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# **Civil Society or ‘Comprador Class’, Participation or Parroting?**

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**Abstract:**

This paper critically looks at the interfaces between the ideal notions of civil society and participation within the remit of Bangladesh's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) formulation process. On the one hand, the idea of civil society has likened as a renaissance and is often considered to be the most likely route out of development 'problems', particularly in the poor countries. Dominant development discourses have scripted the liberal interpretation of civil society as the only game in town. However, on the other hand, as a consequence of growing criticism on the failure of top-down development approach in the late 1960s, and throughout most of the 1970s, there was a sudden upsurge of interest that ordinary citizens might have a part to play in the development process. A generalised consensus took shape that people's participation in projects is an important component of development programmes and a means to their success and hence participation has turned out to be a 'new paradigm' of development. The PRSP framework, that precepts a romantic marriage between civil society and participation, was foisted by two major International Financial Institutions (IFIs) as a condition of further debt and other development assistance for all poor countries. Participation from 'all relevant stakeholders' including civil society was trumpeted as a significant policy shift from previous development prescriptions of these IFIs. This article presents observation from 36 semi-structured interviews with civil society representatives including key people who prepared and finalised the PRSP of Bangladesh and the review of 6 daily national papers (September 2004 – October 2005). This piece argues that, in theory, participation can be manifested as the 'key' for development, but in practice, participation can be an iron hand in a velvet glove. Participation can turn into parroting and often resemble similar views those are 'expected' and required to validate external framework. Moreover, through such process of mainstreaming participation, an interest group within the civil society can emerge who has the technical knack of producing development policy according to donor recipe with some flavour of participation. This work therefore asks whether civil society and participation should be used as technologies of social control or as anti-hegemonic and anti-clientelistic forces in order to empowering marginalised members of the society.

**Key Words:** civil society, participation, Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), development, Bangladesh

## **Introduction:**

Since the end of the Cold War, the idea of civil society has undergone something of a renaissance and is often considered to be the most likely route out of development 'problems', particularly in the poor countries (Diamond; Linz and Lipset 1988, Harbeson; Rothchild and Chazan 1994, Landell-Mills 1992, Lewis 2002, Mercer 2003). There is even considerable evidence that civil society has become the *de facto* and *de jure* representatives of particular segments of the population in the design, implementation, and monitoring of public policy (Gurza Lavalle; Houtzager and Castello 2005). Civil society can also serve a crucial watchdog function by holding the government accountable to the people (Stiles 2002). Like civil society, participation has emerged as another catchphrase within the ambit of development policies. Richardson (1983) argues that prolonged failure of top-down development approach led to fundamental changes in public attitudes to authority, making people no longer willing to accept decisions made by others on their behalf. This led to believe that participation by the poor and marginalised people, for whom most development programmes are designed, would make development policies more realistic and also accelerate targeted outcome. This paper explores the contemporary nexuses between civil society and participation, especially in the context of poverty reduction prescriptions for the poor countries taking Bangladesh as a case study. It starts with providing brief theoretical discussions on civil society and participation within the realm of development. These are followed by how the notions of civil society and participation have been meshed up into one of the latest development prescriptions, such as Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), suggested by the international financial institutes (IFIs) such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Civil society participation have been lauded as a positive policy shift (Booth 2003, Oxfam 2004) in IFIs' development approach where past policies of these organisations have been criticised for being hierarchical and top-down those failed to deliver. This piece presents empirical evidence from Bangladesh and investigates the nature and process of civil society participation in the construction of Bangladesh's PRSP. This leads to ask in the conclusion whether civil society participation should be used as a smokescreen or as anti-hegemonic and anti-clientelistic forces in order to empowering marginalised members of the society.

## **Civil Society and the discourse of Development**

The term civil society has been associated with the formation of a particular type of political authority, for example, an authority that seeks greater good and/or pursues common goals.

But the ambiguity of the concept arises from its changing meaning over time. To illustrate, for seventeenth and eighteenth century thinkers, civil society was defined in contrast to the state (Kaldor 2004, Chandhoke 1995). Civil society was a society characterised by the rule of law, based on certain fundamental individual rights, which were enforced by a political authority also subject to the rule of law<sup>i</sup>. However, there remain major differences in its classical origin and contemporary usage, especially in the context of (international) development. For the World Bank, civil societies are varied in their nature and composition<sup>ii</sup>. The Department for International Development (DFID), UK (2010) comprehends that the notion of civil society is rooted in Western European and North American political thought and experience<sup>iii</sup>. The discourse of development in which civil society has come to signal the ensemble of associations which exist outside the state (mostly as an ‘opposition’) including the private sector<sup>iv</sup> (Bratton 1988; 1994, Makumbe 1998, Rothchild and Chazan 1988). The most important issue in the growth of civil society is the formation of collective ‘consciousness’ that shapes perceptions and experiences of the society. For example, when large numbers of the population of a community, town, region, state, or even at a global level, begin to conceive of common needs, truly powerful changes can occur, as can be seen concerning civil rights, environmental, gender and regional separatist issues<sup>v</sup> (Jenkins 2001). This premise is based on the liberal/pluralist conception of society’s relationship to the state, where civil society as an anti-hegemonic force serve to aggregate and articulate mass opinion and preferences of the marginalised members of the society. However, according to Lavalette and Ferguson (2007), the present vogue of civil society is a result of the way the concept has been used over recent years to protest against the impact of global neo-liberalism, third-world debt and imperialist war. Civil society organisations are often identified as key sources of mobilisation and resistance to the power of the global financial institutions and the central states of the most economically powerful nations. Dominant development discourses have scripted the liberal interpretation of civil society as the only game in town (Mercer 2003), and inherently good for development (Bickford 1995, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Orvis 2001).

‘Civil society empowerment’ initiative is well underway among donor agencies in terms of ‘delivering’ development and is seen as a key element in the promotion of human rights, democratisation, hastening economic development, reducing poverty and strengthening civil society as a goal in itself (Archer 1994, Howell 2002, Howell and Pearce 2002, Lewis 2002, Stiles 2002, 1998). In 1996, the idea that development should be undertaken through civil

society had become an industry orthodoxy. Major studies had been completed, or were in progress, by bodies such as the World Bank and the DFID (Whaites 2000). In supporting civil society, donor agencies pursue a combination of broad goals. However, the principal hazard of an emergent civil society lies in the active and well-meaning efforts of international agencies and bilateral and aid donors to fabricate a civil society. In South Asia but even more so in Africa and post-socialist Europe, a civil society is being manufactured by donor resources (Sobhan 2000). This has been the case for Bangladesh too where the notion of civil society was deeply embedded in its social structure before any donor intervention or ‘invention’ both in traditional and organised forms<sup>vi</sup>. The idea of civil society is not entirely new in Bangladesh but recent talks and discourses can be seen as pushing the idea by international development agencies as part of their development and ‘good governance’ agenda (Lewis 2004, Stiles 2002). Recent times have witnessed a significant influence and patronage from donors as White (1999) suggests that ultimately the donors have ‘captured’ NGOs and civil society in Bangladesh. Perhaps, this has happened in accord of Bangladesh’s dependence on foreign aid as a significant number of development programmes are funded by foreign aid including a number of government projects those are running totally on external economic sources.

Civil society assistance is not limited to promoting democracy or good governance. It also accords with a broader agenda of promoting neo-liberal economic policies (Howell 2002, Howell and Pearce 2002, Howell and Lind 2009). However, the optimism that grew during the late 1980s and early 1990s concerning how civil society would offer a space through which collective interests could be represented, providing a voice and means of empowerment to previously excluded people, has become matched with scepticism over these claims (Hickey and Bracking 2005). Perhaps the most comprehensive example in this regard is the involvement of civil society organisations in the formulation of national poverty reduction strategy papers which is discussed in this paper with empirical evidence from Bangladesh case.

### **A need for participation: counting reality from bottom or legitimating development from top?**

A need for engagement of local people in the development process is being felt, perhaps, because the top-down approach to development has often failed to deliver, and participation by local people is thought to be the key to sustainability by development thinkers<sup>vii</sup>. In the

early days of development, donor agencies, both bilateral and multilateral, were organised and shaped by the understanding that their mission was to *deliver development to the poor countries*. (Long 2001, emphasis added). Local people had hardly any significant role in this process apart from supplying cheap labour required for development projects. From the 1970s to the 1990s, a generalised consensus took shape that people's participation in projects is an important component of development programmes and a means to their success (Cornwall 2000, Laderchi 2001, Richardson 1983). Chambers (1997) argues that participation by community members was assumed to contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of investment and to promote the processes of democratisation and empowerment. There were even claims that participation constituted a 'new paradigm' of development as participation meant empowerment and mutual respect and enabled poor people to express and analyse their individual perceptions and shared realities<sup>viii</sup>.

According to the World Bank (2001), participation increases public accountability, reduces corruption and bureaucratic sclerosis, and provides better inputs to public policy. The World Bank (1996) defines participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them. What the World Bank sees as participation is not only participation by the poor and disadvantaged groups. Rather, the Bank seems seeking participation beyond this level, what it calls 'stakeholder participation'. Such illustration by the World Bank sounds 'generous', 'attractive' but are oversimplified. This outlines one specific form of participation cooked up by the World Bank. Although this definition clubs together all stakeholders, general citizen are not being mentioned as one of the stakeholders. It ignores inequalities which affect the ability of different stakeholders, particularly those who are poor and marginalised (Tandon and Cordeiro 1998). This also conceals the hierarchical and hegemonic relationships among the stakeholders as it does not say whether participation will take place on equal terms for 'all stakeholders' point of views or whether this is a condition imposed by a stronger stakeholder in this process. Participation, therefore, seems to add-up new spice in the development recipe that ostensibly implies discarding mainstream development's neo-colonial tendencies, Western-centric values and centralised decision-making processes. It appears to stand for a more inclusive and 'bottom-up' politics, which takes two dominant institutional forms. First, it seems to aim at promoting local community 'empowerment'; and second, ensuring 'ownership' of development programmes where the state and/or international development agencies seek civil society involvement for policy development and agenda setting<sup>ix</sup> (Kapoor

2005). Participation therefore purports to represent *vox-populi* and emerges as new development orthodoxy.

However, critics insist that consensus-based decisions, made in ‘participatory’ meetings and consultations, are single, as most often they are. They overlook or suppress community differences and tensions by frequently ignoring class, gender, inequality, power relations and other thorny issues (Mohan and Stokke 2000, Mosse 2001). Often decisions are made on the basis of inadequate participation; for example, beneficiaries are consulted *after* the programme design and goals have already been set<sup>x</sup> (Kapoor 2005). The tendency of participatory processes to seek consensus may only conceal that such consensus is more apparent than real and actually represents the wishes of the most powerful players (Johnson and Mayoux 1998: 165 – 166). Therefore, participation may not only be seen as a new development orthodoxy but also as a ‘new tyranny’ (Cooke and Kothari 2001), a legitimising means where it is also critiqued for failing to deliver development.

### **The PRSP framework and the marriage between civil society and participation**

The PRSP framework was introduced in 1996 by the World Bank and IMF for the poor countries in order to centralise their lending mechanism as well as to synchronise development assistance by other donors. The first core principle of the PRSP approach is that it should be country owned, based on broad-based participatory processes. Although the idea of participation by civil society was a relatively new element in the discourse of the IFIs that has been operationalised with the introduction of the PRSP process, it is observed that a clear definition was missing and what exactly was suggested and expected by ‘participation’ was not clarified<sup>xi</sup> (Dijkstra 2005, World Bank and IMF 2005, Molenaers and Renard 2003, Meyer, Schmidt and Schmitt 2001). The World Bank stressed that participatory process itself would vary greatly from country to country because of each developing country’s unique set of political and social institutions, and an idiosyncratic history of civil society participation (World Bank 2002 a: 5). An Oxfam report (2004) and Booth (2003) argue that perhaps the ‘process conditionality’ of including participation in PRSPs was problematic and contradictory but had nevertheless opened new spaces for dialogue in many countries, and the political profile of poverty issues in-country had thereby been raised.

Criticism was always at the centre of many debates that ‘participation’ in the PRSP context means just ‘consultation’ and ‘cooption’, not ‘joint responsibility’ or ‘joint decision-making’



(Eberlei 2007, Oxfam 2004, Bradshaw and Linneker 2003). Nevertheless, critics have identified a number of limitations of ‘participation’ in the PRSP process. To illustrate, for the governments, participation was clearly a conditionality imposed from creditors, to which they have had no alternative but proving that they are in compliance, regardless of their own agendas on the subject and depending on how weighty the resource packet involved. ‘Participation’ and ‘consultation’ do not mean same things – what was named participation in the PRSPs in general could best be described as consultation (Dijkstra 2005, Oxfam 2004, Molenaers and Renard 2003, Knoke and Morazan 2002, Meyer, Schmidt and Schmitt 2001). Sometimes the governments opted for technical consultations with *sample* communities, which in some countries were validated in particular districts (municipalities). Practically most countries convened consensus building workshops in each region (province, department) and a final national one. Through ‘invited consultation’ participation at best could lend a ‘false legitimacy to autocratically made decisions’ (Alexander 2004: 12).

PRSP design in most countries did not start from scratch. Some of the most important decisions have been ‘pre-empted’ by prior government-IFI agreements, for example, on PRGF conditionalities and HIPC triggers (Booth 2003) or other programmes which they had to fulfil to satisfy donors (Fraser 2005). A handful of donor-pleasing programmes and projects, were further combined with some civil society consultation. It was clear that the policy prescriptions within PRSPs did not come from participation processes, and instead continued to reflect the backstage influence of the donors’ own agendas as conditions were imposed by donors and/or were dominated by the interests of the non-poor elite<sup>xiii</sup> (Eberlei 2007, Oxfam 2004). In some cases, a rather narrow view of ‘civil society’ was taken (Booth 2003) and these processes were dominated by urban, professional groups, humanitarian NGOs and their umbrella bodies and were convened using highly technical language. This had effectively excluded significant membership organisations such as trade unions and producer associations, peasant groups, religious associations and professional associations (Fraser 2005, Oxfam 2004, Booth 2003). Only sporadic attempts had been made to engage the existing media, parliamentary committees, audit offices and watchdog bodies in monitoring and holding the government to account for delivering on PRS commitments, or to strengthen their capacity and commitment to fulfil this role (Driscoll with Evans 2003, Eberlei and Henn 2003). In most countries among the stakeholders, ‘the poor’ and especially poor women were heavily underrepresented and even neglected in most PRSP processes (Bliss 2006, Eberlei and Siebold 2006, Oxfam 2004).

## **Bangladesh – a case Study**

This section presents evidence from 36 semi-structured interviews<sup>xiii</sup> (although views from all interviews have not used in this article) convened in 2006 with civil society representatives in Bangladesh including key people who prepared its first final PRSP. This section also includes observation from the review of 6 national daily newspapers of Bangladesh for 13 months prior to the finalisation of Bangladesh's PRSP<sup>xiv</sup>.

The Government of Bangladesh decided to start the preparation of an Interim-PRSP (IPRSP) at the 2000 Bangladesh Development Forum meeting. Since then the status of the PRSP has arguably been elevated to 'the' document<sup>xv</sup> that will guide external financing of Bangladesh's development and poverty reduction agenda (Hossain 2002). Preparation of the IPRSP was the responsibility of a taskforce constituted in December 2000 and headed by the Secretary of the Economic Relations Division of the ministry of Finance<sup>xvi</sup>. To show a 'poverty reduction strategy document' at the Paris Consortium<sup>xvii</sup>, the IPRSP was prepared hastily before the donor meeting and the Finance Minister of Government of Bangladesh took the document with him in order to prevent any awful situation in front of the donors. The manner in which the participatory process was conducted has been described as an *eyewash* (Akash 2002). The I-PRSP process in Bangladesh was limited within inter-ministerial committees<sup>xviii</sup> which did not include any representative from the civil society, the private sector and development NGOs (Deb, Raihan and Ahamed 2004).

Followed by the IPRSP, the government in 2005 prepared its final version of the first PRSP. The General Economics Divisions (GED) of the Planning Commission of the Ministry of Finance undertook the lead to prepare a full PRSP from the IPRSP. As stated in the PRSP, the GED states that four *effective* participatory strategies were put in place. First, a high-powered National Steering Committee headed by the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister was established to steer the process of preparing a full-blown poverty reduction strategy. Second, a National Poverty Focal Point was established within the GED of the Planning Commission to act as the secretariat for the strategy formulation process. Third, 19 theme areas were identified for which thematic groups were constituted under the relevant ministries for preparation of thematic reports that would feed the final strategy<sup>xix</sup>. Fourth, regional consultations were undertaken with representation from a wide cross section of society including elected functionaries and grass roots organizations. Over and above the

specific steps initiated by the Government, the availability of a National Poverty Focal Point also galvanized a secondary process of participation in which active segments of civil society undertook their own consultative exercises, and channelled their outputs to the formulation team. With the completion of the draft PRSP in December 2004, a concluding round of consultations were initiated prior to finalization. The most comprehensive of these was with Members of Parliament both through the medium of the parliamentary standing committees and through three special all-party meetings held at the behest of the Speaker of the Parliament under the aegis of the Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy Project. In addition, consultations were held with development partners, civil society/academics, NGOs, media representatives, eminent persons, women spokespersons, and adivashi/ethnic minorities' representatives. *The final PRS document incorporated relevant suggestions emerging from these consultations* (GED 2005: xii, emphasis added).

This is worth noting that the PRSP does not provide any indication what 'relevant suggestions' were incorporated and how they were prioritised. In following sections, government's claim of including civil society participation in the PRSP is contrasted by using the views expressed by civil society representatives, in order to disinter the actual practice that took place in the production of Bangladesh's PRSP.

### **A company of parrots**

This section delineates a process how a panoptic and ostensible form of participation help creating a 'participating circle'. This circle is being used to meet the requirement of 'participation' from 'all relevant stakeholders' in legitimating an external as well as hierarchical development approach. Farida Akhter (2006), a women activist, and B. K. Jahangir (2006), a political anthropologist, argued that there were ambiguities in the conceptual and structural arrangements of participatory consultation meetings for the PRSP of Bangladesh. They insisted, participants at the consultation meetings had two options. First, one could praise whatever had been prepared or proposed in the PRSP and then might feel honoured and privileged for being invited to the meeting. Or, one might realise that the framework had not enough space for views from outside. The organisers were in full control of the process; they could record, ignore or even delete any argument if they wished. Mahfuz Anam (2006), editor of a national daily newspaper, argued that in an overnight and all of a sudden participation cannot produce views and voices from the bottom<sup>xx</sup>. The reality in Bangladesh is both development and governance are deeply hierarchical and bureaucratic.

Participation from wider sections of the society can barely feel welcomed as a conducive mechanism is yet to be developed.

Divisional level consultation meetings have been heralded as the key feature in claiming Bangladesh's PRSP to be 'participatory'. Concerns were expressed that participation could not be ensured through arranged (day-long divisional) meetings. M. M. Akash (2006), a professor of economics, insisted that poor people are intimidated, shy or embarrassed to talk before local elites and such fear increase when people from even further up the hierarchy are present. It was the task of the policy makers to understand the psychology of the poor who are shy and prone to be inexpressive rather than being articulate on poverty and poverty reduction in those consultation meetings (Haider 2005). Shihab Uddin Ahamad (2006) and Rezaul Karim Choudhury (2006), are NGO activists, explained that local level officers were asked to organise those meetings and were overwhelmed by the directions from the top. Neither were they interested in going beyond nor had they enough time to do so. They had to ensure that people who were attending to 'secure' participation would echo the voices from the top.

“Quite often, officials at local levels have to organise meetings at very short notice because the time of the people at the top is more valuable than district level officials and local participants. So a participatory meeting could be arranged only when people at the top were able to manage their schedules to visit. District level officers had to be present at these meetings because their central bosses were visiting the territory and therefore, it was their utmost responsibility to satisfy their superiors. Given the underlying intention of gratifying their central bosses, they had very little time to ensure that poor people were present. Especially when nobody is going to investigate whether poorest of the poor are in the meeting. If the audience appears to have included a few participants from poor backgrounds that is alright for both the organisers and district level officers. An awkward situation in presence of central people is not desired so the district organisers have to be selective” (Choudhury Rezaul K. 2006).

Yunus (2006), country's sole noble laureate and a vanguard for micro-credit, observed that the participatory meetings for the preparation of the PRSP were pre-designed with a standard format.

“The reason is, if the standard procedure forces someone to go to village or remote area and to listen to the poorest, then to save his/her job s/he will maintain that and things will move forward in accordance to that format set by the elite at the centre. In the one hand, organisers go to villages or slums because they have to do so. On the other hand, participants in these meetings participate because they have been asked to join and may remain silent if they feel uncomfortable in an unfamiliar environment. The PRSP committee cannot claim the consultations took place in local people’s own set-ups. These were convened in an orthodox format. Participation in the PRSP was ‘standard’ participation and there was plenty of speculation that it did not genuinely intend to include ordinary people in this exercise” (Yunus 2006).

Critics also questioned a deadline for preparing and submitting the PRSP. They argued in a given time it was not possible to get to the unorganised and unsupervised people because it would have required more time and effort (Barkat 2006, Ahamad 2006, Ahmed M. 2006). Therefore, the people who developed the PRSP went to readily available organised groups, for example the beneficiary groups or clients of the NGOs. Anu Muhammad (2006), a professor of economics, insisted that participants were invited to these consultations who are somewhat informed on relevant issues by the NGOs they are attached to. They know what they need to say, they also know the language of these meetings; the vocabularies, the development jargon and buzzwords, and thus can fill the gaps with their skills left by the people at the top, especially when there is a need for participation. Catchphrases are introduced into this circuit and these groups learn these words quickly and use them regardless of whether they understand the phrases or not. What they understand is that if they can use those terms they will be invited to more participatory meetings (Akash 2006, Muhammad 2006).

However, it is also observed that only people who were already known to the organisers were invited to district level and national consultations. Q. K. Ahmad (2006), an economist and developmentalist, and Farzana Islam (2006), a professor of anthropology, observed that it seems like the organisers wanted to listen to something that they already knew. The entire group of the selected people was part of a participating circle in the development business. Atiur Rahman (2006), an economist and development activist, insisted that in those meetings PRSP committee (or people they asked to organise meetings at district levels) invited people from selected NGOs whose work they were familiar with and some so-called civil society

representatives who they knew very well. It was not interactive; rather its purpose was to serve ‘mutual interests’. Rasheda K Choudhury (2006), an education activist, explained that traditionally in Bangladesh the people who are in charge, invite only those people who they know will support their approach and avoid those who are known to have alternative views (Choudhury Rasheda K. 2006). According to Nazrul Islam (2006), possibly there were big arrangements, media coverage, to witness participation by like-minded groups. In Bangladesh this is more akin to ‘a company of parrots’ that fulfils everyone’s purpose to maintain the ‘formalities’ of participation.

“...in the national level meetings a few common names and faces were present who generally go to most consultations, for example the same names can be found for good governance, gender, health, education and similar issues. The PRSP was extremely restricted. I was invited to couple of such meetings possibly because the organisers knew me” (Arefeen 2006).

#### **5.4 Emergence or creation of a ‘comprador class’\***

It has been gleaned that the trickle-down approach has been the dominant paradigm in the construction of Bangladesh’s PRSP. This has helped in ensuring an undue share of development fund for the elites, political leaders, bureaucrats and others involved in the process. These groups have taken their share which means that only minimal development assistance has gone to the bottom and actual poor (Majumder 2005). Anam (2006), Ahmad (2006) and H. K. Arefeen (2006) noted that the political leaders and the elites generally have not possessed the capacity to build-up development plans but have wanted their share from these plans. They lack required technical skills and knowledge. As a consequence, they have to depend on bureaucrats’ and consultants’ technical knack. The whole process can be perceived as what Mitchell (2002) described as the ‘rule of experts’. Experts enjoy a privilege position in brokering development; they assume a growing importance and capture

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\* This is not to mean to indicate classical Marxist concept of class. Instead it was adopted from a view expressed by one of the informants who referred to a particular interest group by using the phrase ‘comprador class’. The word *comprador* comes from the Portuguese for *buyer* (Heartfield 2005, Gantman and Parker 2006). But in English it has acquired a rather more critical sense in terms of the social relations of imperialism. Following this latter usage, Gantman and Parker used the word to denote a native of a colonised country who acts as the agent of the coloniser (Gantman and Parker 2006: 26). Vitalis (1990) argues that as ‘agents of foreign imperialism’, they act ‘against the interest of the national economy’. He illustrates that the category of comprador can encompass a wide variety of economic interests and activities, from importers to contractors to commission agents to bureaucrats with control over licenses to investors in industrial joint ventures. The common denominator is a foreign connection of some kind and the negative impact presumed to have on the political economy.

significant resources in the mediated cultures of development (Mosse and Lewis 2006). Critics pointed out that these consultants are one of the major obstacles to national development and poverty reduction. They however emphasised that this is not to mean that all the bureaucrats and consultants are alike but most of them, intentionally or indirectly have been absorbed into this process. Ahmad (2006) observed that dependence on the bureaucrats and consultants has not prevented the elites and political leaders dictating how development programmes will be prepared. The bureaucrat and consultant groups are given two choices. Either they can prepare policies as asked by donors and the government and can benefit from the process (in an apparent win-win situation). Or, they can refrain from doing so which is very difficult, especially for the bureaucrats, in a politically hierarchical society like Bangladesh. In the latter case, government and donors would find replacements who would follow instructions and take things forward in their way.

Arefeen (2006), a professor of anthropology, argued that it is not only the hegemonic mechanism that has forced bureaucrats and consultants to become assimilated into this process. There are many who are very happy to be inside this arrangement and make their fortune from it. Very few can desist from the temptation to become assimilated within the hegemonic structure, and those few are not united. Apart from this small group, the bureaucrats and consultants have largely seemed uninterested in any action which does not serve their personal gains (Ahmad 2006). Psychologically they are not attached to the nation's interest; rather they believe in the propaganda of those they have to trust in order to remain in the business (to serve their patrons who ensure their 'brighter' prospects). Their children go to English medium schools which are separate from mainstream education, they like to purchase property overseas and therefore what happens to Bangladesh as a whole is not their true concern. As a consequence, the policies they produce are made to follow orders and to ensure that political leaders, their patrons and this group have been looked after in a balanced way (Choudhury Rasheda K. 2006, Arefeen 2006). Nonetheless, some form of participation must be included to justify their stance and critics have compared participation in the PRSP of Bangladesh as whitewash.

Selim Al-Deen (2006), a play-writer and professor of Dramatics, and Arefeen (2006) suggested that the development programmes these people devise are based on external prescription and hence are distant from local (and cultural) knowledge. Nazrul Islam (2006) and Farida Akhter (2006) observed that this is very visible in the way they do things. For

example, the language they employ is foreign. Not only is this inaccessible to the most of the people in the country but also often seems over intricate for the many donors whose first language is not English. This clearly indicates that the purpose is to satisfy their most powerful patrons<sup>xxi</sup>. Seraj (2006), a media personality and agricultural activist, noted that not only in terms of language, but also this group had also adopted vocabularies which are distant from the common people. They make their arguments in terms of economics, statistics and growth that are only understandable by less than one percent of the total population. Poverty reduction in a country context should not only include the participation from the economists, funding agencies, bureaucrats, consultants and political leaders; but also should incorporate larger sections of the society for whom the programmes are designed. But critics argued that a process geared to satisfying government and donors, and bestowing rewards on bureaucrats and consultants, shows how little these people are interested in actual poverty reduction in a given society (Haque 2006, Akhter 2006, Islam N. 2006).

“The ruling class of Bangladesh welcomes and expects frameworks like this where there is space for mutual benefit and interest. The political leaders, the bureaucrats, the elites and neo-elites need such programme to establish a firmer grip on national development and also to secure their *material and political interests*. Whenever a proposition is made or a step taken to privatise state owned sectors, the elites and neo-elites are elated because ultimately they enjoy the benefit with or without the association of international collaborators. Therefore, somehow they persuade the process to move on. I call them as a comprador class *who always accept external approaches and enjoy benefits from these*. Along with elites and political leaders, bureaucrats also represent this group and benefit from it” (Ahmed M. 2006, emphases added).

Frameworks like the PRSP open up more such opportunities and the government cannot work as an autonomous body beyond these interest groups. The ruling class and the elites can see their ‘stake’ in such frameworks and therefore accept the policies without resistance. They did not take any critical stance against the PRSP framework as a package, and did not add or exclude any components of it either. There are many other policies in Bangladesh, such as, in health; education; and natural resources, did not require participation. But in the case of PRSP, there was a necessity for participation, and they incorporated some ‘bogus’ participation (Muhammad 2006). However, it was not explained why the PRSP framework



was accepted or why participation was sought, or what was better in this framework than previous Five Year Plans and why the shift was inevitable (Islam F. 2006, Muhammad 2006, Ahmed M. 2006). A docile group from civil society, developmentalists and researchers is being formed in various sectors of the society. This group had done exactly as they were directed (Muhammad 2006, Ahmed M. 2006, Ahamad 2006). In a Bangladesh context this was an interesting development. This can be likened to what Alavi (1972) explained for docile attitude of civil society. He asserted that in such process civil society cannot autonomously represent the mass population. Instead they act as a consenting group for state or international agencies. Inside the government there are bureaucrats and outside the government there are NGOs and consultant groups in this category. These groups are the Bangladesh part of an international development industry and act as a local franchise of their international counterpart (Muhammad 2006). They have no dissimilarity in their thinking or approach to their global patrons. Any announcement from the World Bank and IMF is reverberated and supported by these groups. Mozaffar Ahmed (2006) and Muhammad (2006) explained that the emergence of these groups can be understood from two positions. Firstly, they agree to act like the donor agencies because of the temptation of quick money and thereby become part of the hegemonic, hierarchical and politicised administration. Secondly, such a group has been created carefully with high salaries and other material benefits to work as ‘middlemen’ between the country and the international agencies. This group may be perceived as comprador intellectuals (Constantino 2000). They oppose any critical intellectual production at home or in the diaspora, and are linked like the class with which they are allied to imperial interests and policies of which they are the main local beneficiaries. Edward Said understands that they are the kind of intellectuals who choose to ‘passively allow ... a patron or an authority to direct [them]’ rather than ‘represent ... the truth to the best of [their] ability’ (Said 1996: 121). Constantino argues that they provide defences for the indefensible, for example, huge foreign debt, privatisation, deregulation, import liberalisation and so on. They seek to discredit all alternatives to the neocolonial model of development. Comprador intellectuals are like cosmetologists who prettify the grim face of neocolonial reality (Constantino 2000: 425). An important feature of such process is that the common interests of local elites and external organizations whether they be foreign governments, multinational corporations or international agencies. External interests are maintained and represented by this ‘collaborative class’ within the economic and developmental arrangements in which foreigners hold the major stake (Smith 2009). The ‘mutuality of interest’ across national boundaries between national economic elites and senior

management of trans-national corporations and banks produce a ‘transnational class formation’ of an international oligarchy with local and international ‘wings’ which ensured that public policy supported the interests of international capital (Becker and Sklar 1987). This envisages the order where external interests as thus included in the policy process, indigenous interests not represented by the elite are excluded. The government needs such groups to secure more aid and better relationships with international organisations that eventually play a crucial role for their political prospects. On the other hand, donors also need these groups for their agendas to be appropriately reflected in ‘locally owned’ policies.

## **Conclusion**

A few important points need to be clarified that serve as the basis for the continuing discussion and drawing a conclusion for this piece. First, as conventionally defined, civil society is clearly a western (or northern) construct. The thinkers have developed the concept based on their situated values and experiences. Second, despite the notion’s origins in Europe, some scholars have effectively extended the idea of civil society beyond western/European experiences. This makes clear that there is more than one way to think about and apply the concept. Finally, the notion that different sets of values and experiences can give rise to different conceptions or applications of ‘civil society’ leads us to the insight that it should not be seen as a static phenomenon. Moreover, its marriage with participation into development programmes is subjected to a plethora of organisational demands. For example, bureaucratic review and approval procedures, budgetary deadlines, and/or reporting requirements such as the collection of statistics (e.g. participation rates, frequency of meetings, gender breakdown of participants). This impedes participation being far from inclusive and bottom-up (Kapoor 2005). The discussion of civil society participation is therefore needs to be understood through the differences between rhetoric and reality. On the one hand, it is replete with grand-sounding promises of empowerment of the marginalised, and on the other hand, in practice this often takes the form of enlisting people in pre-determined ventures and securing their compliance with pre-shaped development agendas (Cooke and Kothari 2001, White 1996). A combination of civil society and participation provides an attractive package that crank-up the legitimising endeavour for foisted development frameworks, especially when ‘participatory development’ is also subjected to criticism for not being able to deliver.

Furthermore, translating voices (generated from ‘participatory’ approach) into influence requires more than ways of capturing what people want to say; it involves efforts ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ (Gaventa and Robinson 1998). From within the authorities, responsiveness is contingent on wider institutional changes and the political will to convert professed commitment to participation into tangible action. Institutionalising participation in policymaking would require that political processes themselves become more open and participative – a process that is beyond the remit of the PRSP exercise (Piron and Evans 2004). Changes in policy do not necessarily lead to changes in outcome. Policies can exist as intentions, or as symbols, but may never be put into practice. Lots of good policy exists which is not implemented properly, reflecting a gap between policy making and policy implementation. This requires strong political vision and concerted efforts from political leaders, bureaucrats, policy-makers and civil society (Li 2007). This paper therefore argues that participation needs to be recognised as a political issue; quite opposite to the romantic notions of ‘inclusion’ and normalisation process of external development agendas. There are always questions to be asked about who is involved, how, and on whose terms. Enhancing participation to empower the poor requires more than ‘inviting’ people to participate through incentives or by offering them ‘spaces to talk’. It requires active engagement in nurturing voice; building critical consciousness; widening spaces for involvement in decision-making; and building the political capabilities for democratic engagement within various prongs of social structure. Unless this is recognised and fed into policy making process, a push for ‘participation’ from the top may remain as rhetoric and be used to authenticate an external agenda (Kamruzzaman 2009). A quest for universal mechanism for mainstreaming IFI loans and donor assistance through a monitorable, manageable and manufactured civil society has severely undermined the pluralistic and polyphonic character of civil society and its development. Presumptions adopted in the PRSP framework are based in large part on commonly shared western values and historical experiences, and, appear to leave little room for extending the idea of civil society in assorted developing country contexts – where difference, rather than commonality, is the rule. Through a preferred type of participation, local interest groups may be created and/or emerged as by-products in such process. Some of these groups will be ‘parroting’ in the guise of participation and that will be deemed to be *enough* to rubber-stamping a hegemonic relationship. Whereas some groups will act as ‘compradors’ under the façade of civil society, as demonstrated from Bangladesh’s PRSP experience. The notions of inclusion and empowerment through participation then at best appear to be mere lipservice, and, at worst a disingenuous stage-show to maintain neo-liberal

development agenda. Civil society, therefore, as a vehicle for seeking commonweal and pursuing collective interests turns out to be a very weak strategy and politically motivated. A strategy that is congruent to the 'politics of the governed' (Chatterjee 2004), where politicisation of civil society (as a technology of social control) has marginalised the poor people instead of putting forward their needs and demands. Overall, positive changes in the development mindset through civil society participation, at least in the PRSPs, remain a distant reality. 'Participation' by 'civil society' (broadly speaking) and thereby ensuring 'ownership' of the PRSPs were the carrot that actually offered the IFIs (and other donors) some leeway to recuperate their policy exporting strategies against the failure (and criticism) of structural adjustment programmes.

Nevertheless, it is also true that channelling donor supports as well as monitoring and evaluating progress are practical concerns for development assistance. Perhaps this has led the donor community to come up with a mechanism where both 'progress' and aid effectiveness can 'effectively' be measured that can be replicated to almost every aid-receiving communities preferably by only changing its cover-page and prefaces. As stated above, such a quest for *one size fit all* approach fundamentally contradicts with pluralistic features of both civil society and participation (two major components those deemed to be positive steps forward for donor policies and have received widespread acclamation from the academics and researchers alike). This universalistic approach also undermines cultural; social; regional; behavioural and historical diversities of poor countries where civil society may exist in very different (and non-institutionalised) forms than the West and whose perception towards development and poverty reduction may be quite differing from growth based economic principles. Therefore, this is my contention to propose that instead of masquerading civil society and participation for glossing over external prescriptions, IFIs and donor communities should rethink how diverse forms of civil societies can be supported in different country contexts to build and sustain an inclusive and truly participatory mechanism, vis-a-vis to a unilineal framework such as PRSP, in order to promote local endeavours towards poverty reduction. I am aware that this proposition might be refuted as a chaotic one. But, it is more likely that, in contrast to token participations from consenting groups (and some clients/beneficiaries of various development projects) whose rent-seeking psychology help endorsing often incompatible external development prescriptions, these country specific policies will match up the theoretical promises of civil society and participation and advance the hopes and enthusiasm raised from these.

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<sup>i</sup> Kaldor (2004) observes that the term was linked to the concept of ‘civility’. It meant respect for individual autonomy, based on security and trust among people who had perhaps never met. She explains, it required regularity of behaviour, rules of conduct, respect for law, and control of violence. Hence, a civil society was synonymous with polite society, a society in which strangers act in a civilised way toward each other, treating each other with mutual respect, tolerance and confidence, a society in which rational debate and discussion become possible. Whereas, Kumar explains, up to the end of the eighteenth century, the term ‘civil society’ was synonymous with the state or ‘political society’. Here it reflects precisely its classical origins. He further illustrates that ‘civil society’ was a more or less direct translation of Cicero’s *societas civilis* and Aristotle’s *Koinonia politike*. Locke could speak of ‘civil government’ along with, and as an alternative term for, ‘civil or political society’. Kant sees *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* as that constitutional state towards which political evolution tends. For Rousseau the *etat civil* is the state. In all these usages the contrast is with the ‘uncivilised’ condition of humanity – whether in a hypothesised state of nature or more particularly under an ‘unnatural’ system of government that rules by despotic decree rather than by laws (Kumar 1993: 376). Civil society in this conception expresses the growth of civilisation to the point where society is ‘civilised’.

<sup>ii</sup> The World Bank uses the term civil society to refer to the wide array of non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations that have a presence in public life, expressing the interests and values of their members or others, based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) therefore are a wide array of organisations: community groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), labour unions, indigenous groups, charitable organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, and foundations (The World Bank 2010).

<sup>iii</sup> Civil society embraces: institutionalised groups (such as religious organisations, trades unions, business associations and co-operatives), local organisations (such as community associations, farmers’ associations, local sports groups, non-governmental organisations and credit societies) and social movements and networks (DFID 2010).

<sup>iv</sup> Habermas (1996: 365) understands civil society as ‘associations, organisations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere (and (...)) institutionalises problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organised public spheres’.

<sup>v</sup> Robert Cox (1999) sees civil society itself as a field of global power relations – involved in the reproduction of global capitalist hegemony but also containing the potential to organise counter-hegemony at this level. Thus, he insists that in the first instance, states (as agencies of the global economy) and corporate interests seek to use civil society in order to stabilise the social and political status quo that is globalised capitalism, for example through state subsidies to NGOs which orientate the NGOs towards operations in conformity with neoliberalism. Yet in the second dimension, and Cox uses the phrase ‘bottom up’ to describe this, civil society is the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalisation can mount protests and seek alternatives. In addition, Howell and Pearce (2002) argue that implications for global civil society and its developmental processes can be understood through two main points. First, people are ‘agents’ and second, people are ‘social beings’. When it is said, people are agents, this acknowledges that they have ‘agency’ – the means or ability to make (political) change happen, or to have some effect on things around them. This process legitimises an intellectual space, one in which it is recognised that all individuals through their diverse associations and organisations have the right to contribute to discussions about how to organise their society, deal with problems and ultimately define what kind of development is required and desired. For Ottaway and Carothers (2000), civil society is virtuously dedicated to giving citizens a voice, while political society is power-hungry, self-interested, and considerably less virtuous.

<sup>vi</sup> ‘Traditional’ civil society organisations in Bangladesh can be found comprising of students, lawyers, journalists, religious charities, cultural activists and so on (Hashemi 1995, Hasan, 1999, Zaidi 1970) which is outstandingly visible in times of natural disasters and various relief works. In addition, formal civil society has been playing strategic role in strengthening the process of democratisation since the language movement (Rahman 1999), in fact, the movement against the military dictatorships of Ayub Khan and H M Ershad, and even the war of independence, were often led by civil society organisations rather than political parties (Hasan 1999).

<sup>vii</sup> Kapoor (2005) observes that two decades ago participation was anathema to transnational organisations such as the World Bank and IMF. Now, in the aftermath of sharp criticism about the top-down and exclusionary character of their structural adjustment programmes, not only do they embrace participation with confidence but also they make it a condition of assistance. Such as, for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) especially, debt relief is contingent upon a poverty reduction strategy (PRS), which in turn requires local ‘ownership’ (World Bank 2003). Recipient governments are expected to form ‘partnerships’ with civil society organisations

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during the preparation of their PRSPs. Whereas McGee with Levene and Hughes (2002), describes the participation agenda as a social technology of control for the Northern actors – to impose particular conditions and particular values as well as to neutralise resistance.

<sup>viii</sup> This shows that a need for fast-growing engagement of local people in the development process was being felt, perhaps, because the top-down approach to development had often failed to deliver, and participation by local people was thought to be the key to sustainability by development thinkers. Chambers (1997) questions the top-down approach of development and insists that the puzzle is how and why errors were so deeply entrenched in the beliefs, thinking, values and actions of development professionals. These included managers, scientists, planners, academics and consultants, of many disciplines, working in many organisations, such as aid agencies, national bureaucracies, research and training institutes, universities and colleges, and private firms. How could they all have been so wrong and wrong for so long? He asks how these errors were possible and why they were sustained for a prolonged period of time.

<sup>ix</sup> The process of participation in development appears to be pulled in two directions at once: being promoted as benevolent, while professing neutrality in order to ‘empower the Other’ (Kapoor 2004). In first instance, there is an unmistakable self-righteousness that is being embraced in such an approach to participation. Here the mentality of the ‘burden of the fittest’ prevails: not only is pride taken in the philanthropic idea of ‘us’ helping ‘them’, but also in the assumption that we (elites and professionals) know better than them (impoverished Third World communities). The ‘empowerment’ agenda in such an approach gives it an almost sublime character, for example, it is naturally progressive and tends to flow as blameless and honourable (Kapoor 2005).

<sup>x</sup> Kapoor (2005) explains, in the meeting space itself, there may be several micro-power processes at play. For instance, rhetorical devices – polemical or sensationalist arguments, technical or esoteric language, misrepresentation or over-representation of evidence, loud or aggressive speech – can unduly influence opinion or silence and intimidate participants. While sometimes overt, these devices can be subtle, too, as when the meeting convenor invites technical or scientific ‘experts’ to speak to (to persuade) community members. Therefore the very condition of having to seek a consensus may also be a problem.

<sup>xi</sup> As stated in the World Bank’s participation *Sourcebook*, the mechanisms of participation can be participatory research (*i.e.* perceptions of the poor), information dissemination, consultation (informal and structured) and the formation of committees and working groups on issues dealt with in the PRSP (World Bank 2002 b: 238).

<sup>xii</sup> An Oxfam (2004) report suggests that almost everyone involved in PRSP formulation is a middle-class technocrat. This was the case regardless of whether those people were women or men, or represented donors, government, international or local non-government organisations (NGOs) or other Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). The result of this bias was often consensus – but it was rarely a consensus informed by the participation of poor women and men, and as such is unlikely to be pro-poor.

<sup>xiii</sup> Interviews were carried out with the Chairman of the National Steering Committee for the PRSP, the secretary of the National Steering Committee for the PRSP, the lead consultant for the PRSP and other consultants, as well as members of the main drafting team for the PRSP (thematic team leaders from the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, BIDS). In contrast to this group, interviews were also carried out with a number of academics, well known researchers and leading economists in the country, distinguished media and cultural personalities, top personnel in NGOs working on poverty issues, development activists, leading journalists, representative from ethnic groups, writers, leading thinkers and the sole noble laureate of Bangladesh.

<sup>xiv</sup> Six Bangladeshi daily newspapers (three were in Bengali and three were in English) were selected for review over a period of thirteen months (October 2004 – October 2005). We chose the time of October 2004 to October 2005 because this was just over a year before the final version of the PRSP of Bangladesh was prepared. The contents for this review were selected and comprised discussions on poverty, civil society, participation and the PRSP of Bangladesh. News items containing the titles with the words like *poverty*, *poverty reduction*, *PRSP* and *development* featured in selected newspapers during that time were coded in NVivo and used for qualitative content analysis.

<sup>xv</sup> At the time of writing this paper a draft national five year plan is on the table ‘for consultation’ with civil society and the donors. The Government of Bangladesh has decided to go back to producing five year plans after developing two PRSPs.

<sup>xvi</sup> Taskforce members included other Secretaries, Additional secretaries and Joint Secretaries from the Ministries of Finance, Women and Child Affairs, Social Welfare, Youth and Sports, Planning, Local Government and Rural Development, Statistical Division and the Prime Minister’s Office. Two professional consultants were recruited to lead the drafting of the PRSP. The fact that the Government has sought to finance the PRSP process through external financing rather than investing its own resources is indicative of the political marginalisation of the PRSP (Hossain 2002).

<sup>xvii</sup> Paris Consortium was the platform of donors who have operations and assistance programme in Bangladesh.

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<sup>xviii</sup> According to Deb, Raihan and Ahamed (2004), an eleven-member Task Force, headed by the Secretary, Economic Relations Division (ERD), and drawing on representatives from the key ministries, was set up in late November 2000 to oversee the preparation of the Bangladesh I-PRSP. The Task Force included the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and 10 Secretaries from the Finance Division, Statistics Division, Ministry of Social Welfare, Rural Development and Cooperative Division, Local Government Division, Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, and Planning Division.

<sup>xix</sup> According to the GED, 'the thematic groups effectively functioned as a wide-ranging partnership between public sector ministries and research and professional institutions and agencies. The thematic exercise also played a significant role in motivating the Ministries and Divisions in an intensive process of reviewing and examining their own policy areas for all major cross-cutting, macroeconomic and real sector issues. The process of policy ownership of PRSPs in the public sector thus acquired renewed vigour by ensuring full participation of the principal actors in the public sector and obtaining from them outcome-oriented thematic reports' (GED 2005: xii).

<sup>xx</sup> Sanchez and Cash observed that the lack of appropriate institutional frameworks for participation has led both to widespread failure to facilitate broad based participation and poor quality participatory processes for those who can participate. This weakness in process has deeply affected both the quality of PRSP contents and national ownership (Sanchez and Cash *undated*). Participatory consultation, planning, and learning are vital but difficult in a country whose governance has so far often characterised as obedient and lacking in policy-oriented civil society organisations (Mutebi, Stone and Thin 2003).

<sup>xxi</sup> Booth (2005: 5) argues that PRSPs have almost everywhere suffered severe slippages. The root cause was that those who exercised real power in countries were not interested in promoting required reforms. Most decisions were made informally, by small groups linked together by networks of clientelism and patronage.