transparency, accountability and responsiveness at all levels of state activities. The context of the movement is the next general elections in Bangladesh to be held in 2007. The objective of the movement is empowerment of the people to demand an accountable development process based on equity, justice and transparency. The Committee organizes and provides support to dialogues, dissemination of information on citizens’ rights, and on ‘clean candidate campaign’ at different regions within the country (Syeduzzaman, 2006). The Committee has already arranged dialogues with the local people from different background in various districts in Bangladesh. Simultaneously, the Committee members are exchanging views with the key people in public organizations such as National Board of Revenue, Anti-Corruption Commission etc. Another case of civil society’s engagement in this direction is its role in the making of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). In
September 1999, the World Bank Group and the IMF determined that nationally-owned participatory poverty reduction strategies should provide the basis for all their concessional lending and eligibility for debt relief under the enhanced *Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC)* Initiative. The PRSP team consulted with various stakeholders. During the month of January 2002, the PRSP team held a total of 22 consultation meetings in collaboration with the BRAC, the largest NGOs in Bangladesh. Out of these 22 consultation meetings two were held at the national level and one was held with the donors. Although the level of participation of civil society in this process is not substantive, it has begun a process of being counted upon. This has huge impact on the public policy discourse in Bangladesh.

**Social movements for establishing rights and justice**

The civil society actors in Bangladesh are increasingly challenging the power and authority of state and market and thus altering the realities through social movements. Khan and Kabir (2002) have identified some of the cases of civil society participation mostly by unorganized masses – tebhaga andolon (division in three parts movement), fertilizer crisis, shrimp violence. It is not only unorganized masses but also the organized forces are coming together to institute changes and support the unorganized and spontaneous masses. Social movements and citizens groups are becoming strong and decisive as the state is surrendering to the corrupt and illiberal political elements what Khondker terms as ‘uncivil society’ (2006) and invisible market forces. In fact, Bangladesh has a long history of protests and resistance against exploitation and deprivation. In this regard, two cases of such movements maybe mentioned. One of the recent and powerful cases of social movement is the Kansat uprising.

**The Case of Kansat Uprising:** The Kansat uprising is a major case of social movement in recent history of Bangladesh that took place in the first four months of 2006 in northwestern part of Bangladesh, about 250 kilometers from Dhaka. The people formed a protest body calling it ‘Palli Bidyut Unnayan Sangram Committee’ (PBUSC) or ‘Action Committee for Rural Power Development’ under which they started making complaints against the authority about the supply of electricity for farming. Their demands included uninterrupted supply of electricity especially during irrigation period, withdrawal of minimum charge system, which was raised from Taka 35 to Taka 105, and end of harassment and corruption by the officials. Unlike rich people in the mega cities, rural people, according to the REB, pay their bills regularly; rate of payment is more than 99 per cent. Yet they become victims of discriminatory treatments and targets of government violence while the defaulters enjoy VIP status. The people in Kansat area started agitation after all appeals and efforts to get their demands fulfilled through negotiation failed. Golam Rabbani, the leader of the movement, was arrested with a threat to be killed. The people, instead of getting nervous, became resilient. The number of agitated people in the street increased in a geometric rate on 23 January 2006 --- they came from shibgonj, gomastapur, bholarhat and nababganj upazillas. After the *Parishad* had launched the movement on August 8 last year, two people were killed on January 4 followed by killing of seven on the 23rd of the same month. Then four were killed on April 6 and another was injured, who later died on April 12 and finally, six were killed. A total of 20 innocent

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4 Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative is an agreement among official creditors to help the most heavily indebted countries to obtain debt relief.
lives lost for the ‘crime’ of agitating for adequate electricity supply so that they could carry on their farming properly. All these deaths occurred due to police firing that can only be termed unprovoked, for there is absolutely no evidence of the villagers resorting to any sort of violent action that could have called for such brutality and response of ‘final resort’. The people became furious when police killed two poor young men on 4 January. In bloody incidences from 6 to 16 April 2006, the police showed their highest cruelty, attacked unarmed people in their sleep - senior people and children were not spared, villages at night found government forces behaving like foreign invaders, killers and looters. Poor peasants and workers, on the other hand, showed their highest courage and unity. It resulted in a mass upsurge of its localized version. Finally, the state bowed down to the poor people who were unarmed but held an organization of power. PBSUSP leaders and a high powered government committee signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) that brought an end to the three-and-a-half-month movement. The authority was forced to accept all of their demands. It was victory for the people. In essence, PBUSP has launched a truly civil society movement (Mazumder, 2006). Unlike the traditional voluntary organizations, such civil society driven movements are able to effectively fight against injustice and exploitation. The Kansat uprising is a unique case of civil disobedience in this nascent democracy. The people are apolitical and had no leader or spokesperson but they follow the decisions made by the committee. What is significant in all this is the spontaneous character of the movement and its organized form. People of Kansat have subsequently extended their movement to other forms of injustice such as corruption which are being perpetrated upon them in a systematic way.

V. Patterns of State-Civil Society Relationship and Human Security

The available literature on state-civil society relationship in Bangladesh demonstrates a reductionist view on the matter as it is basically perceived through government-NGOs relations, popularly GO-NGOs relations. Donors and government tend to bypass a range of actors in civil society domain while focusing their relations with civil society. NGOs being part of the civil society happily enjoy such predominance or special treatment. It is true that over the years the government has formed partnership with these NGOs in various sectors with a view to enhance human development and social empowerment in rural areas (See appendix). The same is true about the donors in Bangladesh. But this is only a part of reality. Several actions are taking place in Bangladesh where NGOs are not the only actor vis-à-vis state or donors. For example, the Kansat uprising, the 1995-96 Fertilizer crisis and the Nagorik Committee initiative, many local movements for environmental protection, peasants’ movements are not exclusively led by NGOs or a particular type of organization, rather participated by a range of diverse actors. The visibility of civil society is seen largely as a result of the lack of faith in the capacity and intention of the state to ensure the security of the people and individuals. Hence it is important to look beyond GO-NGOs relations. However, the GO-NGOs relationship is certainly a critical element of state-civil society relationship as long as NGOs are considered a vital ingredient of civil society. Besides, the organizational power and agentive role of civil society in Bangladesh are relatively of recent origin. It may appear that the analysis of state-civil society relationship is dominated by GO-NGOs relationship. Even the GO-NGOs relationship is not very old phenomenon in Bangladesh. Although four of the giant NGOs and micro-credit
organizations were established in the 1970s (BRAC in 1972, the Grameen Bank 1976, Proshika 1976, and ASA 1978), it is since the mid 1980s with the proliferation of big and small NGOs, both the government and NGOs felt the presence of relationship between the two actors. Until then the government perceived NGO sector rather an ‘object’ and perhaps NGOs were subservient to government domination or they were preoccupied with their internal expansion. It may be mentioned that from legal perspective several laws are framed to regulate NGOs and social organizations as part of civil society in Bangladesh. These are the Registration Act 1806, the Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies Ordinance 1961, the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Registration Ordinance and Rules 1978 and the Foreign Contributions (Regulation) Ordinance 1981. The first two deal with the registration of NGOs and social organizations while the last two deal with the inflow of aid. Later on government formed two major institutions to monitor activities of NGOs – NGO Affairs Bureau and Palli Karma Shahayak Foundation (PKSF) in 1990. These legal instruments have not posed any major hindrance to organizational expansion of civil society in Bangladesh. In fact, government, NGOs and donors enjoyed a stable and cooperative relationship in the 1980s primarily because of more favorable view of the autocratic regime led by Ershad. Perhaps, the reason for such view of the government was its perennial crisis of political legitimacy and preoccupation with the suppression of opposition political parties. During the Ershad regime, the NGO community had better relationship with the government. Civil society with their non-political activities, had been encouraged or just simply allowed to grow by the government of Ershad since coming to power through a coup in 1982. State provides space to various civil society groups promoting land rights, women’s rights, community-based self-sufficiency, and the like. In 1987, the Ministry of Land Reform directly involved NGOs in the program of distributing khas land to the landless peasants. In 1988, an NGO cell was created in the Cabinet Division of the President’s Secretariat and an NGO Steering Committee was placed in every concerned ministry, chaired by a divisional secretary. The devastating floods of 1988 brought the NGO community closer to government as the NGOs extensively involved in relief and rehabilitation works. In 1990, the government created a separate administrative unit known as the NGO Affairs Bureau which was meant to provide a one-stop service to all foreign funded NGOs in Bangladesh. However, during the last days of Ershad regime the NGO community under the leadership of their umbrella organization ADAB, joined people’s movement against the autocratic rule. This marked the beginning of conflictual phase of relations between the state and civil society, particularly NGOs. A large section of writers, poets, teachers, cultural activists, students and intellectuals outside the political society opposed the autocratic rule of Ershad. Jatiya Kabita Utsab (National Poetry Festival) organized by Jatiya Kabita Parishad (National Poetry Council) since 1987 is one of such initiatives which mobilized public opinion and sentiments against the military rule during the Ershad regime.

Paradoxically, the newly elected government of Khaleda Zia in the post-Ershad era remained critical about the role of NGOs. The government blamed the NGO community for its relationship with Ershad regime and also blamed for making delay in joining anti-Ershad movement (Khan, 2000: 167). The relationship between the NGO community and the NGO Affairs Bureau (NAB) became strained and deteriorated after ADAB submitted a complaint to the Prime Minister, who called for a report from the NGOAB.
The report entitled *NGO Activities in Bangladesh* blasted NGO leaders in unequivocal terms. The report portrayed NGO activities debatable and controversial. It alleged that NGOs are involved in embezzlement, irregularities, corruption and anti-state activities. Based on the report the government even decided to cancel the registration of ADAB in 1992 (Khan 2000). In the face of pressure from donor community the government had withdraw the order within a few hours after announcing it. In 1994, the government drafted the Voluntary Activities Registration Act, but subsequently was withdrawn under the pressure from ADAB. Before the February 1996 elections, some NGOs decided to involve themselves in poll monitoring and formed a coalition ‘Fair Election Monitoring Association’ or FEMA. FEMA along with other observers of the elections called for canceling the results of the elections as it was widely rigged and unfair. In early 1996, ADAB leadership joined other professional with the help of the FBCCI in establishing the *Shommillito Peshajibi Porsihod*. They took part in agitation against the government of Khaleda Zia and succeeded in gaining the confidence of Sheikh Hasina and AL leadership. The government-NGOs relationship has improved significantly following the electoral victory of opposition party AL in the 1996 Parliamentary elections. It came as a logical consequence since a major section of NGO community joined hands with the opposition political parties against the government of Khaleda Zia in early 1996. On 23 September 1996, the Hasina government formed the ADB sponsored Government-NGO consultative Council (GNCC), through a Gazette notification and the Hasina regime maintained a better relationship with the NGO community. On the contrary, the same government took over the administration of a large NGO, Gono Shahajyo Shaungstha (GSS) after investigations revealed misuse of foreign donations and gender discrimination. This was the first time the government stepped in and took over the running of a big NGO in Bangladesh. The Executive Body of GSS claimed that allegations against GSS were politically driven. After the four and a half year of legal battle, in September 2003, the High Court cleared GSS of all the charges and the management and administration together with GSS’s assets and liabilities were handed over by the Caretaker Body to a new Executive Committee that was formed (World Bank, 2005).

However, the change of political power through the 2001 Parliamentary elections reinstated Khaleda government. Having past experience of animosity with ADAB, the new BNP led coalition government did attempt to influence the NGO community and to bring into book the alleged political activities of certain NGOs such as Proshika, PRIP Trust, International Voluntary Services, Center for Development Services etc. Subsequently the government branded several NGO executives as political activists and said they had worked in favor of certain political parties before the last elections (*The Daily Star* 18 February 2003). The NGO Affairs Bureau functioning under the control of the Prime Minister's Office instituted an enquiry committee which had stalled funds totaling U.S $ 61.70 million to five of the country's large NGOs accused of financing political activities and for other financial irregularities. The ADAB as the umbrella organization for all NGOs in Bangladesh was disintegrated. A large number of big and small NGOs broke away from ADAB and formed another umbrella organization called Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB) in early 2003. It is generally viewed that the FNB is pro-Government apex body of NGOs which has 975 members as of July 2005 and the ADAB is known to
be pro-opposition apex body of NGOs (Habib, 2004). Despite the division of leadership in NGO community, the government remained committed to frame new laws and to amend existing laws to regulate the activities of NGOs. One such attempt is the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation (Amendment) Ordinance, 2004. This attempt brought the two factions of NGO community united and they opposed the proposed amendment arguing that the move would turn the private voluntary organizations into "another set of Government departments". The Government has made new rules and regulations relating to the approval of new proposals submitted by NGOs. Under the new system, NGOs are required to obtain a certificate of approval from respective working areas (from the Deputy Commissioner and the Upazila Nirbahi Officer). NGOs are also required to obtain a clearance certificate from these local officials annually as part of an already rigorous process, under the Government NGO Affairs Bureau, to secure approval for a following year's budget and funding. The Government has tightened its grip on some leading NGOs 'suspected' of being 'sympathizers' with political opposition parties, blocking clearance of funds consequently stalling poverty reduction activities of about 1,000 small, subsidiary community organizations (Samad, 2003). Another factor that angered the NGO community in Bangladesh is the proposed imposition of VAT (Value Added Tax) on some NGO activities that are deemed to be commercial as well as levying taxes on the profits on micro-credit programs of NGOs. Finally the government dropped the plan. On the other hand, the government has taken some positive initiatives and continued dialogue with NGOs at various levels. For example, the government has set up the Bangladesh NGO Foundation through a Gazette notification of Ministry of Finance on 11 December 2004 to provide financial assistance to small NGO's having not more than 10 programs, Upazillas and annual turnover not more than 50 million taka (including NGO Foundation grants). The government has been maintaining periodic consultation meetings with NGOs and civil society groups on policy matters.

It has been demonstrated that the relationship between state and civil society in Bangladesh as exemplified through GO-NGOs relations is marked by both conflict and cooperation. BRAC’s Salahuddin Ahmed sums up,

‘In the 1970s, NGOs were relief-and-rehabilitation-oriented and were not bothered by the Government. In the 1980s, as NGOs moved into the phase of development and poverty alleviation, they encountered serious opposition from the Government. This was the decade of conflict. But as we stepped into the 1990s, we came across what could be called the period of collaboration. Now NGOs work jointly with the Government.’ He added that the relationship was more productive but the threat was that they might be co-opted into the ‘official world’ instead of representing civil society (quoted in Chowdhury, 2001).

Salauddin’s observations are based on GO-NGOs relations. If the overall state-civil society relationship is taken into consideration, there are two major contradictions in government attitude towards civil society. First, as mentioned elsewhere the government tends to work with the NGOs while they ignore other sections of civil society. The governments remain overly critical about social movements, citizens’ initiatives etc. The second contradiction lies with government’s relationship with the NGOs. It has been increasingly observed that the government pursues a selective approach in engaging the NGOs in social services. The government tends to coddle with some NGOs while remain hostile to others. Another important factor is that the
donors are closely related to both the state and civil society in the capacity of funding agencies which provides them a leeway to influence the relationship between the two domestic actors. It is often a triangular linkage between state, donors and civil society with their own agenda. The problem with the donors is that they emphasize service delivery function among NGOs (Kabeer, 2003). The same is true about the state. The government prefers to deal with NGOs as development partners in rural areas in order to make effective social service delivery. The GO-NGOs relationship remains cooperative as long as NGOs do not pose any threat or hindrance to unfettered governmental actions. It also depends on the perception of political regime. Donors often play a vital role in preventing the government from being extremely hostile to NGOs operations. But donors ignore other segments of civil society except NGOs. If the broad spectrum of civil society is taken into consideration, the relationship between state and civil society remains in the early stage. The civil society is largely neglected by the state organizations. While the corrupt state easily succumbs to the pressures of donor community for implementing the neo-liberal agenda, the same is not prepared to accept the growing role of civil society in the country. In this context, Holloway (1998) poses a right set of questions which have particular significance for state-civil society relations in Bangladesh though it is invoked regarding NGOs. To him: why is it that NGOs which take foreign donations are treated and considered differently from the government which takes grants and loans? Why is it that Bangladesh NGOs receive adulatory visits from foreign dignitaries, but rarely from Bangladeshi dignitaries, and then so often only to find fault or to praise sarcastically? Through these questions Holloway precisely indicates a hostile attitude of government about civil society in Bangladesh. It maybe argued that the hostile attitude of government largely depends on the nature of the Bangladesh state. The Bangladesh state is an enigma to people within the territory and beyond. In its thirty five years of independence Bangladesh has witnessed the assassination of two heads of government in two different, but critical phases of history. The first prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on 15 August 1975 and the President Ziaur Rahman suffered the same fate in May 1981. It has witnessed the introduction of military rule for the period of 1975-1990 with brief intermission by the civilianization process (1979-1981; 1986-1990). Killing of the two popular leaders within ten years of independence was a great shock for the country and caused an unbearable stress for the nascent political process. The introduction of military rule has further weakened the political process and ultimately led to the emergence of military-bureaucratic oligarchy to run the country directly or indirectly until now. Corruption, rent-seeking and patronage, political vengeance, misgovernance and poverty are symptomatic to political crisis in Bangladesh. As Kabeer rightly points out, state actors do not only fail to protect the rights of citizens, they actively contribute to their violation. The extensive controls over the allocation of valued resources exercised by state officials at all levels have given rise to widespread rent-seeking and corruption (2003). Unable to pay the necessary bribes, mobilize the necessary contacts or exercise the necessary clout, it is the poor who go without water and power, receive poor quality services in health and education, are harassed by the police and the law courts at the instigation of the rich and left isolated when government contracts for infrastructure and embankments are diverted or misspent (Kabeer, 2003). In this process, state has
become coercive and omnipotent. The power and authority of government remains overwhelming and all encompassing. The syndromes of deficits such as rights deficit, development deficits, democratic deficits and governance deficits have become widely visible in the society. With such character of state in Bangladesh, there has been widespread reliance on either government or patron-client relationships, often rooted in family and kinship networks, to gain any form of access (Kabeer, 2003). The democratic governments in the post-Ershad era had paid lip service to empowering the poor and underprivileged and protecting the citizens from violations of rules and laws, but did little to implement their rhetoric. It appears that the political parties in Bangladesh have developed a civil society-bashing attitude amid growing social movements and citizens’ initiatives.\(^5\)

While the rigid and hostile attitude of government is a fact, over the past years the civil society has carved its own niche in society. The civil society actors are in continuous search for a meaningful role in the society for addressing security and development concerns in the country. They have achieved a remarkable success in various aspects as mentioned earlier which have clear implications for human security. The changing role of civil society in Bangladesh is facilitated by the domestic changes induced by global factors. With the end of the Cold War and the advent of the process of globalization the government has begun to encounter growing pressures from outside and within to withdraw from some traditional domains of power and functions of the state. Besides, the growing partnership between donor community and civil society organizations in Bangladesh has forced the state rethinking its relations with civil society actors. One way of understanding the growing reliance of donor community on civil society actors specifically NGOs, is the rising level of funding. According to a report of the World Bank on *Economics and Governance of NGOs in Bangladesh*, the share of aid going to NGOs has risen sharply in the country from an annual average of 233 million US dollars (0.7 per cent of GDP) in 1990-95 to 343 million US dollars in 1996-2005. On the other hand, total aid to Bangladesh fell from an annual average of 1.62 billion US dollars (4.9 per cent of GDP) to 1.39 billion dollars (2.9 per cent of GDP) during those periods. The share of aid to NGOs in total aid to Bangladesh has risen from 14.4 percent in the first half of the 1990s to 24.6 per cent since then (*News Today*, 2006 May 13, 2006). The donor community also engages civil society through dialogue process exemplified in the Country Assistance Strategy of donors known as CAS Consultations. Another major factor behind the changed context is the increasing transnational networks of civil society actors. Global and regional civil society actors have forged alliances with national and local NGOs, citizens’ initiatives, social movements, professional associations etc. They have dramatically increased over the past decade. NGOs in Kathmandu, and think-tanks in Dhaka have partner organizations in Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. Environmental movements or human rights groups have

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\(^5\) It is reported recently that the political leaders representing the major political parties squarely criticize civil society in Bangladesh. A former minister and one of the top leaders of AL attacked civil society by questioning the acceptability and legitimacy of civil society (*Janakantha*, Dhaka, 1 May 2006). Even the leader of opposition and the former prime minister questioned the role of civil society while commenting on the role of *Nagorik* Committee 2006 for searching honest and competent candidates in the elections of 2007 (*The Daily Star*, 8 June 2006). Similarly, an influential central leader of ruling BNP made a scathing attack on civil society by calling them ‘good barber’ in sarcastic meaning of the Bengali word for civil society (*Janakantha*, Dhaka, 1 May 2006).
wide-ranging networks throughout the region. This has given a critical space for autonomous power and functions of civil society groups at various levels. More importantly, the civil society empowerment has been substantially facilitated by these networks as well as partnership with the donor community. In this process, the civil society actors have developed their own skills and knowledge which is a major source of their power. Now there is increasing realization that civil society has strengths in specific fields of knowledge. This newly found knowledge and power of civil society actors are vitally important for addressing the situations of human insecurity. Internally, the success and acceptability of NGOs to people changed the attitude of the state. Another domestic factor for change is the growing role of media in Bangladesh. Both printed and electronic media are very strong and active in Bangladesh. They have been graphically exposing the cases of violations of human rights, cases of corruption and malpractices by political leaders and bureaucrats in Bangladesh. Against this background, the government in Bangladesh often seeks partnership with civil society actors, sit together for discussing policy issues (for example, national budget), and take actions against coercive behavior of particular state machineries (for example, police, customs, tax, water, electricity, land etc.). Leaders and policy makers started talking about human security. More importantly, the state is getting familiar to use the specialized knowledge of civil society actors for development under conditions of globalization. Governments have human resources and material but lack participatory approaches. NGOs and other civil society groups, conversely, are known for their flexibility, ability to reach the poor and to empower marginal groups, challenging gender-stereotypes, while advocating and implementing participatory development. A convergence between the two can produce significant results that may enhance human security. This collaboration is more urgent than ever before in view of the challenges of human security in Bangladesh. Meaningful and effective state-civil society partnership may arise in the context of a particular set of institutional and political conditions. The challenge remains how GO-NGOs relationship can be transformed into state-civil society relationship. It is not to do away with NGOs, rather making it comprehensive and meaningful for people and individuals. As development was the key word for both government and NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s, human security can be a key word for civil society empowerment as well as for meaningful and functioning state-civil society relationship.

Conclusions

The preceding analysis clearly demonstrates that Bangladesh faces challenges of human security in various dimensions ranging from basic needs to environmental degradation and natural disasters. These challenges are substantially different from war-torn societies or transition economies where human security agenda are generally pursued. It is also observed that despite perennial political crises, rent-seeking state, and natural disasters, Bangladesh has achieved remarkable success in some basic socio-economic indicators. One of the major contributing forces to this achievement is the growing empowerment of civil society. Initially it was basically the empowerment of NGOs that substantially changed the development landscape in vast rural areas of Bangladesh. The successive political regimes since 1971 have failed to bring about meaningful changes in basic social services such as poverty, health and education. The NGOs as a critical element of civil
society have caused positive changes and by the end of 1990s people started to feel the
effects of their activities. The NGOs have outperformed the government in poverty
alleviation and literacy sectors. Although the NGOs remain a critical actor, the civil society
as a whole started to contribute improving peoples’ lives since the mid 1990s. Bangladesh
has been witnessing a transformation from the NGOs to civil society empowerment. This
transformation has profound implications for human security. While NGOs focus on the
poor and rural women particularly for social services delivery and advocacy, the civil
society actors are concerned with all segments of people and dimensions of power relations.
It is not just the poor or women only, the citizens in general face the threats of human
insecurity. Realities bit all sections of people. Only exception is the elites and beneficiaries
of the government. People want nothing big and lofty, they just want a shelter to live, food
to survive, education for children and unquestionable and speedy remedies for any
injustice and harm done to them. Human security is just that. Although the government
would appear to be the obvious institution to mitigate the threats of human security,
widespread corruption and lack of accountability has meant that it is part of the problem
rather than the solution (TIB, 1997).

Despite the success of civil society actors, the threats of human security in Bangladesh
continue to exist extensively. Particularly, non-economic threats are becoming more and
more visible with the governmental failure and effects of neo-liberal market reforms. Some
critical factors need to be considered for strengthening the process of civil society
empowerment in Bangladesh. First, it is necessary to change the perception of reducing
civil society to NGOs. This reductionist view is widely seen among government, donors
and many scholars-activists. Empirical evidence suggests that civil society actors are
becoming deeply engaged with the issues of human security such as rule of law, containing
violence, stopping human rights violations, corruption of public officials and business
sector, state suppression, police violence, criminal activities in society, environmental
degradation, free and fair election issues etc. NGOs are not the only or even leading actors
in many of these issues. Social movements, think-tanks, citizens’ groups/committees, labor
associations are playing the critical role depending on the issue and context. The NGOs
with their organized networks and infrastructure are certainly participating and supporting
these citizens’ initiatives. The basic problem with NGOs is that they cannot hold the state
accountable for its misdeeds of commission and omission, nor do they provide or facilitate
citizen inputs to policy making (Sobhan, 2006; Blair, 2003). According to Blair, civil
society can perform better in this regard. NGOs are better in service delivery. There is also
a concern that the way NGOs are getting involved in commercial activities, over the years
they may develop vested interests with governments, business and donors. The NGO
community must be aware of this scenario. Second, the most crucial success of NGOs in
Bangladesh over the past two decades is micro-credit. But if it is compared with the need of
the poor people in the whole country, then it still remains a small portion of support. One
reason for such reality is that the NGOs tend to exclude the ultra-poor in both microcredit
and social programs. According to the Bangladesh Economic Survey 2005, non-formal
sector stands out as the biggest source of small loans, accounting more than half of the
money advanced to micro borrowers both in rural and urban areas. Non-government
organizations share only 21 per cent of the micro credit disbursed in 2004, while borrowing
from non-formal sources like relatives and commercial moneylenders accounted for 52 per
cent of the total. Borrowings from NGOs even trailed behind the amount people borrowed from their relatives. NGOs met about 37 per cent of the total credit needs of the poor in the urban area reflecting stronger credit activities in towns while in rural area the share of NGO is about 21 per cent (New Age, Dhaka, 22 June 2005). It is necessary to expand and diversify micro-credit programs of NGOs incorporating the lowest and upper crunches of society. Third, the politicization process of civil society actors needs to be stopped. Many NGOs, think-tanks, labor associations often become deeply partisan blurring their differences with political society. Some analysts term it as the syndrome of polarization among the civil society actors. It is very important for the civil society actors in Bangladesh to establish credibility among different sections of people. The self-interested NGOs and civil society organization must be identified and eliminated. Fourth, the operations of NGOs in particular need to be transparent and accountable in the eyes of people and through the laws and regulations of government. The civil society actors in general need to focus on expanding and deepening of representation and democratization by incorporating diverse issues and actors in society. The question of leadership is another critical area that needs to be decentralized. Many civil society organizations including NGOs run as a one-man show although they are performing some good works.

Fifth, the funding sources need to be diversified as most of these organizations are heavily dependent on foreign donors. The alternative strategies for resource mobilization have to be creatively searched due to limitation of local private charitable donations. It is a big challenge for the civil society actors in Bangladesh. Unlike developed countries and many developing nations such as India, the affluent people and large business houses in Bangladesh do not come forward with substantive donations for civil society engagement. It has become almost a stereotype thinking that the NGOs and other civil society organizations feed on donations either from foreign donors or the government. The growing reliance of NGOs on commercial activities for resource mobilization may be a boomerang for them as long as they are identified with civil society. In this context, Holloway shows that there are twelve different approaches to resource mobilization for NGOs: revenue from earned income; indigenous foundations; individual philanthropy; building grassroots organizations; resources from government; sustainability resources from foreign development agencies; corporate sources; building reserve funds and endowments; conversion of debt; microcredit programs; social investment, and; use of internet (2001). These approaches are clearly relevant for civil society actors in Bangladesh.

As the empowerment of civil society is equally dependent on external factors, the triangular relationship between government, donors and civil society is in need for reinvention. By their policy declarations and official commitment both the Bangladesh state and donor community attach critical significance to the challenges of human security. As mentioned earlier, the concept of human security owes to the 1994 Human Development Report, for that matter the visions of UNDP, for its origin and development. In reality, the views of both the government and donors suffer from linearity and stereotypes. There is a common perception between donors and the government about reducing civil society to NGOs. The partnership with civil society is reduced to GO-NGOs or Donors-NGOs frame. In 2005, the World Bank has published a report entitled: The
Economics and Governance of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh. As the title suggests the report deals with various dimensions of NGOs operations in Bangladesh. Donors are obsessed with cost-effective nature of the NGOs operations. A study of the role of NGOs in poverty alleviation in Bangladesh has shown that NGOs are becoming more efficient and cost-effective in service delivery to and the empowerment of the rural poor. For example, BRAC has been providing effective health and population programs to its target groups; 73 per cent of those registered in their program regularly use its facilities as compared with 15-20 per cent who make use of government health facilities. Similarly, the drop-out rate in the BRAC primary education program is as low as 2 per cent compared with 60 per cent in the government primary school (Sobhan, 1998). The major contribution of the report is that it envisages a strategic compact between Government, NGOs, donors and clients where each party needs to strengthen its current practices and demand more from each other in order to improve the quality of NGO interventions (2005).

The civil society is absent in the minds of donors. The talk of civil society is fraught with technical mentioning in different reports and papers by government and donors. The interests about civil society actors by the donors are primarily confined to use them as a force of pressure to the governments of aid recipient countries for neo-liberal economic reforms or serving strategic goals of Western powers. If donors are genuinely interested about human security, they need to change their outlook. Instead of a strategic compact between government, donors, NGOs and clients it needs to be a compact between government, donors, civil society and other stakeholders. NGOs and clients appear to be formal and restrictive actors with limited scope and agency. It has to be broad-based and comprehensive. What is missing in the thinking pattern of government and donors is redistribution of power not just services. The NGOs by their organizational nature and functions are constrained to bargain with government and donors. It must be recognized that there is a popular discontent with the state of affairs in the country. A strong civil society including the NGOs can continuously negotiate and renegotiate with the state and donors for power, representation, democracy and justice. Civil society actors can press the state to be more accountable and equitable in allocating resources and safety net mechanisms. This does not mean that the civil society actors perceive government, donors and business as their rivals implying a constant conflict and contestation between these actors. For the government and donors it is an inescapable fact to recognize the role of civil society as the ‘agency’ not as the ‘objects’ for social change in Bangladesh.

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