

**Participation in theory and practice in the production of a Poverty Reduction Strategy  
Paper (PRSP) – the case of Bangladesh**

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I solely am responsible for the interpretation of data and other mistakes in this research.

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**This research is dedicated to**

My parents,

The poor people of Bangladesh (and other parts of the world), most of them are very hard-working and in my opinion deserve better living, and

The scholars, thinkers, philosophers and activists who inspire us to dream on and fight for a better world

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**Abstract:**

This research interrogates the idea of participation in theory and practice in recent development thought, taking Bangladesh's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) as a case study. The PRSP framework, the latest in the 'prescription series' from two globally influential trans-national monetary organisations, has been operationalised as a condition for their various aid and debt relationships with poor countries. However, at the same time, the PRSP approach purports to be 'country-owned', tailored in each country through a participatory process. Possible contradictions between genuine participation and its imposition as a condition for obtaining debt and aid led this study to investigate whether participation actually enhanced Bangladesh's PRSP process. An extensive literature review was carried out and a wide range of data was collected through a multi-method approach. Thirty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted with a number of civil society representatives and key people who prepared the PRSP of Bangladesh. A review of six national daily newspapers from Bangladesh was carried out over 13 months prior to completion of the PRSP, and a total of 129 articles, editorials and letters were analysed. Interview transcripts and news items were coded in NVivo and subjected to close qualitative content analysis. In addition, an online survey (primarily based on closed questions) was posted on the Internet to collect the views of Bangladeshi citizens. Four hundred and sixty eight people from Bangladesh and other parts of the world responded to the survey and their views were analysed in SPSS.

This thesis explores how the idea of participation was used as a smokescreen to cover up a universal one size fits all approach. Participation was used for validation and authentication of an externally foisted framework which was designed to tighten the hegemonic control of international financial organisations over poor countries. This work also suggests that poor countries can 'argue very little with the biggest crocodiles while living in the same water' in the process of conforming to or rejecting any external prescription for poverty reduction. At the same time, the hegemonic structure of the international development process creates 'comprador interest groups' in local societies that assist in introducing and establishing such frameworks. Participation attempted to add a flavour of local ownership, but in reality local people had very little input in the production of the PRSP. It is argued that if the PRSP of Bangladesh was prepared in a genuinely participatory manner it would have included cultural and religious contexts, and also adopted Bengali as its primary language so that most people could have been involved in this process. This work suggests that poverty reduction is not



about well-documented and eloquently drafted policy but rather that success in fighting against poverty depends crucially on the implementation of policies. A universal framework undermines and/or supersedes the local cultural contexts and dynamics of poverty, politics, polemics and debates about regional and international development. It by-passes human agency and local efforts towards poverty reduction, and therefore may not suit all national contexts. A decorative form of participation may validate a universal framework prepared in a non-poor society within an elitist frame of mind, but will only contribute to backing-up a growth-based neo-liberal agenda instead of reducing inequality and poverty in any given society. This research also asserts that poverty reduction should not be mere rhetoric and slogan. It needs strong political vision and concerted efforts from political leaders, bureaucrats, policy-makers and civil society representatives. These commitments are highly unlikely to be found in the clientelist attitude of an aid-seeking, docile government, especially when aid is dependent on various conditionalities, and the relationship between aid-givers and aid-receivers is deeply hierarchical.

## **Chapter – 1**

### **Introduction – Another brick in the wall**

## 1.1 Prologue

According to Katherine Marshall (2008), the World Bank enjoys a special position today in the world of international development what Marshall calls as ‘catbird’s seat’ – a privileged place affording a unique vision and broad overview, as well as advantages of access. In some countries, the Bank’s influence is extraordinarily broad, extending to day-to-day issues and fundamental strategic choices. It can be a trusted advisor or a stern arbiter (Marshall 2008: 5). She argues that today the World Bank is widely regarded as a lead voice supporting the economic and social development of poor nations. She also observes that the Bank has, increasingly over the years come to see itself and to be seen as an intellectual leader that draws together many strands of development thinking (*ibid*: 74 – 75). Moreover, she insists that the Bank’s position has sometimes been termed as ‘bully pulpit’ – that is, the opportunity to preach (in her words, in a ‘positive sense’) on the need to mobilise support for aid in general and good development ideas in particular (*ibid*: 109). Such views, from a professor of Georgetown University and senior advisor to the World Bank, reflect the unprecedented authority of the World Bank in much mainstream literature and in the politics of development in many poorer countries. This research critically looks at these views and challenges these kinds of analyses from critical standpoint and empirical evidence taking the production of Bangladesh’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) as a case.

The executive boards of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) had suggested a new framework for poverty reduction in Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) and/or other poor client countries in December 1999 (IMF and IDA 1999 a). According to the Bank and the Fund, PRSPs were supposed to be prepared by respective governments with the participation of all major stakeholders in the country’s development, i.e., parliament, civil society organisations (CSOs), sectoral ministries, regional banks and international donor agencies (IMF and IDA 1999 a, IDA and IMF *undated*). The World Bank also insisted that the PRSP approach emphasised the interdependence of all elements of development – social, structural, human, economic, environmental, and financial – and advocated a holistic long-term development strategy, with the developing country governments in the lead, both ‘owning’ and directing the strategy (World Bank 2002 a). In general, PRSP aimed to

describe a country's macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programmes over a three year or longer horizon, to promote growth and reduce poverty, as well as associated external financing needs and major sources of financing (World Bank 2001).

This chapter outlines some general features of the PRSP framework. It looks at the background of the PRSP framework; how the PRSP approach has been imposed as a conditionality of debt relief and further loans from the World Bank and IMF; the role of PRSP in connection with previous poverty reduction prescriptions for poor countries by the international financial institutions (IFIs); the notion of 'ownership' and 'participation' (in this framework) the experience of other countries in making their PRSPs and finally an overview of the Bangladesh case. It is perceived that this general discussion about the approach itself and other countries' experiences will provide this research with a strong basis upon which to understand the purpose of 'participation' in this framework. It is also believed that this will help in illustrating the Bangladesh case in the following chapters of this thesis. A precise research question is also set out at the end of this section.

The PRSP framework had been officially incorporated into all International Financial organisations' (IFIs) development policies and programmes and was endorsed in 1999 as the basis of all future concessional lending to low-income countries, as well as debt relief under the enhanced HIPC Initiative. In addition, the IFIs identified a few priority areas, for example, sound macroeconomic policies<sup>1</sup> and structural reform policies, such as trade liberalisation and banking sector reform; appropriate sectoral policies and programmes; improved governance; and realistic costing and appropriate funding. These were considered to be imperative in bringing economic growth to the developing world, and therefore, turned into conditions by the Bank and Fund that had to be met before concessional lending for a PRSP could be approved (World Bank 2002 a). It was agreed by the boards of the Bank and Fund that concessional lending and debt relief under the HIPC Initiative would be based on Poverty

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<sup>1</sup> In the PRSP Sourcebook (World Bank 2002 b), the Bank and Fund laid out their understanding of what constitutes 'sound macroeconomic policy'. They suggested that there exists a consensus in the development community, on what is 'good macroeconomic policy', and that this policy package should be applied in all developing countries.

Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) (IMF and IDA 1999 b). It was also made tangible that making a PRSP would be the link between the countries and World Bank and IMF's lending programmes, debt relations and other development assistance. Since then several multilateral and bilateral donors in addition to the World Bank and IMF have indicated that they will only support activities that are clearly spelled out and given priority in the PRSP documents (Swallow 2005).

The PRSP tool has thus become among the most important documents for national planning and communicating priorities to development partners, and it lies increasingly at the centre of development assistance and debt relief to poor countries (Swallow 2005, Driscoll with Evans 2005). As of May 2008, fifty-nine countries have a full PRSP, and in addition to this, Interim PRSPs (IPRSPs) of nine other countries can be found in the World Bank website<sup>2</sup>. Analysts generally agree on two major achievements of this framework. First, poverty reduction has been brought to the centre of national planning processes, so that sector investments need to be clearly justified in terms of their impacts on poverty. Second, the PRSP processes have generally been more transparent and participatory than other national planning processes (Booth 2003, Hanmer; Ikiara; Eberlei and Abong 2003).

The processes of 'ownership' and 'participation' (from wider sections of the society) have been heralded as major steps forward in development thoughts in the poor countries, though critics of the PRSP approach have likened the framework to a twenty-first-century '*gosplan*': an ambitious long-term planning tool cooked up from a World Bank/IMF recipe (Holmqvist and Metell Cueva 2006, Fraser 2005).

However, Bradshaw and Linneker (2003) insist that this approach was introduced as a condition of debt relief from the concern over limited success of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs)<sup>3</sup>. Whereas, Booth observes that it stems from the almost

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<sup>2</sup> Counted from the dedicated page for PRSP of the World Bank website [www.worldbank.org/prsp](http://www.worldbank.org/prsp) (accessed on 14 May 2008)

<sup>3</sup> According to Marshall (2008), structural adjustment lending entailed providing support to governments that agreed to macro-economic reforms – reforms that were intended to transform their countries' basic economic structures in a fundamental way. Examples of structural adjustment measures included increases in energy prices, action to raise state revenues, and tariff reforms. Most of this lending was agreed upon in a crisis setting, allowing both a country and the World Bank to return to a 'normal' development path at a later point. Experience shows that countries often did not fulfil these 'conditionalities' which became more and more specific, leading to hundreds of designated actions that, in retrospect, no one could possibly carry out or monitor (Marshall 2008: 40).

unreserved failure of all previous instruments and processes to achieve significant breakthroughs in the field of poverty reduction in the poorest countries and raises the possibility that, against this background of failure, small adjustments in ways of doing certain things might make a significant difference (Booth 2003). Critics have also argued that the PRSP approach is nothing more than a public relations exercise to silence some of the critics of SAPs in the North and the South, while the policies advocated by the IFIs have largely remained the same (UNCTAD 2002). According to this view, the IFIs have only changed the rhetoric of their operations without changing the actual policies or operational practices. While Cling, Razafindrakoto and Roubaud (2002) suggest that this framework just offers the same 'old wine' (like previous policies of IFIs) in a 'new bottle' (PRSP framework) (Cling, Razafindrakoto and Roubaud 2002) and can be seen as 'stripping adjustment policies of their poverty reduction clothing' (Hellinger, Hansen-Kuhn and Fehling, 2001). An ActionAid Bangladesh (ActionAid *undated*) report observed that, as a concept, the PRSP is laden with the positive values of participation and country ownership, but, as a strategy and the manner of its implementation, it is riddled with the very problems of its foundation. Rahee (2002) argues that this problem lies in the intention from IFIs to keep their hegemonic control over the poor countries through different conditionalities in various development programmes. He further states that to institutionalise this control and to find 'acceptable' and 'legitimate' strategies exploiting local comprador-groups<sup>4</sup> by the IFIs are nothing new (Rahee 2002).

PRSPs were required to be country driven, results oriented, comprehensive in scope, partnership oriented, long term in perspective and participatory. This approach received much recognition for the implications for the process of policy formulation, that was supposed to advance a 'bottom-up' rather than a 'top-down' process of policy formulation (Weber 2006, Swallow 2005, World Bank and IMF 2005, Booth 2003, IDA and IMF 1999 a). In this context, a PRSP has been presented as a 'country-owned' and 'country-driven' project, in spite of these national strategy papers must having to be endorsed by the boards of the World Bank and IMF for debt relief and other aid assistance (IMF and IDA 1999 a). Meyer, Schmidt and Schmitt (2001) observe that one of the conditions of a proper PRSP is that it must have been

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<sup>4</sup> Theoretical discussion on this issue is in chapter 2.

developed with the participation of civil society. Even though this idea of civil society participation is quite common, to have it formulated as a conditionality, a *participation clause* so to say, is a step onto new territory for both lending institutions and borrowing governments (Meyer, Schmidt and Schmitt 2001). Therefore, **this research intends to explore whether civil society participation is being used to enhance poverty reduction strategies taking Bangladesh as a case study, or if it merely legitimates an externally imposed approach to keep the hegemonic control by the IFIs as stated above.**

## **1.2 PRSP as a framework**

The World Bank and the IMF, in a review, described the PRSP initiative in the following terms:

In December 1999, the Boards of the World Bank and the IMF approved a new approach to the challenge of reducing poverty in low-income countries based on country-owned poverty reduction strategies. These strategies were expected to be country-driven, results oriented, comprehensive and long-term in perspective, and foster domestic and external partnership in line with the principles that underpin the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF). They were to be embodied within a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which was expected to serve as a framework for development assistance beyond the operations of the Fund and the Bank (IDA and IMF 2002: 3).

The policy content of the PRSP documents was expected to be formulated by the developing country itself, and to reflect the country's individual circumstances and characteristics<sup>5</sup>. This constitutes the framework for all discussions around the PRSP, which is elaborated in more detail in the PRSP *Sourcebook* (World Bank 2002a and 2002b). The IFIs had also explained their role in the PRSP process. On the one hand, as development partners, the IFIs would provide technical support, with the IMF

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<sup>5</sup> It needs to be noted here that although PRSPs were supposed to be 'country driven' and 'owned' by the respective governments, the IFIs provided a detailed outline of the issues to be addressed in the PRSP, and identified specific policy criteria for the ultimate approval of all PRSPs. However, while the World Bank stresses there were no blueprints for poverty reduction strategies, the poverty reduction strategy source book does emphasise a number of key policy aspects and states that economic growth is the single most important factor influencing poverty, and macroeconomic stability is essential for high and sustainable rates of growth (World Bank 2002 a).

advising on macroeconomics, exchange rate, and tax policies, and the World Bank advising on poverty assessments, sectoral strategies, institutional reform and social safety nets. On the other hand, they would be the ‘gatekeepers’ that would decide when and under what conditions developing countries would receive financial assistance and debt relief. The Executive Boards of the IFIs consider each PRSP based on staff assessments, which include a detailed analysis of the PRSP and a recommendation of whether or not to endorse the PRSP (IMF and World Bank 2000).

A PRSP describes the macroeconomic, structural and social policies and programmes which a country intends to follow in order to promote growth and reduce poverty and should be prepared by a government through a participatory process involving civil society and development partners, including the World Bank and the IMF. It is observed that PRSPs are to be based on five core principles<sup>6</sup>:

- Policy-making for poverty reduction should be nationally ‘owned’ – in which government engages in *dialogue* with other constituents of national society, resulting in greater national ownership of the decision taken
- It should be *results or outcome-oriented*, identifying desired outcomes that benefit the poor and include plans to achieving these
- The thinking should be *comprehensive*, taking account of the multidimensional nature of poverty
- The basis for international support should be a form of *partnership*, involving coordinated participation of development partners (bi-lateral, multi-lateral and non-governmental)
- This is visualised as a *medium to long-term process*, implying a need for medium-term commitments as well as careful consideration of appropriate timing, performance criteria and monitoring arrangements

(Sanchez and Cash *undated*, Booth 2003, IDA and IMF 1999 a)

Craig and Porter (2003) argue that PRSPs are best seen as part of a ‘Third Way’ re-morphing of neoliberal approaches<sup>7</sup>, a new convergence in which governments and

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix – 1, for further details about these underlying principles of PRSP approach

<sup>7</sup> Richard Peet explains that neoliberalism is an entire structure of beliefs founded on right-wing, but not conservative, ideas about individual freedom, political democracy, self-regulating markets and entrepreneurship. Neoliberalism renews the beliefs of early modern, and especially nineteenth-century,



agencies of various stripes in both liberal OECD and developing countries are focusing on optimising economic, juridical and social governance in order to create ideal conditions for international finance and investment. They explain, how in practice, PRSPs tend to reproduce three or four pronged approaches to poverty reduction: (a) 'promoting opportunity' or more particularly broad based growth that is recently rendered as pro-poor growth (b) 'facilitating empowerment' especially by promoting good governance, which has grown from anti-corruption and public accountability measures to embrace a range of policy settings from fiscal management to decentralised governance and (c) 'enhancing security' especially involving investments in human capital, generally in health and education sectors. This is what they observe embedded in global economic integration, first, good governance second, poverty reduction following as a result (Craig and Porter 2003).

Introduction of the PRSP approach could be understood as an attempt by the IFIs to build hegemony<sup>8</sup> around their highly contested neoliberal policy prescriptions for developing countries. Robert Cox lists five elements that are vital to understanding the operation through which neoliberal hegemony in the world economy is reproduced by the IFIs (Cox 1983). International institutions help to (re)produce hegemony because they '(1) embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders; (2) they are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order; (3) they ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order; (4) they co-opt elites from peripheral states; and, (5) they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas' (Cox

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British 'classical' liberalism. Neoliberalism relates positively to its nineteenth century ancestor, but critically to its twentieth century predecessor, especially social democratic Keynesianism. So the classical liberal past is remembered in the neoliberal present not merely a received wisdom, but also through a series of creative re-enactments that respond to changed circumstances. Hence, contemporary neoliberalism's obsession with the deregulation of private enterprise and privatisation of previously state-run enterprises, this time in critical reaction to Keynesian social democracy rather than liberalism's earlier reaction to mercantilism (Peet 2003: 8).

<sup>8</sup> According to Martins (2007), hegemony is a crucial topic in any analysis of contemporary international relations. It plays a fundamental role in the development of the modern world-system, a development driven by historical capitalism. Gramsci describes hegemony as a process of domination through sustaining values and ideologies sympathetic to, or isomorphic with, those of the dominating body or 'hegemon' (Gramsci 1971, 1975). Joseph Femia observes that treatment and use of hegemony is generally marred by conceptual vagueness; it has become one of those fashionable political catchwords which is invoked but seldom properly defined or submitted to close scrutiny. Femia illustrates that whenever certain analysts [Marxists] come across a situation involving (what they deem to be) the ideological predominance of a particular group or class, the term 'hegemony' is immediately adopted – as if the notion of 'ideological predominance' were itself free of ambiguity (Femia 1987). This research has discussed more about the idea in terms of its application for this research in section 2.1.4.

1983: 172). By absorbing counter-hegemonic ideas into the mainstream policy dialogue and by engaging civil society actors in developing countries during the policy formulation process, the IFIs hope to create a consensus around their interventions into developing countries and the neoliberal adjustment policies that they promote. Despite its supposed new focus on poverty reduction, the IFIs basic policies suggest little leeway for those who might actually want to propose a new policy framework (Wood 2000).

Critics have found some striking similarities among all PRSPs handed in so far (Bradshaw and Linneker 2003, Rahee 2002, Knoke and Morazan 2002). Although PRSPs were to be prepared in a 'participatory' manner, in most countries PRSPs were prepared following the guidelines from the World Bank, IMF and other IFIs. As the strategy papers were closely connected to the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) loans, their main focus was on economic growth, labelled as pro-poor growth. However, the recipe for how to achieve growth was very much like former programmes and contained mainly the implementation of structural adjustment measures based on liberalisation of trade and financial markets, a restrictive stabilisation policy and privatisation (Rahee 2002, Knoke and Morazan 2002). Marshall, Woodroffe and Skell (2001) in an intensive survey of several PRSP experiences sum up that:

The consistency of policies put forward in the PRSPs and I-PRSPs is remarkable, given the different histories, characteristics and drafting processes of the sixteen countries surveyed. The general thrust of the macro-economic policies found in the PRSPs and I-PRSPs seems very similar to that of standard SAPs in the past. For all PRSPs and I-PRSPs macroeconomic stability is important, but there is little reference to the debate that rages over the benefits of growth, and the different types of growth. The vocabulary in some of the strategies signals a commitment to a type of "pro-poor" growth ("equity-based", "broad based"), but often this seems only to extend to the rhetoric, and not the reality of the policies chosen (Marshall, Woodroffe and Skell 2001:15).

Craig and Porter (2003) have insisted that PRSPs may be seen as a 'third way for the Third world', a wide-ranging integrative framework for global growth and poverty

reduction, aiming to become a ‘development’ version similar to what Beck (1998) describes as a ‘democracy without enemies’. However, they also observed PRSPs’ silence in the face of rising concern about the pervasiveness of unequal market power, consolidating corporate power, restricted migration and access to rich economies, and local political realities (elite capture, under regulated monopolies, rising global and local inequalities) which heighten critics’ scepticism. Promoting universal global integration, whilst remaining silent about power issues raises the fear that PRSPs may serve as an instrument of hegemonic economic interests. From this follows the charge that PRSPs ‘inclusion’ is primarily a form of leverage and risk management, specifically of the risks of exclusion and instability, and that this project is advanced not primarily in the interests of the poor (Craig and Porter 2003). This point can be made with reference to both the form and content it projects in global politics. Sumner (2006) cites from *The Economist* (2005): ‘the shift in fashions [to PRSPs] should not be exaggerated. Where before donors told governments what to do now governments largely tell donors what they want to hear’ (The Economist 2005 cited in Sumner 2006). A Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) report suggests that no significant achievements are made in so far as the PRSP was introduced merely to satisfy the donors (DANIDA 2001).

### **1.2.1 PRSP: A tool for debt relief and continuing loans**

The World Bank and IMF enjoy a special place in the politics of world economic relations and can claim a virtually universal membership and accountability to governments across the world. In the 1990s, both the IMF and the World Bank became powerful advocates of high standards of legitimacy, representation, and accountability in governments seeking to borrow from them<sup>9</sup> (Woods 2000). According to John Pender (2001), the period from 1980 until about 1994 was a period in which the World Bank emanated a strong sense of confidence regarding the objective of development policy for the world’s least developed countries – the achievement of rapid and sustained economic growth. This objective was regarded as uncontroversial and was also shared by the World Bank’s sister organisation the IMF.

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<sup>9</sup> However, a number of observers (Bordo and James 2000, Feldstein 1998, Goldstein, 2003) strongly criticise the IMF for straying from its core competence of macroeconomic and exchange rate policies into structural policy areas such as corporate governance, trade policy, privatisation, poverty reduction, and environmental management, areas in which the Fund does not have necessary expertise and staff resources to make timely and sound policy recommendations.

This objective of rapid and sustained economic growth was repeatedly articulated in their various development programmes. While the stated objective was economic growth, the overall thrust of the World Bank and IMF intervention was highly politicised. For the developing world, the World Bank and IMF's politicised intervention took the form of promoting specific models of development which incorporated a pro-market, anti-state emphasis, and adoption of the World Bank and IMF policy framework was seen to be the key to achieving development objectives (Pender 2001). He also argues, such a model of development was promoted by the World Bank and IMF through conditionality, and conditionality was implemented through the introduction of structural adjustment. During the 1980s and into the 1990s loans from the World Bank, IMF and regional development banks, aid from bilateral donors and even private finance became effectively conditional on the agreement by the recipient government to implement often far-reaching economic policy reforms, along the lines of the World Bank model (Pender 2001). This had constrained the capacity of developing countries to experiment with their own models. As Mohan *et al* explain, 'these conditions, and the declining availability of alternative sources of finance, have meant that there has been precious little leeway for experimentation with heterodox policies at odds with the [International Financial Institutions'] prescriptions' (Mohan *et al.* 2000: 120).

In operational terms, conditionality raises questions of whether the donors look at development goals as a condition for entering a partnership, or as objectives of the partnership itself (Morten Jerve 2002). This corresponds to choosing between what has been labelled *ex ante* and *ex post* conditionality. With *ex ante* conditions the donor declares that aid will not be given until certain conditions are met in the recipient country. It is argued that 'ex ante conditionality' (aid against the promise of future action) has failed because of a lack of enforcement by donors of their own conditions, mostly because of their own lending culture, which subsequently led to non-compliance by borrowers. While *ex post* means that certain conditions should be met during the time a programme is carried out and future support depends on the quality of outputs – the end-result (Holvoet and Renard 2007, Morten Jerve 2002). There has definitely been a move towards *ex post* conditionality in recent years, including by the IMF and the World Bank. The PRSP framework is based on the premise that *ex ante* conditionality did not work (Morten Jerve 2002) and starts with

the hypothesis that there is a strong link between debt relief and poverty reduction and debt relief is an integral part of broader efforts to implement outcome oriented poverty reduction strategies. Completion of PRSPs as a condition of debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative seemed to be an agreement among official creditors to help the most heavily indebted countries to obtain debt relief (Sanchez and Cash *undated*, IMF and IDA 1999 b). The principal objective was to bring the countries' debt burden to sustainable levels.

However, Easterly (2002) argues that in the past, debt relief brought little of the benefits was promised. In fact, debt relief did not even bring a reduction in debt, as poor country governments borrowed anew until they had again become heavily indebted (Easterly 2002). He illustrates how governments in poor countries are subject to greater instability (e.g., more coups) than in rich countries, thus have shorter expected tenures in office, and thus have a higher discount rate than in rich countries (Easterly 2002, 1999). Moreover, he found, that new borrowing was correlated with debt relief so that debt ratios actually got worse. Although debt relief is done in the name of the poor, the poor are worse off if debt relief creates incentives to delay reforms necessary for growth (Easterly 2002). Nevertheless, given the fact that a country had to prepare a PRSP in order to be eligible for debt relief and further loan and aid, it is observed that the PRSP approach implies conditionality of a very different nature. It is a 'process' (as PRSPs were supposed to be 'country owned' and should be prepared in a 'participatory' manner) and not a 'content' conditionality (Dijkstra 2005, Booth 2003). Behind the PRSP initiative, there is a belief that 'process conditionality' (Foster *et al.* 1999) may succeed where previous forms of conditionality, focused on specific policy measures, had failed. However, Dijkstra (2005) argues that the notion of process conditionality also conflicts with the idea that PRSPs should constitute the basis for lending operations by the IFIs and for other donors for endorsement and approval of loans and, therefore, the *content* of PRSPs must be assessed. She insists that despite the broad consensus among both academic and policy-making circles that setting conditions for policies was not effective, the HIPC initiative with its requirement to elaborate PRSPs implied more, not less, policy conditionality (Dijkstra 2005). In fact, the Bank and Fund staffs assess the content of PRSPs, which reduces the chances for domestic ownership of the strategies, and also the possibilities for effective domestic participation (IOB, 2003). Bradshaw and

Linneker (2003) state that tensions existed between the urgent need for debt relief and the time required to develop a genuinely participatory PRSP. Harrison (2001) suggests that recipient governments have learnt, through the difficult experience of structural adjustment, that international economic realities offer few choices but to embrace conditionality and market-oriented reforms (Harrison 2001).

PRSPs were therefore, written because donors wanted them to be written, and domestic ownership of the strategies was limited. As Dijkstra argues that recipient governments knew how to play the game in order to receive donor money (Dijkstra 2005). Approval of development policies from the IFIs has become more and more influential as the IFIs increasingly act as ‘gatekeepers’ to numerous other potential sources of capital. As German *et al.* note, ‘if the IMF and World Bank reject a government’s PRS, the government would lose access to trade credits, aid and finance and probably default on its debt obligations. Ultimately, its domestic economy could collapse’ (German *et al.* 2002:10). It is observed that the IFIs have introduced new lending instruments designed to support the implementation of PRSPs. The IMF has introduced its scheme, Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF), while the World Bank has a Poverty Reduction Support Credit (PRSC) programme (Booth 2003, Knoke and Morazan 2002). Booth explains that these are not merely formal changes, or new labels for established activities. They reflect long-term shifts in the policy thinking of the IFIs, and the senior management of both the Fund and the Bank are meant to signal fundamental changes in the way these organisations do business (Booth 2003).

### **1.2.2 PRSP – latest in the IFI’s prescription series**

Booth (2003) observes that the phrase Poverty Reduction *Strategy* Paper has a literal meaning and an aura of solemnity that are potentially deceptive. Some of the language in which PRSPs are discussed is strongly reminiscent of the early days of ‘development planning’ in the 1950s and 1960s, when the world seemed a simpler place than it does now (Booth 2003). In this research, it is understood that the PRSP approach is not an ingenious serendipity (or a ‘magic bullet’ for poverty reduction) which is unconnected and inconsistent with previous poverty reduction prescriptions for the poor countries suggested by the IFIs. This study argues that PRSP is the latest in the World Bank and IMF’s poverty reduction prescription series and it (the PRSP

approach) has close linkages with previous approaches. For example, links with the HIPC initiative (see 1.2.1), Country Assistance Strategies (CASs), Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF). The interconnections of these approaches (and their resemblance with the PRSP framework) are explained below.

According to Marshall (2008), the first place to look in exploring World Bank work on and in a given country is the Country Assistance Strategy (CAS)<sup>10</sup> – sometimes described as the Bank’s ‘business plan’. The World Bank’s Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) drives the institution’s assistance to developing countries and spells out what the World Bank will finance and the rationale for these priorities. The CAS lists the World Bank’s priorities, although the CAS may identify areas of disagreement between the Bank and the borrowing government (ActionAid 2004). The CAS is a central vehicle for planning work in a given country, assessing how the Bank judges that country’s prospects and development strategies, exploring and refining relationships among development partners, and summarising the common agenda (Marshall 2008). CASs provide the key support to the World Bank and IMF for the implementation of client countries’ poverty reduction frameworks. Moreover, it is a source of quantifiable indicators to measure progress towards poverty outcome goals, the main characteristics of poverty and its determinants, and on linkages between growth and poverty reduction for the Bank and Fund (IMF and IDA 1999 a).

Currently the CASs are only released *after* World Bank board approval, and not before. Even then, the World Bank information disclosure policy allows borrowing governments to choose to keep the CAS undisclosed from their public if they wish to do so. However, for the PRSP consultations to be meaningful, it was suggested that the entire contents of the CAS must be made clear to parliamentarians and civil society groups, in *draft* form, *before* borrowing governments finalise agreements with the World Bank (ActionAid 2004). Moreover, there are scepticisms as the donor-government relationship is being increasingly defined by the PRSPs, but the donors

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<sup>10</sup> Marshall observes that the CAS is a key and visible strategic document and as a relatively recent phenomenon, as country planning documents were formerly some of the most tightly held documents. Its current form and public disclosure emerged from sometimes difficult negotiations. CAS documents are prepared according to varying rhythms, with some updated every 3 – 5 years (the norm for the largest borrowers) and others after more lengthy interludes (Marshall 2008).

are continuing to produce their respective CASs at regular intervals. Bhattacharya (2005) questions why the donors cannot use the national PRSPs instead of CAS (Bhattacharya 2005).

However, Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) were packages of policy reforms that aimed to achieve macro-economic stability and export led growth, on the assumption that this would reduce poverty. SAPs typically included structural policy reforms such as the privatisation of state owned enterprises, removal of subsidies for domestic industry and agriculture and liberalisation of international trade through the reduction/removal of import duties. They also included monetary reforms such as currency devaluation, liberalisation of the financial sector, and tightened fiscal discipline through, for example, public sector wage cuts or introduction of user fees for health and education services (Sanchez and Cash *undated*, ActionAid 2004). The IFIs began imposing free trade and free market-oriented economic policy reforms as binding conditions on access to loans for low-income countries in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Through structural adjustment lending, the IFIs have been able to put pressure on developing country governments to open up their economies to transnational capital and to direct their economies towards an export-orientation (ActionAid 2004).

After two decades of practising structural adjustment, the programme encountered major public relations problems for the World Bank and IMF (Morten Jerve 2002), associated with limited economic growth, increased income inequalities and in some cases reduced access to health care and education for the ordinary populations (Sanchez and Cash *undated*). The IFIs themselves have acknowledged some of the shortcomings of SAPs. As the *World Development Report 1999/2000* points out, 'some countries followed policies of liberalization, stabilization and privatization, but failed to grow as expected' (World Bank 1999: 16). Under tremendous public pressure and demonstrations across the world, the World Bank and IMF were forced to rethink their ways of working and propose a new development framework to ensure their own survival. The Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) was an attempt to deflect criticisms of their activities and address some of the concerns of critics, and later they developed PRSPs. In this new approach, it seems, instead of



macro-economic stability and growth being the sole focus, the aim of reducing poverty was to be put in the centre (Pender 2001, Sanchez and Cash *undated*).

Former World Bank president James Wolfensohn's 1998 address to the Board of Governors, titled *The Other Crisis*, was a frank admission that the Bank's policies had contributed to the crisis, which had dashed the hopes of many and created 'dark searing images of desperation, hopelessness and decline' (Wolfensohn, 1998: 2). At a time when there were concerns over the financial crisis in East Asia, he called attention to 'the other crisis' – the crisis of poverty faced by an increasing number of people, many of whom lived in countries that had religiously followed the Bank's advice (Owusu 2003). Wolfensohn admitted the failures of SAPs, arguing that 'development is not about adjustment. Development is about putting all the component parts in place – together and in harmony' (Wolfensohn, 1998: 11). A few months after the speech, in 1999, he proposed the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF)<sup>11</sup>.

It was intended that CDFs should be prepared by the country through a participatory national consultation process – one that balances good macroeconomic and financial management with sound social, structural and human policies so that countries can define their economic developments and design their strategies for poverty reduction. However, Owusu argues that the CDF approach was not beyond the IFIs's neo-liberal agendas (Owusu 2003). The framework of PRSP is based on CDF principles, as with the CDF, national governments are responsible for preparing PRSPs with the assistance and participation of 'domestic' and 'external' development partners. External partners are encouraged to assist governments in preparing PRSPs, and to link their development efforts to them<sup>12</sup>. Holvoet and Renard think the PRSP is not the perfect incarnation of the CDF (Holvoet and Renard 2007). The World Bank suggests, PRSP and CDF share the same basic principles but there are also important

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<sup>11</sup> 'The Comprehensive Development Framework I am proposing highlights a more inclusive picture of development. We cannot adopt a system in which the macroeconomic and financial is considered apart from the structural, social and human aspects, and vice versa. One of the reasons for developing such a comprehensive, holistic framework is to allow us to think more strategically about the sequencing of policies, programs, and projects and the pacing of reforms' (Wolfensohn 1999: 7).

<sup>12</sup> Wolfensohn and Fischer maintain that the CDF and PRSP should be mutually reinforcing. It will also ensure more effective collaboration between the Bank and the Fund in supporting countries, as specifically requested by their major shareholders (Wolfensohn and Fischer 2000).

differences. The CDF was not linked to Bank lending, involved no explicit conditionality and did not propose one single model of implementation (World Bank 2003).

Karl Polanyi argued that expansion of capitalist aggression made Lenin assert that finance capital was responsible for imperialism, notably for the struggle for spheres of influence, concessions, extraterritorial rights, and the innumerable forms in which the Western powers got a stranglehold on less developed regions, in order to invest in railways, public utilities, ports and other permanent establishments on which their heavy industries made profits (Polanyi 1944/1980: 15 – 16). In its contemporary form, Anu Muhammad (2006 a), figures out how these conditionalities and series of prescriptions serve the interest of a neo-liberal and market oriented economy where the beneficiaries are by no means the poor. He argues from the context of Bangladesh that IFIs, including the World Bank and IMF, have played key role in accelerating the process of integrating peripheral economies like Bangladesh with the central economies. Anu Muhammad demonstrates (see below) who the real beneficiaries of these programmes are and argues that PRSPs are merely the most recent version of the same process and objectives (Muhammad 2006 a).

Prescription	Cause shown	Incentive	Beneficiaries
Don't raise wage. Lower wage	Keep production cost low	More funding will be available and/or old funding will continue	Local and foreign investors
Raise price of utility: gas, water, electricity	To rationalise price in line with international price and production cost	More funding will be available and/or old funding will continue	Interested investors in these sectors would feel comfortable
Privatise losing enterprises	Removing pressure from public money	More funding will be available and/or old funding will continue	New owner who gets with minimum price. International investor would feel better without strong competitor
Privatise profit making enterprises	Not government's job	More funding will be available and/or old funding will continue	New owner who gets with minimum price. International investor would feel better without strong competitor
Devalue currency	Raising competitiveness	More funding will be available and/or old funding will continue	Exportable items would be cheaper. Real income of dollar-earner would increase

Policies and the real beneficiaries (adapted from Muhammad 2006 a: 83)

Sobhan (2002) argues that 'discovery' of such a new approach says nothing about the linkage between past eras of structural adjustment with the prospective agendas. Nor does this discourse address the contribution of an earlier generation of policies to the perpetuation of the problems they are trying to correct today. He asserts that this does not remove much out of these failed agendas if they [the IFIs] do not come to terms

with what really went wrong with earlier generations of policies. He argues that all these exercises still see development policy as a positive sum game played out in a socio-political vacuum (Sobhan 2002). Stiglitz insists that the recent push for financial and capital market liberalisation is masquerading as economic science and good policy in developing countries. He argues that the advanced industrial countries and global IFIs lecture the less developed countries on the vices of protectionism and government subsidies. They have been more adamant in opening up markets in developing countries than in opening their own markets to the goods and services that represent the developing world's comparative advantage (Stiglitz 2001: ix). The main criticism of the concept of PRSP was about its 'innovative' features (such as 'ownership' and 'participation'); what is new in this framework is highly questionable. Some observers found it very similar to World Bank and IMF's massively controversial Structural Adjustment Programme. They insist, in PRSPs, special emphasis has given to privatisation, tax reform and trade liberalisation that is widely known as neo-liberal policy of those two IFIs which is no different from the controversial SAP (Bhattacharya and Ahamed 2006, Rahee 2002). This seems just *another brick in the wall* – the newest disguise for pushing same neoliberal agendas to the poor countries under the softer cover of 'participation' and 'ownership'.

### **1.2.3 'Ownership' of PRSP**

Although the idea of preparing a national poverty reduction strategy was a proposition of the World Bank and IMF, it has been constantly attempted to label the process as 'country owned' and government-led<sup>13</sup>. Ambiguity mounts up when the working papers and guidelines of the World Bank and IMF outline the contents, principles, good practices and possible elements of prospective PRSPs (these clearly tend to

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<sup>13</sup> Understanding 'labelling' is remarkably important in this regard. Labels are invented by international organisations like the World Bank which are apparently rational but fundamentally political in nature. Ferguson in 'The Anti-Politics Machine' addresses the importance of labelling in depoliticising and neutralising development interventions (Ferguson 1990). He shows in the case of Lesotho, it was presented as an 'aboriginal economy', virtually untouched. Its poverty is caused, according to the World Bank report, by its backward, primordial and un-penetrated economy. Ferguson argues that this is actually far from the case and that Lesotho's real problem has never been addressed. He argues that Lesotho's [national/local] problem has to be understood in terms of socio-political relations within 'underdeveloped' Africa [historical and local context]. The issue of migration and the global economy which are important for understanding Lesotho's economy are completely missed out from the World Bank's account (Ferguson 1990).

depict the possible form and structure of an ‘ideal PRSP’)<sup>14</sup> and then they attempt to describe it as a ‘country owned’ process thus ensuring greater participation from local civil societies and direct representatives of poor people.

It has been clearly stated in the World Bank and IMF reports that the Bank staff will take the lead in advising the authorities in the design of poverty reduction strategies, including the necessary diagnostic work such as poverty assessments and their monitoring, the design of sectoral strategies, reforms that assure more efficient and responsive institutions, and the provision of social safety nets; and in helping the authorities to cost the priority poverty reducing expenditures designed to achieve particular outcomes. The Bank staff will also take the lead in advising on how to improve the effectiveness and poverty-orientation of public expenditure and on other structural reforms such as privatisation and regulatory reform (IDA and IMF 1999 a). Furthermore, it is also believed that preparing PRSPs at national levels by following the guidelines and principles of the World Bank and IMF requires substantial capacity to analyse poverty, select indicators, design programmes, monitor and facilitate widespread participation. However, the World Bank and IMF think that many of the targeted poor countries do not have enough institutional capacity and technical expertise to prepare a PRSP accordingly (IDA and IMF 2002). Therefore, it is suggested that ‘external assistance’ will help these countries to develop a better poverty reduction strategy and the World Bank and IMF will continue providing support in various poverty reduction programmes and facilitate donor coordination. The World Bank and IMF, through their work with the poor countries, are thought to be in such a position to offer assistance to help prepare PRSP to those countries in need of assistance. The same report asserts that experts and/or staff of the World Bank and IMF will facilitate the whole process, suggest and advise the government regarding participation, poverty diagnosis, setting indicator and donor harmonisation in different micro and macro economic collaborations. The government or country authority should write the first draft of the PRSP to ensure ownership of the paper. Regional donors would assist and give their comments, feedback and suggestions at this stage while the World Bank and IMF would also provide ‘external/technical assistance’ if required or felt necessary by the staff of the Bank and Fund. These

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<sup>14</sup> For more details please see IDA and IMF (2002), IDA and IMF (1999 a), IDA and IMF (*undated*), World Bank (2002 a), World Bank (2002 b).

interactions between the government and the World Bank and IMF should be seen as part of the broader participatory effort to formulate and implement a poverty reduction strategy along the lines of a CDF (IDA and IMF 2002). The staffs of these two organisations will then decide when and in what form a full PRSP will be placed before the executive boards for endorsement (IDA and IMF 1999 a).

Given the discussion above it is understood in this research that the notion of ownership in PRSP preparation is, therefore, contradictory as well as deceptive. On the one hand, in various World Bank and IMF reports, the idea of ownership is described as an ingenious attempt to make poverty reduction work in poor countries while on the other hand, the endorsement of PRSP is entirely controlled by the boards of the World Bank and IMF. Booth explains that ownership of the PRSP process and not specific policies, on the first dimension (initiation), were obviously low in all cases (Booth 2003). He illustrates, drawing on wide international experience, it was obvious that the PRSP initiative came to each country from Washington. In other words, the PRSP initiative and the incentives put in place around it have not (yet) been sufficient to generate full national ownership, even in terms of the process. The country researchers also argue, states Booth, in several cases, that having plenty of ownership in one or two dimensions and not in others is potentially damaging to the coherence and implementability of the plans (Booth 2003). Eberlei insists that as the PRSPs had to be endorsed by the boards of the Bank and the Fund, from the very beginning the countries formulated their strategies by anticipating the potential expectations of the IMF and World Bank. Therefore, many similarities are found between the finished PRSPs to date (and there is no real indication that this will change in the 'second generation'<sup>15</sup> of PRS papers) (Eberlei 2007).

Buiter (2007) suggests that the term 'country ownership' has been used and abused in so many ways to gloss over realities deemed uncomfortable, and to create a pleasant buzz to distract the uninformed and unwary, and now needs to be put out of its misery. A country is made up of populations ranging from the tens of thousands to the billion plus. All countries, even the smallest and most homogeneous – racially, ethnically, culturally, religiously – contain many individuals and groups with diverse,

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<sup>15</sup> Some observers (Eberlei 2007, Driscoll with Evans 2005, Oxfam 2004) have identified PRSPs as 'second generation' when they are not the first of its kind in the respective countries.

often divergent and conflicting views, interests, policy objectives, and programmes. He questions, under what circumstances and how can the concept of country ownership be relevant to a country with countless heterogeneous and often conflicting views and interests (Buiter 2007)? According to Eberlei (2001) country ownership ‘materialises when a majority of the population and their representatives (democratically legitimated representatives as well as representatives of societal pressure groups) participate in the development of the strategy, identify with the goals and elements of the strategy, and will participate in its implementation, monitoring and ongoing development’ (Eberlei 2001: 11). However, Morten Jerve (2002) emphasises that the recent specification of the term ‘ownership’ by adding ‘country’ and ‘national’ is by no means straightforward. It raises a debate about ‘who’ is the ‘country’ and who is the owner when it is about ‘national’ ownership. The term ownership is useful when it is strictly linked to the main institutional partners in the aid relationship – such as the donor agency and the recipient organisation, specifically, or the governments involved, more generally. ‘Ownership’ is about who decides what is in the process of aid delivery (Morten Jerve 2002).

According to Buiter, in the case of the PRSPs, recognition of this reality led to the development of ad hoc consultative processes of ever increasing complexity and duration. Not only representatives of government (central, regional, and municipal) and of parliament were involved, but supposedly, also, representatives of many other groups, associations, agencies, institutions, and organisations. Increasingly, the PRSP process tried to involve a wide range of special interests and lobby groups, including political, environmental, cultural, and religious NGOs (both local and international) and other representatives of civil society. How the views and voices of such a range of sectional and special interests were expected to be aggregated into an operative concept of country ownership remains a mystery. Also, despite the large number of NGOs and civil society groups, organisations, and factions involved in some of the PRSP consultative processes, the representativeness of the consultations remains an open issue (Buiter 2007).

Morten Jerve (2002) proposes another understanding for ‘national ownership’ that is *legitimacy* (Morten Jerve 2002). The degree of national ownership is determined by the legitimacy of the government and its institutions. Brown (2004) and Craig and

Porter (2003) argue that participation and ownership can be understood as ‘*technologies of control*’ since they mystify power relations, depoliticise negotiations, and thus secure IFI control of outcomes. Why does legitimacy matter? Ian Hurd (1999) points out that legitimacy is a very useful form of social control – one that is often less costly and more effective than coercion and more widely applicable than self-interest. Best (2007) argues that certain forms of legitimacy are more self-reflexive about their own conventionality than others. Democratically based legitimacy tends to be more open to questioning and contestation than expert-based legitimacy, which effectively depoliticises its own claims by representing them as singularly true.

Buiter asserts that the concept of ‘country ownership’ has been used and abused in so many ways that it now is at best unhelpful and at worst misleading and obfuscating because he insists that the statement ‘this programme is country-owned’ means no more than ‘this programme is supported by the people who own the country’ (Buiter 2007). Best points out that the concept of ownership suggests that for a policy to work, it must be perceived as legitimate by those on the ground, who are responsible for implementing it<sup>16</sup>. Ownership is thus not only about legitimacy, but about a kind of political legitimacy that exceeds the narrow constraints of expertise (Best 2007). She further describes that much of the debate about ownership has focused on the importance of increasing participation, through broader consultation processes with parliament, NGOs, and so called ‘stakeholders’ in the reform process. This emphasis on participation as the key to ownership is particularly central to the PRSP process and related financing facilities, which have replaced IMF and World Bank structural adjustment policies and funds. Whereas a study of the poverty reduction strategy process conducted by the IMF’s Independent Evaluation Office (2004) indicated that the scope of genuine debate on policy alternatives was generally very limited, arguing:

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<sup>16</sup> In a recent IMF staff statement on the principles underlying new guidelines, the term ‘ownership’ is defined as ‘a commitment to a program of policies, by country officials who have the responsibility to formulate and carry out those policies, based on their understanding that the programme is achievable and is in the country’s best interest’ (IMF 2006: 1). Buiter argues that in practical terms this means that member countries are to play the lead role in determining how they will meet programme goals - at least in so far as they have the capacity to do so – and that there needs to be adequate political will on the domestic level to put the agreed policies in place (Buiter 2007). However, Best (2007) shows that changes, particularly the new emphasis on national ownership, represent a significant shift in the form of legitimacy pursued by the Fund, from narrowly expert-based to more explicitly political.



The PRS process has had limited impact in generating meaningful discussions, outside the narrow official circle, of alternative policy options with respect to the macroeconomic framework and macro-relevant structural reforms. The review concluded, ‘results in terms of ownership are mixed’ with only a narrow circle of officials developing any real ownership of the process (IEO/IMF 2004: 3).

A critical question, coming back to the trade-off between ownership and partnership, is the extent to which donors are willing to give away ownership. There is a general perception among partners that the process has been mainly donor rather than country driven (Sanchez and Cash *undated*). Edgren (2003) found that donors were ganging together to exert greater power over recipient countries (Edgren 2003). From her own experiences as a head of a donor mission in Bolivia, Eyben (2007) reveals that they (donors) used to meet behind closed doors to agree what was going to be played before attending official co-ordination meetings. She explains that it is a new orthodoxy that reinforces, on the grounds of efficiency, the tendency for donor bureaucracies to talk only with their counterparts in the recipient government. By largely ignoring civil society and parliaments, they put at risk their stated commitment to broad-based country ownership of aid (Eyben 2007). However, an Oxfam (2004) report observes that if the PRS approach itself has tended to be conceived apolitically, so too has the role that donors play in what is intended to be a nationally owned process. Principled commitments to move from policy to process conditionality have not in practice translated into real moves by donors to ‘step back’ from influencing the content of PRSs. Donors continue to pursue the adoption of their favourite policies, targets and indicators through a combination of explicit conditionality and backstage negotiation and influencing (Oxfam 2004).

#### **1.2.4 ‘Participation’ in PRSP**

The first core principle of the PRS 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 (Dijkstra 2005, World Bank and IMF 2005, Molenaers and Renard 2003, Meyer, Schmidt and Schmitt 2001). However, the 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 (Oxfam 2004, Booth 2003). However, the term participation itself is highly ambiguous and means different things to different stakeholders. According to the *Sourcebook*, the mechanisms of participation can be participatory research (for example 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). The World Bank stressed that the 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). According to the IFIs, this means that no blueprint for participation can be developed which could serve as a guide to the implementation of participation or for the evaluation of participation. As the World Bank states, 'there is no blueprint for participation, especially at the macro-economic level. On the contrary, there are a number of choices given a country's particular context, its starting points, what is considered feasible in that country and what outcomes it hopes to achieve' (World Bank 2002 b: 238).

Molenaers and Renard (2003) argue that participation, as imposed by the donors, is too ambitious to be workable and too vague to be monitored. The rationale seems to be that participation by civil society will increase *ownership* of the development strategy – not only by the government but also by large sections of the population – by stimulating reasoned debate, shared understanding and a partial consensus on some of the fundamental strategic choices (Tikare *et al.* 2001, McGee and Norton 2001). This should reduce the chance of the strategy being abandoned prematurely (Molenaers and Renard 2003). It appears it was also believed that participation by civil society organisations would increase the *effectiveness* of poverty-reducing policies, partly as a consequence of increased ownership and accountability but also more directly by involving the poor in identifying the causes of their predicament and some of the remedies (Schusterman and Hardoy 1997). Piron and Evans (2004)

observe that the requirement of participation is probably the one most open to different interpretation. It is presented as a mechanism for both consensus-building and for legitimising national development plans, as well as for improving the technical quality of analysis underlying those plans (Piron and Evans 2004).

Criticism was always at the centre of many debates that ‘participation’ in the PRS context means just ‘consultation’ and ‘cooption’, not ‘joint responsibility’ or ‘joint influence in decision-making’ (Eberlei 2007, Oxfam 2004, Bradshaw and Linneker 2003). Observers have raised their concern that ‘participation’ and ‘consultation’ do not mean same things (Dijkstra 2005, Oxfam 2004, Molenaers and Renard 2003). Participation can mean a number of things: who should participate, in what processes, with what power, and with what legitimacy? For a number of critics it is not evident why civil society organisations (CSOs) should engage in the PRS processes. At a minimum, guidance suggests that there should be ‘technical’ consultations with pre-selected stakeholders. Through ‘invited consultation’ participation at best could lend a ‘false legitimacy to autocratically made decisions’ (Alexander 2004: 12). To institutionalise 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). This view builds on the so-called ‘participation ladder’ that starts with information sharing, followed by consultations, joint decision-making and empowerment as well as control by stakeholders (Eberlei 2007).

In line with the view that the PRSP process had opened up a ‘new window’ for participation, Driscoll with Evans (2005) observed that within the first generation of PRSs, the approach has made important progress in three key areas. It had, firstly, contributed to a much stronger focus on poverty inside government. Secondly, it had engaged civil society in poverty policy debates on an unprecedented scale and thirdly, focused attention on donor alignment and harmonisation internationally and at the country level (Driscoll with Evans 2005). Moreover, it is also acknowledged that new voices started being heard – not in most cases ‘voices of the poor’ in a direct sense, but at any rate organisations with different perceptions from the government, on the needs and problems of poor people (Booth 2003). The PRS approach has resulted in engagement by civil society organisations in poverty policy debates, though NGOs

have played a far more active role than other types of organisation to date. NGOs and civil society organisations have mobilised to engage with national policy processes in a more strategic manner than before to increase the national coherence and coordination of civil society in many countries (Driscoll with Evans 2005, ActionAid 2004, Oxfam 2004, Booth 2003).

However, critics including the observers who believed that the PRSP framework had created new spaces for participation have identified a number of limitations of 'participation' in the PRSP process. For the governments, participation was first of all 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. The findings of different reports with regard to the process of participation in the formulation of the PRSP are that generally, what was named participation could be called at best consultation (Oxfam 2004, 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). According to Meyer, Schmidt and Schmitt (2001), practically all countries have held or will hold a consensus building workshop in each region (province, department) and a final national one (Meyer, Schmidt and Schmitt 2001).

In most cases, participation/consultation processes for PRSPs have been hasty, ad hoc and perfunctory (Knoke and Morazan 2002, McGee and Norton 2001, UNDP 2001). However, PRSP design in most countries did not start with a blank sheet of paper. 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). Knoke and Morazan (2002) argue that PRSPs put together a handful of donor-pleasing programmes and projects, sometimes already existing, that were further combined with some civil society consultation. Eberlei (2007) and Oxfam (2004) explain that it was clear that the policy prescriptions within PRSPs did not come from PRSP participation processes, and instead continued to reflect the backstage influence of the donors' own agendas as conditions are imposed by donors and/or are

dominated by the interests of the non-poor elite<sup>17</sup> (Eberlei 2007, Oxfam 2004). In most PRS countries among the stakeholders, ‘the poor’ and especially poor women were heavily underrepresented and even neglected in most PRS processes (Bliss 2006, Eberlei and Siebold 2006, 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 (Fraser 2005). This had effectively excluded significant membership organisations such as trade unions and producer associations, peasant groups, religious and professional associations (Fraser 2005, Oxfam 2004, Booth 2003). There was also a general tendency to by-pass and/or exclude parliamentary institutions and procedures, and even, in some cases key political processes and elected bodies within the executive arms of government (Eberlei 2007, Dijkstra 2005, Booth 2003)<sup>18</sup>. Sector line ministries and sub-national levels of government have not been actively engaged in many PRS processes (Driscoll with Evans, 2004). 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). Although the World Bank and IMF (2005) PRS review report draws a somewhat optimistic picture (World Bank and IMF 2005: 32), an Institute for Development and Peace (INEF) project report, in

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<sup>17</sup> An Oxfam 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 (Oxfam 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Reviews of the World Bank and IMF also observed similar findings, as a 2002 report states ‘...the role of Parliaments in the preparation, approval, and monitoring of country strategies has generally been limited. Various concerns have been expressed about the lack of involvement of specific groups in the participatory process. While the patterns differ across countries, CSOs that were out of favour with the government; local government officials; private sector representatives; trade unions; women’s groups; and direct representatives of the poor are among the groups that have not always been fully involved in the PRSP process’ (IDA and IMF 2002: 22 – 23). Another review in 2005 acknowledges that the nature of stakeholder participation in PRSP formulation has varied depending on countries’ political structure, stability, traditions and institutional capacity. The same report also explains, in response to the criticism of excluding parliaments, that early focus on civil society engagement in PRSP formulation may have drawn attention away from the involvement of representative bodies. However, that report admits that there are concerns that the views of poor people and other marginalised groups have not been adequately reflected in poverty reduction strategies (World Bank and IMF 2005)

contrast, did not find a single example of parliamentary involvement that could serve as ‘good practice’ (INEF 2005). However, Dijkstra (2005) argues that given that the donors intended to use the strategies as the basis for their aid programmes, the neglect of the role of parliaments can also be seen as a conscious decision, and not as an unfortunate omission, as is now commonly claimed. She illustrates that as long as one talks about ‘participation’ by ‘civil society’, it is not necessary to define or formalise the actual influence of this participation process<sup>19</sup>, which means that the donors can insert their own priorities into the strategy. As soon as parliaments are involved, donor influence may be curtailed (Dijkstra 2005). Moreover, as the PRSP processes in most cases have excluded the elected bodies and parliaments, Holmqvist and Metell Cueva assert that the strategies also face difficulties in surviving electoral cycles, thus contradicting the idea of being long-term (Holmqvist and Metell Cueva 2006).

### **1.3 PRSP – country experiences**

After discussing some key features of the PRSP framework and its historical background this section briefly looks at various country experiences of the PRSP processes. A selection of few country’s experiences are presented below in alphabetical order. These country experiences help us to understand the extent to which ‘participation’ (by greater sections of society) has played a positive role (or not) in the formulation of national poverty reduction strategies.

#### Armenia

The Armenian PRSP process began in May 2000. Forty local experts were selected along with NGO participants to write the draft PRSP in October 2002. The Institute for Human Rights and Democracy (IDHR) NGO and the Analytical Informational Centre for Economic Reforms Joint Stock Company were selected to organise and implement the participatory portion of the PRSP from April to October 2002. In Armenia, civil society was often equated with NGOs by donors and the participation process for PRSP was heavily dominated by the NGOs (Ishkanian 2006).

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<sup>19</sup> According to Piron and Evans (2004), a preference for technical consultations or for using civil society organisations may appear to be apolitical.

## Bolivia

According to Molenaers and Renard (2003), the PRSP process in Bolivia disclosed serious misgivings about optimistic assertions that externally imposed civil society participation would trigger better political performance and more accountability, more ownership and increased effectiveness. They argue that the vagueness of the participation conditionality and the one size fits all approach of donors gave the Bolivian government the freedom to organise the process in a way that diluted the impact of civil society involvement and diverted attention away from the fundamental problems that hampered the performance of the political system (Molenaers and Renard 2003). World Bank and IMF findings suggest that consulting with more radical groups has been essential for the survival of a ruling coalition in Bolivia (at least at a political level) (World Bank and IMF 2005).

## Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, the government handpicked those they wanted to consult among ruling party affiliated trade unions (and the like). Among other participants, sometimes those invited were not the most knowledgeable on the subjects being discussed. A small number of participants tended to dominate formal and informal contributions and it was felt that civil society participation could have been strengthened by better quality representation (AFRODAD 2002).

## Georgia

According to the World Bank and IMF, the lack of institutionalised politics in Georgia and the politicisation of key aspects of civil society meant that there was relatively little space for meaningful contributions from non-governmental actors during the PRSP process (World Bank and IMF 2005).

## Honduras

Dijkstra (2005) states that in Honduras the consultation process was seen as an improvement in comparison onto earlier governance practices. However, she further illustrates that the agenda had been limited and the civil society organisations did not consider their concerns were sufficiently reflected in the strategy. Donor conditionality was the decisive factor in elaborating the strategy, and donor influence on both process and contents of the strategy was strong (Dijkstra 2005).

## Kenya

Hanmer *et al.* (2003) found that in Kenya, the government launched an ambitious consultation process with the PRSP Secretariat in the Ministry of Finance and Planning as the lead agency. The PRSP consultation process was implemented at both national and regional levels. They observed that comprehensive consultations were conducted in twenty five districts with an average of 200 participants in addition to participants in sub-district level meetings. General consultations held in 45 districts with an average of 150 participants and in-depth community level consultations were carried out in the form of in ten districts and co-ordinated by an NGO, AMREF<sup>20</sup> (Hanmer *et al.* 2003). However, Swallow argues that although participation seemed ‘successful’ in revealing sector issues and priorities of relevance to village residents in Western Kenya, many of the activities indicated in the implementation matrix would have little direct relevance to those priorities (Swallow 2005).

## Malawi

Jenkins and Tsoka (2003) suggest that in Malawi, there was a great deal of variation between different stakeholders in terms of the degree of understanding of the general *purpose* of the PRSP. Government officials were, for the most part, better informed than civil society. Within government, officials in the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MoFEP) were the best briefed, while in the line ministries there was quite a lot of uncertainty as to what the PRSP would ultimately do. They describe how the consultation process was designed originally as a series of one-day workshops, to which various ‘sectors’ of civil society were invited so that the government could hear their views. Some members of local civil society were invited to become involved in the district consultations, but in general the workshops were dominated by local officials (district councillors, the police, district health officers) and the traditional authorities (Jenkins and Tsoka 2003). However, Weber observes that in Malawi’s PRSP, the content was influenced by substantial comments from the ‘donor institutions’ made on its draft version<sup>21</sup> (Weber 2006).

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<sup>20</sup> Most of the districts selected participants from already existing participatory institutions such as self-help groups, churches, women’s groups and other community based organisations.

<sup>21</sup> According to Jenkins and Tsoka, Malawi Poverty Reduction Strategy (MPRS) was circulated to ministries, parliament, civil society organisations, top civil servants and donors. Civil society and donor representatives submitted substantial written comments. The most substantial were those from Washington-based IMF and World Bank staff, the recommendations from the Bank being particularly



## Mozambique

Mozambique managed its Action Programme for the Reduction of Absolute Poverty 2000 – 2004 (PARPA 2000 – 2004) was approved as its IPRSP in 2000. After the approval of PARPA 2000 – 4, Mozambique's preparation of PARPA 2001 – 5 started. The document went through four different drafts of which only the first draft was used for nationwide consultations in December 2000 and January 2001, and was also commented upon by the IFIs and bilateral donors. Other drafts were not presented to the public but the line ministries, IFIs and bilateral donors gave their comments and feedback on those drafts (Flank and Landfald with Rebelo 2003).

## Nicaragua

Dijkstra (2005) argues that the Nicaraguan PRSP was elaborated by technocrats according to donor directives. Ownership even among the government was limited. Donor presence at all meetings, supposedly to monitor the participation process, also gave them the opportunity to include their own programmes and projects in the priorities of the strategy (Dijkstra 2005). Sanchez and Cash observe that in the case of Nicaragua, the space for 'genuine participation' by civil society was extremely limited. Alternative ideas articulated by civil society during the parallel PRSP processes were not incorporated into Nicaragua's PRSP. The CSO criticisms of the privatisation and liberalisation of the Nicaraguan economy seem to have been completely disregarded (Sanchez and Cash *undated*).

## Rwanda

Mutebi, Stone and Thin (2003) observe that the IPRSP of Rwanda was finalised in November 2000, and was formally adopted by the National Assembly after a one-day meeting by the Cabinet to discuss the final draft. IMF staff visited MPs in Parliament in January 2001 to discuss the process of producing the full PRSP. In early September 2001 a draft outline of the PRSP was sent out to most key stakeholders for comment before producing the draft PRSP in September 2001. The draft PRSP was discussed in October 2001 by a national validation workshop, with representatives of major stakeholder categories in the public, private and civil society sectors. Nevertheless, in

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hefty. The Malawi-based staffs of the UK Department for International Development and NORAD were notably vocal as well (Jenkins and Tsoka 2003).

March 2002, the Bank insisted that the PRSP to be revised before it could be submitted for endorsement. This intervention was perceived by the Rwandan government and some donors as unreasonable and late interference (Mutebi, Stone and Thin 2003).

### Tanzania

Evans with Ngalwea (2003) observes that in Tanzania, from initiation to cabinet approval, the full PRSP process took just six months. They explain that the participatory process was managed by the PRSP Technical Committee, chaired by the Deputy Permanent Secretary Finance, and assisted by Vice-President's Office (VPO). The consultative phase was particularly short-lived, centring on seven simultaneous zonal workshops on two consecutive days in May 2000 and a national workshop to discuss an early draft. Participants were invited from central and local government, private sector groups, selected (government-friendly) NGOs and community based youth/women's organisations (Evans with Ngalwea 2003). However, Mercer (2003) states that the first full draft of the PRSP was taken to parliament and given a two-hour reading in July 2000. This was the first time that MPs had seen the document. Finally a national workshop was held in Dar es Salaam in August. Approximately 50 NGOs attended, having received the document only two days previously (Mercer 2003). Holtom insists from the experiences of a member of the Tanzania Coalition for Debt and Development (TCDD) that through 'participation' the World Bank was only seeking legitimacy from civil society for the policies they were proposing for Tanzania, which Tanzanian civil society had rejected for years (Holtom 2007).

### Uganda

The World Bank and IMF found that in the case of Uganda, participation was dominated by the involvement of selected NGOs in key processes whereas political parties and trade unions were kept at a distance (World Bank and IMF 2005)

### Vietnam

Sanchez and Cash observe that in Vietnam, many government officials could not read the draft documents as they were initially written in English. The PRSP was clearly being targeted at generating external (donor/INGO) rather than Vietnamese input (Sanchez and Cash *undated*).

Based on the above country experiences, it is understood that in most cases participation processes were extremely technocratic and donor involvements were at the highest level at various stages. This includes not only attendance at workshops, commenting on drafts and producing some analysis of the process, but also membership of the drafting committees. Almost in every country a steering committee (or a committee of similar nature) was formed on an ad hoc basis which was closely monitored and/or supervised by the prime minister/president's office as well as ministries of finance. Supposedly these ministries were closely inter-linked with IFIs for debt and aid relationships. As a consequence, it can be observed that governments paid greater attention to the views of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and donors than those of citizens and parliaments, choosing policies the IFIs would approve rather than the policies citizens wanted and policies that might be more effective in poverty reduction locally. Dijkstra (2005) argues that one can wonder whether the donors themselves were serious in their efforts to promote broad-based participation. Governments and donors alike had no interest in broadening the debate towards macroeconomic policies, or to issues like land reform and privatisation of public utilities – policy areas in which the IFIs prefer to deal directly with governments. This highlights that probably neither the IFIs nor the governments cared a lot about 'participation' to generate voices from below and different sectors of society in terms of bringing forward pro-poor priorities towards poverty reduction in local contexts. Instead it seems like they were more keen to produce another 'piece of paper' to continue debt and aid business just as before (Kamruzzaman *forthcoming*), and they needed some kind of validation as previous strategies had not produced much success and were highly criticised.

Furthermore, the whole set-up with respect to how actual decisions would have to be made remained unclear. This raises questions about how broad consultations could lead to comprehensive strategies in which clear priorities were set (Dijkstra 2005). However, the central concern here is with each government's interpretation of civil society 'participation', which sometimes amounted to nothing more than sporadic consultation with NGOs through a limited number of workshops, and which was hampered by a lack of communication and information. It is clear that international NGOs and larger NGOs/CSOs have been most active in the process in several

countries. Participation was often heavily biased towards the capital city and most participants were more representative of the elite sector of the society than the poor. Engagement in the PRS process by political actors such as the members of the national assembly or members of parliament was virtually absent in most of the countries. In some cases ostensible and superficial attempts were made to validate the completed draft.

The discussion above includes critical observations regarding the PRSP process across different countries and different regions. The evidence suggests that the experience of Bangladesh's PRSP production (empirical evidence is presented in chapter 4 – 6) is not an isolated incident. Although 'participation' was thought to be ensured bringing voices from below into the forefront of anti-poverty policies, it appears that this did not happen in reality.

#### **1.4 Bangladesh – an overview and background to its PRSP process**

Bangladesh has been characterised in almost all sociological works and development reports as a very poor country with a low resource base, fragile economy, disaster prone, living with problems like poor governance and political instability. Bangladesh achieved independence from Pakistan in 1971 through a nine month liberation war (Bangladesh had been known as 'East Pakistan'). Before this Bangladesh had formed part of the Indian sub-continent and had been colonised by British imperial interests for two hundred years. Presumably, a massive amount of resources were transferred to the colonial master Britain and west-Pakistan<sup>22</sup> that left the country with a scarce resource base and very low income in contrast to the massive population.

Bangladesh is one of the most populous countries in the world. The total area of Bangladesh is 1, 47,570 square kilometres. The total population is approximately 130 million. The population density is 876 per square kilometres<sup>23</sup>. Bangladesh is not only one of the most populous countries but also one of the poorest in the world. One out of every two citizens is absolutely poor on the basis of cost-of-basic needs; and two

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<sup>22</sup> This can be explained by Andre Gunder Frank's line of argument where he insists that the metropolis exploits the satellite and appropriates surpluses of satellites. The satellite is impoverished by this exploitative relationship and is reduced to a state of dependency on the metropolis (Frank 1971).

<sup>23</sup> The data have been taken from the primary population census report of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (<http://www.bbsgov.org/>) based on the data of 2001.

out of three of these poor are hardcore poor (Hye 2002). The unequal distributions of wealth are explicit and visible within its social structure. On the one hand, in most places (both urban and rural) people from the poorest category can be found beside people who are living their lives with highest luxuries.

Development activities in Bangladesh, including poverty reduction are highly dependent on foreign aid. Therefore, in most cases issues related to poverty and ways forward look through ‘foreign glasses’ rather than of local perceptions. Wood describes, how Bangladesh, once dubbed as ‘*the test case of development*’, had turned in the 1980s into an *International Laboratory* for poverty studies, with an overwhelming dependency upon foreign aid and technical assistance (Wood 1992). This dependence has forced the government to accept foreign suggestions and various frameworks suggested by its international counterparts at different times. Bangladesh, not being in HIPC but a member of Least Developed Countries (LDC) was asked to prepare a PRSP by the World Bank and IMF. It was believed that to continue borrowing and receiving other assistance from the Bank and Fund the Government of Bangladesh had no better option than preparing a PRSP<sup>24</sup>. In addition, preparing a PRSP was a requisite for Bangladesh as the Bank suggested that other donors should link their assistance programmes with national PRSPs<sup>25</sup>.

It has been recognised by many donors and international institutions that Bangladesh made good progress in poverty reduction during 1990s. Bangladesh’s poverty head-count declined by 1% per year (DFID Bangladesh 2004). Some sociologists and development activist would identify this rate as very slow and alarming (Akash 2002a, Hossain 2002) while many donors identified it as one of the fastest in the world<sup>26</sup>. It is worth mentioning that whether this annual reduction was very slow or one of the fastest in the world, no PRSP was operating in that decade in Bangladesh. More importantly, based on the Millennium Development Goals (these are PRSP

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<sup>24</sup> This view was found to be the case during the fieldwork and interviews in the later stage of this research.

<sup>25</sup> As a DFID newsletter explains, in response to the Government’s well-orchestrated preparation process for a high quality Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) for Bangladesh, DFID, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Government of Japan, Bangladesh’s major development partners (accounting for over 80% of development assistance) joined the orchestra to harmonise their support for the PRSP (DFID 2006).

<sup>26</sup> DFID, Bangladesh (2004), factsheet 2004, retrieved from [www.dfidbangladesh.org](http://www.dfidbangladesh.org) (accessed in April 2005).

targets as well) halving extreme poverty by 2015 will not make any difference in Bangladesh than present poverty circumstances. In the year 1983-1984 the head count ratio of income poverty in Bangladesh was 52.3 per cent and in 2000 it had declined at 39.8 percent. It actually implies that in 1983-84 there were 38.7 million poor people in the country but now the total number of poor has actually become almost 50 million (Akash 2002 b). If Bangladesh can achieve the projected target of an average growth rate of seven percent upto 2015 it will be able to reduce absolute income poverty from the current level by half, reflecting the MDGs. But if its growth performance continues to remain same (i.e. two percent per-capita income growth) then number of poor people will rather increase from 63 million to 64 million by 2015.

The Government of Bangladesh decided to start the preparation of an IPRSP at the Bangladesh Development Forum meeting 2000. Preparing a PRSP was linked to Bangladesh's access to further concessional lending facilities from the Bank and the Fund. Beyond this, most donors had bought into the PRSP as a central plank in their funding strategies. In this, the status of the PRSP had arguably been elevated to 'the' document that would guide external financing of Bangladesh's development and poverty reduction agenda (Hossain 2002). In June 2003, the IPRSP was presented to the Executive Boards of the IDA and the IMF for approval. The Boards agreed that

'The document provided a cohesive policy framework for implementing a pro-poor growth strategy and a sound basis for the preparation of a fully participatory Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The government, in close consultation with various stakeholders, is now in the process of preparing the full PRSP, which continues to be on track for completion, as originally planned, by December 2004' (IDA and IMF 2004: 3)

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. 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 IPRSP. The fact that the Government has sought to finance the IPRSP process through external financing rather than investing its own resources is indicative of the political marginalisation of the PRSP (Hossain 2002). The whole process was hastily accomplished in order to prevent any awful situation in front of donors. To show the donors a 'poverty reduction strategy document' at the Paris Consortium<sup>27</sup>, the IPRSP was prepared hurriedly before the donor meeting and the Finance Minister of Government of Bangladesh took the document with him. The manner in which the participatory process was conducted has been aptly described as an *eyewash* (Akash 2002 a). Deb, Raihan and Ahamed explain that the I-PRSP process in Bangladesh was essentially an inter-ministerial committee<sup>28</sup> which did not include any representative from the civil society, the private sector or development NGOs (Deb, Raihan and Ahamed 2004).

As required by the donors, the government in 2005 prepared its final version of PRSP. The General Economics Divisions (GED) of the Planning Commission of the Ministry of Finance undertook to prepare a full PRSP from the IPRSP. The GED states that four effective participatory strategies were put in place. First, a high-powered National Steering Committee (NSC) headed by the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and drawing on all the major public sector ministries was established to steer the process of preparing a full-blown poverty reduction strategy. Second, a National Poverty Focal Point (NPPF) was established within the General Economics Division (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 formulation process<sup>29</sup>. Fourth, regional consultations

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<sup>27</sup> Paris Consortium was the platform of donors who have operations and assistance programme in Bangladesh.

<sup>28</sup> According to Deb, Raihan and Ahamed, 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 (Deb, Raihan and Ahamed 2004).

<sup>29</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

were undertaken with representation from a wide cross section of society including elected functionaries and grass roots organisations. Over and above the specific steps initiated by the Government, the availability of a Focal Point (in the GED of the Planning Commission) also galvanised a secondary process of participation in which active segments of civil society undertook their own consultative exercises, as for example on the issue of disability, 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 finalisation. 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).

Critics have mentioned that, PRSP is a set of wishful thinking based on a few good ideas aimed at satisfying donor recipes (Alamgir 2005). By any standard, poverty is one of the most common features in Bangladesh. Poverty reduction was the top priority in all the Five Year Plans (FYP) in Bangladesh, since it started its journey as an independent nation state. It can be observed that the PRSP of Bangladesh appears to be ahistorical, an unconnected and isolated strategy as it does not contain reflections of the previous efforts of Five Year Plans (Bhattacharya and Ahamed 2006). However, Bhattacharya and Ahamed also argue that a strategy labelled with 'ownership', which was actually prescribed by the World Bank and IMF, will only offer an opportunity to excuse the state/government for prospective failures.

### **1.5 Chapter outlines**

As the PRSP of Bangladesh (with a resonance to World Bank and IMF) claims that the core principles underpinning PRSP require that it should be a country-driven,

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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).



country owned and results-oriented document, anchored in broad-based participatory processes. Involvement of all the stakeholders, as far as possible, is essential for a PRS to make it responsive to all people, especially poor people's, needs and priorities. It has mentioned in the PRSP of Bangladesh that 'preparation of the I-PRSP was preceded by consultations with the rural and urban poor and civil society, but on a small scale' (GED 2005: 21). This research looks at whether the much 'trumpeted' approach of engagement with and participation of civil society actually enhanced the preparation of the PRSP? Or has this approach merely acted as a means for legitimising external and foreign influence on the government of Bangladesh?

The following chapter focuses on a review of the literature and will be centred around three core issues. These are first, poverty (issues about poverty and poverty reduction, and poverty reduction in the Bangladesh context) second, civil society (understanding civil society and its role in bringing forward issues on behalf of those whose voices are less heard in development policies) and third, participation (how participation in development can be meaningful in terms of generating voices from below and, on the other hand, how it can be used as a tool for validation). A multi-method approach has been used to investigate the research queries. Methodological techniques used in this research are discussed in chapter three. Chapters four, five and six present the data collected for this research with support from works of other scholars. Chapter seven contains the conclusions to this thesis.

## **Chapter – 2**

### **Part – 1: Poverty Reduction: discourse or a commitment to change?**

### **2.1.1 Poverty – a contested subject**

Observers have referred to poverty as forms of economic, social and psychological deprivation occurring either among people or countries which lack sufficient ownership, control or access to resources to maintain or provide either individual or collective minimum levels of living (Like-Minded Group 1990, McCarthy and Feldman 1988). As a result, explain McCarthy and Feldman, the ability to provide for minimum nutrition, health, shelter, education, security, leisure or other aspects of life is impaired. Poverty may also represent an exclusionary relation, including exclusion from an institutional network sufficient to maintain one's survival (McCarthy and Feldman 1988). Lewis (1962) observes that poverty has often seemed as a natural and integral part of the whole way of life, intimately related to poor technology and/or poor resources or both. But, he insists that poverty is really a very different matter that suggests class antagonism, social problems, and the need for change (Lewis 1962). Green and Hulme argue that poverty is not a natural fact, but a social experience (Green and Hulme 2005). In the understanding of poverty, Yunus underscores that the first thing to remember is that poverty is not created by the poor people. It is created by various social, political and financial institutions and the policy environment created by the designers and managers of these institutions (Yunus 2002). However, it is also argued that poverty originates in injustice rather than scarcity of resources. This injustice is institutionalised in the social, political, legal and economic structures of society (Sobhan 2002) and when someone becomes or stays poor this is a structural social consequence (Ferge and Millar 1987). Therefore, causes of poverty lie in the dynamics of social and economic forces within societies which structure the production and distribution of resources. Poverty is not a characteristic of a certain group of people; it rather characterises of a particular situation in which people may find themselves at a given point in time (Bastiaansen; De Herdt and D'exelle 2005). Poverty does not necessarily constitute a class nor any other form of 'identity' group based on shared territory or culture (Hickey and Bracking 2005).

This chapter discusses theoretical debates on the definition of poverty and issues related to anti-poverty policies. This discussion reveals that the mantra of dominant anti-poverty policies are embedded in growth and other neo-liberal agendas of a growth (or market) based economy. The chapter also discusses the Bangladesh context and in particular the role of what has been termed 'a comprador' class that

helps maintain and/or assists in establishing Western hegemony through anti-poverty policies. This chapter will also explore the context of Bangladesh's national poverty reduction policy. It will ask whether such a policy is driven by a commitment to real poverty alleviation in Bangladesh or is this policy merely paying lip-service to poverty alleviation through the use of popular rhetoric.

### **2.1.1.1 Definition and approaches in understanding poverty**

According to Alcock (1993) there is no one correct, and agreed definition of poverty because it is inevitably a political concept, and thus inherently a contested one. He illustrates how what commentators mean by poverty depends to some extent on what they intend, or expect, to do about it. Thus academic and political debate about poverty is not merely descriptive, it is prescriptive too. The first thing is to understand is that poverty is not a simple phenomenon which can be defined by adopting the correct approach (Alcock 1993). Poverty can be seen as a series of contested definitions and complex arguments which overlap and sometimes contradict each other. Different researchers and commentators have clearly operated with different definitions or understandings of poverty as described in the following parts of this section. Few of these approaches imply that poverty should be defined independently, of other aspects related to it. The contrast consensus is that poverty must be viewed with other related issues that cause poverty or catalyse persons and groups to fall into poverty.

#### Absolute and Relative Poverty

An absolute measure of poverty is the most commonly used approach to the identification and measurement of poverty. Absolute poverty refers to subsistence below minimum, socially acceptable living conditions, usually established based on nutritional requirements and other essential goods. It identifies poverty with a shortfall in consumption (or income) from some poverty line. Here one's non-poor status is related to the ability to avoid absolute deprivation. According to Roach and Roach, there will be little disagreement that persons who are so deprived that their physical survival is threatened are to be considered as poor, and poverty is therefore commonly defined as insufficiency of basic needs (Roach and Roach 1972: 21 – 22). Rowntree's work has been described as the benchmark study of poverty (Laderchi et al., 2003, Alcock 1993). Rowntree described poverty as not having enough to get by,

or not having enough to meet one's needs and defined a poverty line<sup>30</sup> by estimating monetary requirements for a nutritionally adequate diet together with needs for clothing and rent (Rowntree 1941). Absolute poverty has been defined in terms of survival criteria, usually the amount of income required to acquire a minimum food calorie intake, a minimum basket of consumption goods or a level of individual welfare or utility needed to live a basic life (Hagenaars 1991, MacPherson and Silburn 1998).

Such a definition stems from the issue whether someone has the economic capacity or income to consume a certain (basic) level of commodity for their living. Nevertheless, poverty in this regard is considered only from a mechanical point of view. Matin and Hulme termed this view a narrow materialist conceptualisation of poverty as an inability to meet minimum income requirements or basic needs (food, shelter, water and clothing), which have dominated empirical studies and programme design, that has been challenged recently by more holistic views (Matin and Hulme 2003). There are other issues, such as, how poverty would be measured and identified based on certain incomes (both individual and household income) that are considered 'enough' to consume a basket of commodities for survival. Moreover, there are concerns, should this measurement incorporate support of the state or any other social organisation (if there is any) or should this be excluded? However, the search for families capable of buying the minimum level of nutrition with this set income is likely to vary across society, country and region. As such as the cost of minimum nutrition (or foods that will ensure this level of nutrition) are not same across the world due to different production costs, diverse wage patterns, availability of resources and other factors generated in local contexts.

On the other hand, for some observers poverty is a relative concept. Saying who is in poverty is a relative statement – it is also a statement of a much more complex kind than one referring to a unilineal scale of measurement. It refers to a variety of conditions involving differences in home environment, material possessions and

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<sup>30</sup> Rowntree estimated the proportions living 'below the minimum' and 'in primary poverty'. He also classified some of his respondents as living in 'secondary poverty' – families whose total earnings would be sufficient for the maintenance of mere physical efficiency (primary level) where it is not that some portion of it is absorbed by other expenditure, either useful or wasteful (Rowntree 1941:460).

educational as well as occupational resources and financial resources. While some economists realise the fact that there are many other factors affecting one's income, consumption and welfare they tend to believe that all of the issues related to poverty cannot be captured in economic well-being, or more precisely from income milieu. Hence, relative poverty compares the lowest segments of a population with upper segments, usually measured in income quintiles or deciles<sup>31</sup>. According to Alcock (1993), relative poverty is the problem of poverty in an affluent but unequal society. He explains that basic needs may be met, but for those at the very bottom, many other social expectations cannot be met, resulting in their exclusion from the customary standard of living in that society. For example, people at the bottom of the income distribution in Britain may not see themselves as poor, particularly if they make comparisons with those elsewhere in the world who face starvation and destitution, or even with those elsewhere in Britain who are worse off than them (Alcock 1993). Understanding relative poverty, in his major study of poverty in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, Townsend states, 'individuals, families and groups in the population can be said to be in poverty when they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary...in the societies to which they belong' (Townsend 1979: 31).

Sen (1981) emphasises on one's capability, entitlement and deprivation response in this regard. According to Sen, a small peasant and a landless labourer may both be poor, but their fortunes are not tied together. This difference may lead to the differences in exchange entitlements during times of stress, although in terms of daily remuneration there may be little actual difference (Sen 1981). The instrumental relationship between income and capability, however, is contingent upon many factors such as age, gender, social roles, location and health status (Sen 1999). The effects of low income, for example, are not as pervasive as those of unemployment. In addition to causing low income, unemployment may also cause psychological stress, loss of motivation and skill, lack of self-confidence, increase in mobility, disruption

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<sup>31</sup> In measuring relative poverty, studies tend to rely on a measure based on an income equal to half the median. Banerji (1981) criticises this as mechanistic since it ignores the contextual relations of people's lives including cultural elements which, though difficult to value, shape the utilisation and accessibility of subsistence items (Banerji 1981). What constitutes subsistence is also subject to disagreement among theorists since cost tends to supersede other factors in determining subsistence and often only total cost is presented while other details of the subsistence package are abandoned (Townsend 1970, Dandekar 1981).

of family relations and social life and intensification of social exclusion and discrimination. Although income is somewhat related to deprivation, Sen argues that capability is what determines both income and deprivation. Furthermore, he argues, choices are influenced by the social context not only in terms of its influence on expectations, but also through strategic interactions, making observed behaviour in the market of dubious value for social valuation (Sen 1985).

Haaland and Keddeman (1984) state that both absolute and relative aspects of poverty are important although there is extensive disagreement about the relevance of the measures used to determine each aspect. For instance, Dandekar (1981) argues that the use of calorie intake to denote absolute poverty confuses malnutrition with poverty, while Sukhatme (1978) states that using an average per consumer unit as the desirable minimum for health ignores inter-and-intra individual variation in energy requirements. Rein (1970) notes that efforts to broaden the definition to include non-economic measures only complicate the problem of determining cut-off points which distinguish those who are poor from the rest of the population. What emerges in the literature as an alternative conceptualisation of poverty is a combination of quantitative and qualitative factors which recognise that poverty indicates forms of deprivation including social and psychological dimensions as well as economic ones. Non-economic aspects include the absence of drinking water, basic health services, housing and security (Townsend 1970).

#### Social exclusion and chronic poverty

Apart from absolute and relative understandings, poverty can also embrace other dimensions, for example, social exclusion, chronic poverty, famine and destitution. Poverty can be understood through an exclusionary relation denoting the state of being excluded from or denied access to a package of resources. The resource package includes both technical resources and social networks necessary to maintain survival (Like-Minded Group 1990). The notion of social exclusion was developed in industrialised countries to describe the processes of marginalisation and deprivation that can arise even in rich countries with comprehensive welfare provisions. The idea of social exclusion has been gradually extended to developing countries through the activities of various UN agencies and social summits (Clert 1999). Atkinson has identified three main characteristics of social exclusion: relativity (such as exclusion

is relative to a particular society); agency (for example, some people are excluded as a result of the action of an agent or agents); and dynamics (meaning that future prospects are relevant as well as current circumstances) (Atkinson 1998). However, White (1997) argues that it is important from the pragmatic standpoint that the notion of people's participation in political activities be incorporated in the discussion of social exclusion and poverty. He notes that social exclusion occurs, when individuals or groups are denied access to civic or cultural activities, for example membership in any social organisations, social networks and other social and cultural groups (White 1997).

The concept of chronic poverty denotes particular forms of poverty, and emerged from a critical rethinking of the usefulness of taking the poor as a general category in both development studies and in the practice of international development<sup>32</sup> (Green and Hulme 2005). According to Hulme and Shepherd (2003), those who have experienced poverty for long periods or perhaps all of their lives should be understood as chronic poor. However, it is also observed that the chronic poor are least likely to gain political representation and have few immediate or natural allies in either civil or political society (Hickey and Bracking 2005), and market-based factors may contribute to their continued deprivation (Hulme and Shepherd 2003).

Another perspective in understanding of poverty analysis is in famine and disaster contexts that generally refer to resource impoverishment which is often quick, unexpected and cataclysmic (Like-Minded Group 1990), whereas Alcock insists that destitution describes extreme hardship or misery. This is an acute and catastrophic problem, increasingly brought to newspapers and television screens in an attempt to secure immediate international action (Alcock 1993).

#### **2.1.1.2 Poverty is neither universal nor a mere econometric issue**

Green and Hulme (2005) assert that poverty comes to be seen as a lack of resources rather than an absence of entitlements, as an 'economic' rather than a political

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<sup>32</sup> This was a response to factors encountered poverty reduction policy and performance. It was increasingly clear that even when countries 'performed' exceptionally well, significant minorities of their people remained highly deprived (Green and Hulme 2005). Moreover, as longitudinal analysis and the availability of panel datasets were becoming more widespread it was increasingly possible to examine who stayed poor over time (Baulch and Hoddinott 2000).



problem. However, they also argue that this kind of approach is accurate in one sense, as it explains why individual households or individuals in particular places have less income potential than some of their neighbours. Nevertheless, what it cannot do is to take the analysis further and begin to explain why it is that these factors become precipitating for certain people in certain situations and contexts rather than others (Green and Hulme 2005). Sachs (2005) provides graphic descriptions of poverty, and a generally useful analysis of many of its causes. He identifies eight key factors that tend to make economies stagnate. According to Sachs, poverty itself is one cause, because there is no income to invest in the future; physical geography meaning that some countries need to make extra investments; a fiscal trap means that some governments lack money for infrastructural investments; governments often fail to provide suitable conditions for investment, notably peace and security; there are cultural barriers, notably concerning women's rights; geopolitics, in the form of trade barriers can cause stagnation; there is a lack of innovation, especially away from coastal locations; and there is also a demographic trap where the poorest of the poor still have very high fertility rates (Sachs 2005: 56 – 66). However, it has been observed by some critics that it is not merely an accident of geography that some countries are poor. At critical times in the past these countries' situations have benefited the rich and powerful (Unwin 2007).

The constitution of poverty is historically particular and linked to social practices (Jahangir 1999), as Frank argues that rather than assuming that relations between rich and poor nations are beneficial to the latter, this relationship should be seen as destructive to the poor, hindering and distorting their development.

Underdevelopment is not a stage which precedes development; rather it has to be seen as the end result of imperialism and colonialism (Frank 1971). According to Munck (1999), this debate ranged over the precise nature of unequal exchange between nations, the methods of surplus extraction and the role of the multinational corporations and conceived a growing polarisation between the advanced pole or centre of the world economy and the underdeveloped periphery. He asserts that attention should be focused on the countries conquered, exploited and colonised by the West, as this is a view from below, a post-colonial move, a nativist reaction. Underdevelopment in the non-West (the South by the 1970s) was simply the other side of the coin of development in the West. Not only did imperialism constrain the

development of the productive forces but, ultimately, made development impossible (Munck 1999: 57 – 58). Nevertheless, Barnett suggests that such an argument gives a too easy explanation. The problems of the Third World could be explained as the outcome of exploitation by the developed world, but internal factors such as natural resource shortages, class exploitation and population growth could be too easily dismissed in this case (Barnett 1988).

In the understanding of poverty aiming to develop anti-poverty strategies, it has to be borne in mind that poverty is not a mere econometric issue<sup>33</sup>. The crucial point to emphasise here is that humans are both individual and social, and therefore, that visions of poverty viewed from either a purely absolute or a purely relative perspective can only be partial (Unwin 2007). Similarly a universal measurement or definition of poverty that has multiple faces and diversified contexts in various societies of the world can be prejudiced, based on the interests of those who propose such a definition. Therefore, based on the discussions of various approach and definitions of poverty, this research understands that poverty can be only described from an econometric point of view, and that a universal definition of poverty will be inappropriate. According to Krishna (2004), poverty needs to be understood in a dynamic context, more specifically from local perspectives because it is important to understand why some previously poor households are no longer poor and why some previously non-poor households have fallen into poverty in any particular setting (Krishna 2004). It is believed that locally defined poverty will also enable specific data to be gathered from which informed policy decisions can be made.

### **2.1.2 Neo-liberal orthodoxy and poverty reduction**

Wade (2004) argues that from the current long wave of globalisation it appears that neo-liberal economic theory has become hegemonic. This is centred on the notion that more open economies are more prosperous; that more liberalised economies experience the faster rate of progress and those who resist further economic liberalisation must be acting out of vested or ‘rent-seeking’ interests (Wade 2004). In

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<sup>33</sup> This can be illustrated as Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson argue that unless a man has food to eat, he must starve, be he rational or not: but his safety, indeed his education, art and religion also require material means, weapons, schools, temples of wood, stone or steel. This fact was, of course, never overlooked. Time and again it was urged that ‘economics’ should be based upon the whole range of man’s material want satisfaction – his material wants, on the one hand, the means of satisfying his wants, be this material or not, on the other (Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson 1957: 240 – 241).

economic literature, growth is regarded most often as the pathway towards poverty reduction (Green and Hulme 2005, Krishna 2004), although it is not always possible to explain how this relationship works out in practice for any particular country, region or community<sup>34</sup> (Krishna 2004). Relatively little knowledge is available that can help explaining why some communities and households benefit more from national economic growth – and even less is known about why some others fall into poverty at the same time. Wade (2004) argues that the world economy, in neo-liberal understanding, appears as if, it is an open system in the sense that country mobility up to the income/wealth hierarchy is unconstrained by the structure. He further insists neo-liberal policies, championed by the leading IFIs like the World Bank, the IMF and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) serve to validate their own rationale as agents for creating a global ‘level playing field’ (undistorted by the state) towards poverty reduction in the poor countries (Wade 2004).

The following sections discuss some of the key issues in recent poverty reduction policies adopted by the leading IFIs that appear to be ‘effective’ for all the poor countries. At the same time, it also looks at various concerns raised by critics, in contrast to such universalistic approach towards anti-poverty policy.

#### **2.1.2.1 ‘Dollarisation’ of poverty**

According to Alcock (1993), understanding poverty involves recognising different political contexts and the links between definition and policy. He insists that the problem of poverty and its solution are largely a debate about identifying and measuring inequality and deprivation to provide a basis for state policy to intervene, directly or indirectly, in order to redistribute resources (Alcock 1993: 256). Poverty is identified and measured in order to provide a basis for anti-poverty policy; and as been discussed above (see 2.1.1), disagreements over definition and measurement are inextricably intertwined and a universal definition and/or measurement of poverty might not be suitable to explain the multiple faces of poverty; rather, this would be highly contested. Nevertheless, the World Bank has managed to propose a definition

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<sup>34</sup> Fields observes that, ‘usually but hardly always, economic growth reduces absolute poverty’ (Fields 2001: 104), and Krishna argues the aggregate relationship between growth and poverty reduction at the national level can hide several discrepancies that appear when lower-level results are examined (Krishna 2004). However, even though growth seems all positive, in a society with satisfactory growth, according to Ravallion, ‘one could find that many people have escaped from poverty while many others have fallen into poverty’ (Ravallion 2001: 1811).

of poverty which is expected to explain poverty in every country. For Marshall, the Bank's heavy reliance on per capita income to categorise countries and its use of \$1 or \$2 dollar a day as its most widely cited benchmark, fuels the view that income is its main criterion for assessing poverty (Marshall 2008: 54). According to the World Bank (2008), 'estimating poverty worldwide, the same reference poverty line has to be used, and expressed in a common unit across countries. Therefore, for the purpose of global aggregation and comparison, the World Bank uses reference lines set at \$1 and \$2 per day (more precisely \$1.08 and \$2.15 in 1993 Purchasing Power Parity terms)<sup>35</sup> (World Bank 2008).

The use of such indicators gives a simplified picture of poverty that is easy to grasp, but the actual calculation is fraught with difficulty. Before explaining the difficulty, a brief note on Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) might be very useful, as this is purely an econometric issue and this research strongly argues that poverty is not entirely an economic issue. In its most general terms the PPP doctrine suggests that one should be able to buy the same bundle of goods in any country, and the exchange rate between two countries over any period of time is determined by the changes in the relative prices of these countries (Alba and Park 2003, Yunus 2000). Wade explains how to get the world extreme poverty headcount, the Bank first defines an international poverty line for a given base year by using purchasing power parity conversion factors to convert the purchasing power of an average of the official national poverty lines of a set of low-income countries into the US dollar amount needed to have the same notional purchasing power in the United States in the same year (Wade 2004). To illustrate, Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) 23 may have the same purchasing power in Bangladesh in 1993 as US\$1 in the United States in the same year, in which case Bangladesh's international extreme poverty line is BDT 23 per day. The underlying intuition is the law of one price, according to which international arbitrage equalises prices across countries (Alba and Park 2003). Unwin (2007) argues that the focus on the US \$ as the key indicator of poverty is a problematic one. He explains that based on the World Bank's definition, that the easiest way to reduce

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<sup>35</sup> Retrieved from, [www.worldbank.org/poverty](http://www.worldbank.org/poverty) (accessed on 29 May 2008). However, the same source acknowledges that poverty line can be varied across time and places as it contains, 'A common method used to measure poverty based on income or consumption levels. A person is considered poor if his or her consumption or income levels fall below some minimum level necessary to meet basic needs. This minimum level is usually called a 'poverty line'. What is necessary to satisfy basic needs varies across time and societies. Therefore, the poverty line varies in time and place' (World Bank 2008).

poverty would simply be to devalue the dollar. However, more subtly, adoption of the US dollar as the key measure of parity provides an image that somehow the wider model of the US economy is the one that should be adhered to should poverty be eliminated. Moreover, on this issue, even if it were possible to shift the income of everyone in the world above the \$1.01 a day line, thereby eliminating extreme poverty, this would be an empty victory. Poverty would still remain; it would just be a little bit less (Unwin 2007).

Paul Cammack identifies this poverty line of one dollar (or two dollars) a day as 'global proletarianisation' of the world's poor with a reserve army of labour acting as a disciplinary force in this proletarianisation process. He feels that this definition of poverty is aimed to exploit the most productive resource of the poor, that is, their labour by setting a minimum daily wage of one dollar. He asks that does the income of one dollar a day of an individual represent the actual poor (especially the poor who are living in urban, semi-urban and rural areas of different parts of the world)? Will it be methodologically correct to by-pass the inter-connected relationships of devaluation of local currencies, changing perceptions of 'well being' and living standards, frequent amendments in the price of essential commodities for daily lives and increase/decline of income (the poor's in particular) (Cammack 2004)? Matin and Hulme (2003) insist that empirical work in many parts of the world has pointed out that the incomes of the poor fluctuate all the time in ways that are only partly predictable. They explain that many people, perhaps most in some areas, experience transient poverty as their incomes and expenditure rise and fall depending on a number of factors: the climate, seasonality, crop prices, relationships with landlords, access to work in urban areas or remittances, health status, paying for funerals and weddings and other factors (Matin and Hulme 2003). Such variances and dynamics cannot be perceived through a unique definition measured in US dollars.

Green (2005) argues that the ways in which poverty is currently represented in development serves to constrict the kinds of policy responses to it that development can manage, both conceptually and as the target of development interventions (Green 2005). It also contributes to the misrepresentation of poverty and to its perpetuation as an effect (Green and Hulme 2005). However, Unwin asserts that through a dollar a day definition the IFIs may achieve some measurable international targets such as

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The PRSP approach is embedded on these targets; nevertheless an important question is whether the MDGs will actually reduce poverty (Unwin 2007). Sachs describes his personal experience, a telephone conversation with an IMF staff member who was aware that MDGs in many countries (in the conversation it was about Ethiopia) are 'unreachable'. Sachs terms this as a 'shadow play' where it is known by both the IFIs and poor countries that these goals are 'unreachable'. But, he further illustrates, through aid programmes (targeted to meet some international goals), many poor countries pretend to reform while rich countries pretend to help them. Many low income countries go through the motions of reform, doing little in practice and expecting even less in return. The aid agencies, on their part, focus on projects at a symbolic rather than a national scale, just big enough to make good headlines (Sachs 2005: 266 – 267). Having said that, Sachs however, argues that ending global poverty within a timeline (in Sachs's proposition by 2025) will require a 'global compact' between the rich and poor countries. Although, he realises that the end of poverty must start in places which are severely stuck in poverty (in Sachs's argument, in the villages of Sauri and the slums of Mumbai, and millions of places like them), for him, 'the key to ending poverty' is to create a global network of connections that reach from impoverished communities to the very centres of world power and wealth and back again (Sachs 2005: 242).

This research partly agrees with the idea that poverty reduction should start in places where people are experiencing the unbearable pains and miseries caused by poverty. At the same time, this research also feels that understanding the local faces, contexts and dimensions of the problem as well as possible ways to rise above it should be felt and developed locally too, which will be more realistic and more likely to be effective as this is focused on local realities, instead of any global framework from Washington DC or any other powerful 'centre'. A belief in universalistic approaches and actions to 'globalise' poverty reduction whilst using the disguise of conditionalities would be as problematic and contested as to search for a universal definition of poverty. This research understands, nevertheless, that such initiative(s) of defining poverty globally and proposing a universal framework for poverty reduction (for example, the PRSP approach) is visible. This is needed for expanding neo-liberal policies across the poor countries as part of debt relief and/or aid programmes of IFIs that believe growth is the only solution to poverty. This research understands that such an initiative ignores

the local dynamics of actual problems and, therefore, does not mean ‘poverty reduction’ in practice. Moreover, this approach fetters poor countries more tightly to ‘must do’ conditionality otherwise debt relief or further loans are prevented.

### **2.1.2.2 ‘Universalistic’ approach towards poverty reduction or a commitment to change?**

According to Hulme (2004), recent thoughts on poverty and poverty reduction seem ‘big’ in terms of ideas, units of analysis, global measurements of poverty and the scale of planned policy interventions (Hulme 2004). This ‘grand approach’ has adopted large communities and groups of people such as countries with millions of people, as the common units of analysis to assess and understand poverty. At the same time, it is believed that via such an approach the rich countries can help to lift poor people onto the bottom rung of the ladder through debt relief and/or a massive injection of aid. Those poor (countries) will then be able to climb the ladder of growth themselves, and thereby ascend out of poverty. Such a vision of economic growth is based on the notion that it is possible for all states to follow a broadly similar pattern of ‘development’<sup>36</sup>. Unwin argues that this notion of progress lies at the heart of the enlightenment adventure, and does not really acknowledge that this is only one view of the world, and it is derived from an essentially European cultural context. It fails to recognise that economic practices also evolve as a result of cultural change (Unwin 2007).

Amin and Pierre, and Unwin insist that poverty alleviation or the elimination of basic deprivation is not primarily a matter of money and technology, but of political and economic empowerment of the poor through firm commitment, uncompromising resolve, and dedicated action on the part of political leadership (Amin and Pierre 2002, Unwin 2007). According to Unwin (2007), poverty reduction requires a commitment to change, and simply increasing the amount of aid is not enough. It needs to begin by listening to poor people and acting on their interests rather than anyone else’s. It needs to focus on minimising inequalities more than on maximising

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<sup>36</sup> Frank (1971) has argued that for ideological reasons Western sociology had incorrectly defined underdevelopment as a problem of ‘development’. To pose the problem in this way assumed that development could occur in any society if it adopted the right economic policies along with a work ethic and parliamentary democracy. Frank said that this was not possible. Instead of development being possible, what was actually in train was a process of underdevelopment (Frank 1971).

profits and inducing growth based on neo-liberal economic policies all over the world (Unwin 2007). Amin and Pierre observe that political leaders, seemingly, have difficulty in coming to terms with the fact that the conditions of poverty in the developing countries are a consequence of the maldistribution of power, and, therefore, require major institutional change or change in the existing political and social power structure (Amin and Pierre 2002).

Not only lack of political commitment, but also the universalistic poverty reduction approach misses the cultural dimensions of poverty. As Unwin asserts, one of the reasons why so many 'well-intentioned' development initiatives have failed in the past is that because they were imposed from outside, with insufficient sensitivity to local contexts. While cultural elements are certainly included as one of the seven parts of the diagnosis in 'clinical economics' (Unwin 2007), it is highly significant that through a universalistic framework culture has been seen as a barrier, rather than an exciting and empowering dimension of human life. Those frameworks intended to impose an alien cultural construct, a western vision of how to make the world less poor through the mantra of growth in poor countries across the world. Ahmed (2005) observes that IFIs have an enormous impact on the socio-economics and politics in the 'Third World'. However, it is equally true that this represents a certain type of development (Ahmed 2005). Escobar argues that the World Bank (and other IFIs) should be seen as an agent of economic and cultural imperialism who define development as a monolithic enterprise pitched against multiple actors (Escobar 1995).

Pitt (1976) suggests that in the process of development the stimulus for poverty reduction is seen to come from above and outside, from the developed countries in the form of aid, trade, and transplanting European institutions. He observes that development in the usual Western sense of increased consumption or production, often takes place in locations unknown to the developers. Therefore, instead of an outside approach that has been cooked in a distant 'centre', development should come from below (Pitt 1976). According to Karl Polanyi, the economy needs to be embedded in, and controlled by society, or else severe disequilibria are created, such as happened in the past in times of rapid social, political and economic changes (Polanyi *cited in* Dalton 1971). However, Green and Hulme (2005) argue that the



social construction of 'poverty' is far from universal, despite donor efforts to promote a universalistic set of poverty attributes. The contemporary preoccupation of development thinking and policy on poverty both create political space to advance the project of poverty reduction and ensure the narrowness of this space through a reductive focus on measurement and poverty correlates. They insist that frameworks based on the understanding of poverty reduction as linearly increasing household income or consumption through economic growth are unlikely to generate development policies and mobilise public action that can adequately tackle the underlying causes of poverty (Green and Hulme 2005).

The challenge is to combine all the dimensions of poverty into a new framework that will ensure an equitable balance in the allocation of global and local resources, while at the same time delivering the basic needs of the world's poorest people. According to Unwin (2007), this requires a fundamental shift towards an approach that is more focused on creating the collective social contexts within which increasing prosperity can be shared more equitably (Unwin 2007). Moreover, in the case of research and analyses of poverty, it needs to be bear in mind that the far-flung target of poverty reduction remains flourishing one's self and capabilities. In contrast to a universalistic poverty reduction approach, Rahman (2004) argues that poverty reduction should not be understood as how a person can somehow manage to rise above the poverty line. She insists that this will be more meaningful and effective if someone can identify the obstacles (in his/her fight against poverty) and then rise above those obstacles. Thoughts on poverty reduction, therefore, need to be embedded more on involving the self-belief instead of merely crossing the poverty line (Rahman 2004).

### **2.1.3 Poverty Reduction: Bangladesh context**

Poverty alleviation has been the central policy objective since the 1960s and after the emergence of independent Bangladesh. The issue has continued to be the focal point of every successive development plan (for example, in the Five Year Plans) and programmes both by the government and NGOs (Rahman and Razzaque 2000). Rahman and Razzaque argue that despite these efforts the number of poor people living below the poverty line has remained almost unchanged over the last hundred

years<sup>37</sup>. Therefore, in spite of the long tradition of ‘poverty alleviation’, widespread and acute rural poverty remains the single most important problem Bangladesh is facing (Rahman 1995). Amin and Pierre (2002) explain that the problem of poverty in Bangladesh is both massive and acute. In Bangladesh lack of resource availability, a massive population, control and access at resource level, all focus on limited natural resource endowments. On the other hand, for Bangladesh, its location within the international community, its weak bargaining position vis-à-vis aid arrangements, and its limited control of resources both generate and maintain infrastructural poverty. Although this nexus and its implications for poverty are rarely examined, they are implicit in foreign aid and assistance arrangements (Like-Minded Group 1990, McCarthy and Feldman 1988). Hence, the paucity of existing resources is not solely responsible for the patterns of inequity that characterise the Bangladesh political economy. If the country was only resource poor (without aid or assistance in addition to lacking local resources and markets), analyses would have likely employed a disaster or famine perspective. The availability of aid and assistance as a resource suggests the importance of questions focused on allocation and distribution rather than on availability (Like-Minded Group 1990).

Quantitative research on poverty dynamics is relatively rare in Bangladesh compared to the wealth of cross-sectional studies and comparisons of poverty trends. There is evidence however, that alongside the modest decline in income poverty there have been some positive shifts in the dynamics of poverty (Matin and Hulme 2003). There has been a significant decline in certain manifestations of extreme poverty – the intensity of seasonal deprivations has reduced considerably; the percentage of the population going without three meals a day has lowered substantially; access to basic clothing has become almost universal; and the proportion of the population living in houses vulnerable to adverse weather conditions has gone down (Rahman and Razzaque 2000). It has been observed that poverty registered a modest decline in the 1990s but the rate of decline even in the most favourable estimates averages less than one percentage point per year (Rahman 2002). Rahman also observes that poverty has declined more in urban than in rural areas and the corresponding differentials in rates

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<sup>37</sup> They make this statement based on a finding of Sen and Begum (1998). According to Sen and Begum, an early estimate of poverty by J. C. Jack in 1910 estimated that 51 percent of rural population of Eastern Bengal (Faridpur) lived in absolute poverty. The comparable figure for 1994 (as obtained from the 62-village survey of BIDS) is 52 percent (Sen and Begum 1998).

of decline have been more pronounced in the case of extreme poverty. Urbanisation therefore, has clearly benefited both the moderate and the extreme poor (Rahman 2002).

McCarthy and Feldman assert that in Bangladesh a major hurdle in the way of effective action for poverty alleviation is the entrenched reality of institutional relations at the level of the state and the bureaucracy (McCarthy and Feldman 1988) which has been inherited as an unwelcome colonial legacy (Rahman 1995). Rahman asserts that by norms, jurisdictions and history, this bureaucratic state power is anything but participatory. More to the point, by the very logic of its institutional prejudices rooted in this regulatory function, it is inherently obstructive of the development goals which have been added to its function in the wake of independence. A crucial dichotomy which appears at this point is between good intentions and unintended consequences. Programmes lacking nothing in good intentions but without sufficient cognition of the specific nature of the machinery of implementation are routinely generating ineffectual outcomes, subverted at the implementation stage by the entrenched ethos of an administrative machinery rooted in the colonial past (Rahman 1995). It has been observed that estimates might vary within some percentage points, but the broad picture is very clear, nearly half of the population remain in poverty and of these around half are in extreme poverty (Rahman 2002). In terms of poverty reduction 'programmes' in Bangladesh, some studies have found that programmes that adopted a livelihood approach, for example, micro-credit and skills training might have benefited some poor but in most cases such programmes did not directly benefit the poorest of the poor (Matin and Hulme 2003, Hashemi 2001, Montgomery, Bhattacharya and Hulme 1996).

Muhammad Yunus, the sole noble laureate from Bangladesh, thinks poverty reduction in Bangladesh will not be a very difficult task. He emphasises that thoughts on poverty reduction should not be duped by 'smart people' who think poverty reduction in Bangladesh will be very difficult; rather he suggests that if proper opportunities are created for the poor, they themselves will be able to come out of poverty (Yunus 2003, 2002). However, Rahman insists that this means that the softer language of 'alleviation' needs to give way to the stronger language of 'elimination' with its

implied re-focusing of analytical, political, institutional and strategic energies (Rahman 2002).

#### **2.1.4 Ideological hegemony and role of a local ‘comprador class’\* in anti-poverty policies**

Having explained various dimensions and nexuses about poverty dynamics (and poverty reduction or elimination) this section looks at how local interest groups maintain western ideological dominance in local contexts.

According to Keohane (2005), theories of hegemony are sometimes partial, since they do not explain changes in the contradictions facing capitalism. He notes that international hegemony derives in part from combining realist conceptions of hegemony as dominance with arguments about the contradictions of capitalism (Keohane 2005). Femia explains this from a Gramscian perspective, that the supremacy of a social group or class manifests itself in two different ways: ‘domination’ (*dominio*), or coercion, and ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ (*direzione intellettuale e morale*). This later type of supremacy constitutes hegemony (Femia 1987: 24). For Keohane, hegemony is related in complex ways to cooperation and to institutions such as international regimes. The hegemon plays a distinctive role, providing its partners with leadership in return for deference; but, unlike an imperial power, it cannot make and enforce rules without a certain degree of consent from other sovereign states. The hegemon may have to invest resources in institutions in order to ensure that its preferred rules will guide the behaviour of other countries (Keohane 2005: 46). However, in the understanding of operational use of the idea in international development, Wallerstein draws a firm demarcation line between hegemony and imperialism. According to Wallerstein (1974), the key distinction between hegemony and imperialism is that a hegemon, unlike an empire, does not dominate societies through a cumbersome political superstructure, but rather supervises the relationships between politically independent societies through a combination of hierarchies of control and the operation of markets (Wallerstein 1974: 15-17).

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\* This does not refer to what Marx has described as a ‘class’. This research has adopted the term ‘comprador class’ from one of the informants who mentioned it to indicate a certain ‘group’ of people and their acts which are elaborated in chapter – 6. However this section discusses the theoretical issues regarding the notion.

Femia (1987) explains that social control takes two basic forms, besides influencing behaviour and choice *externally*, through rewards and punishments. Such a process of control is based on hegemony, which refers to an order in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour. It follows that hegemony is the predominance obtained by *consent* rather than force of one class or group over other classes. Whereas, domination is realised, essentially, through the coercive machinery of the state, 'intellectual and moral leadership' is objectified in, and mainly exercised through 'civil society', the ensemble of educational, religious and associational institutions. Moreover, this ideological superiority must have solid economic roots: 'if hegemony is ethico-political, it must also have its foundation in the decisive function that the leading group exercises in the decisive nucleus of economic activity' (Gramsci *cited in* Femia 1987: 24). Thus, hegemony rests on the subjective awareness by elites in hegemonised states that they are benefiting, as well as on the willingness of the hegemon itself to sacrifice tangible short-term benefits for intangible long-term gains. Gramsci came to view hegemony as the most important face of power, the 'normal' form of control in any post-feudal society, and, in particular, the strength of bourgeois rule in advanced capitalist society, where material force is resorted to on a large scale only in periods of exceptional crisis. The proletariat, in other words, wear their chains willingly (Femia 1978: 31).

The concern is therefore, as to how this idea operates within the realm of economic policies and global social development. Richard Peet (2003) states that economic policies are seen as cultural and political statements that claim power by cross-dressing in the legitimating grab of science. He illustrates that the ideas behind a policy discourse also emerge more directly and perhaps more forcefully, from economic activity as interpreted especially by business and financial elites. Here the discourse is more practical than theoretical, while power rests not so much on intellectual foundations as on control over wealth, capital accumulation, and technical expertise flowing from crucial positions of ideological sophistication, ideas flowing from highly committed interpretations of commercial practice and rephrased into universalistic value formats, by business associations, chambers of commerce and specialised institutes and similar elite economic organisations (Peet 2003: 20).

According to Gill (1993), hegemony occurs when there is a widespread acceptance of the key principles and political ideas of a leading class fraction or constellation of interests. When this happens, the policies which embody these principles will appear to be more natural and legitimate to broader elements within civil and political society. He further explains that what is crucial to this argument, however, is that such a nucleus of ideas is not simply a form of direct ideological domination, but rather a structural force which conditions and constrains class and other social forces. If the hegemonic capitalist class fraction is internationally oriented, its key principles would typically include the view that the market mechanism is the most efficient form of global economic organisation, the capital mobility and free trade increase global welfare, and that the long-term improvement of the condition of the planet and its inhabitants would be best served by strengthening the capitalist (Gill 1993: 266 – 267). This discussion denotes the normalisation and acceptance process of hegemonic ideas where it involves the interest of a local group. The next part of this section elaborates this idea and this research understands this group as comprador.

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 this is presumed to have on the political economy. He suggests that by definition, their ties to foreign capital preclude compradors from playing a ‘progressive’ role in the development of local industry (Vitalis 1990). For Sklar (1976), comprador largely serves as a ‘contemptuous adjective’, synonymous with ‘puppet’, rather than as a meaningful analytic construct.

Vintage Constantino (2000) explains the role of this class in international/national development. According to Constantino, because of the pervasive process of

westernisation the poor countries believe they are the recipients of aid and charity. In this process, the intellectuals of the South play an important role. In the economic sphere, the scope of the term can also be broadened to apply to intellectuals who perform the function of purveying among their countrymen those western modes of thought that facilitate the transfer of wealth to the North. This group may be perceived as comprador intellectuals (Constantino 2000, Massad 1997). Massad (1997) states that this group exports opinion polls, sociological data, official apologies, and personal memoirs, which are featured in the global media, they import IMF ideas, World Bank plans, Western funding for their local institutions, and Western public and media accolades. 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. These are indeed organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense whose class interests are clear (Massad 1997). 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).

Eagleton explains that a dominant social power, conceptualised as a class, naturalises and universalises beliefs and values that are congenial to its interests. That is segments are made by power interests in order to have politically legitimating effects in the face of opposing interests (Eagleton 1991). Moreover, Gill (1993) argues that there is a developing transnational capitalist class faction within a wider 'trilateral establishment'. The elite within this class fraction can be said to be at the zenith of an emerging transnational historic bloc, whose material interests and key ideas (with a broader political consciousness) are bound up with the progressive transnationalisation and liberalisation of the global political economy.

It is observed that international financial institutions (IFIs) have the function of co-opting elites from the periphery and absorbing counter-hegemonic ideas to ensure the dominance of their hegemonic ideology. On the one hand, hegemonic institutions

involve peripheral elites to give an appearance of broad representation and to legitimise the policies that are pursued by them<sup>38</sup>. On the other hand, the concerns of critics being heard and taken seriously, can also be seen as further efforts to absorb counter-hegemonic ideas and concepts. However, in the end, such processes only consolidate the interests of the hegemonic forces<sup>39</sup>. IFIs have the scope to impose various conditionalities. The World Bank and IMF, two of the leading IFIs, in different investor-creditor countries have overwhelming authority to supervise most development programme and can give their verdict. Payer (1982) insists that sometimes their 'cost-benefit' analysis becomes cosmetic in nature, as the projects are of course chosen a priori purely on their own (political) grounds. This is supported by other findings, such as Haggerd and Kaufman (1992) suggesting that often alumni of the international financial institutions play key roles in the political game of adjustment. They observe that staff members of the IMF, the World Bank, or the regional international development banks in almost all developing countries, attempt to persuade their colleagues in domestic decision making circles, primarily based on the interests of external agencies (Haggerd and Kaufman 1992).

Anu Muhammad (2006 a) observes that the World Bank and IMF have a consistent tradition of avoiding any responsibility for the disaster created by the projects imposed or funded by them. He argues that the Bank and Fund's system of knowledge do not consider development as relations of human beings in a historical set of social conditions with an inner dynamic of change. Their static framework, reduction of production and consumption into mere exchange, consideration of human being as simple role consumers, division of everything including human being into tradable and non-tradable, profitable and non-profitable and overlooking the role of institutions, the power play of different forces and historical cultural specificity make the followers of this knowledge into frantic believers who try to impose their beliefs everywhere even in an inappropriate real world (Muhammad 2006 a). Devine (2006)

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<sup>38</sup> As, for example, in the PRSP process, the incorporation of civil society organisations and the attempt of labelling it as 'country-owned' could be seen as an endeavour to co-opt civil society actors in the developing world into the development framework of the IFIs, and to give broader validation to the contested neo-liberal policy reforms in developing countries.

<sup>39</sup> This mechanism could be compared to the concept of participation of civil society in the PRSP process where the notion of participation has been transformed from the ability to influence decision-making processes and to reshape policies at the domestic level to mean nothing more than information-sharing and consultation on pre-determined sets of policies (for further details see 1.2.4 and chapter – 4).



understands such process as ‘clientelism’ and he insists that clientelism continues to reproduce and consolidate itself; albeit in new guises. Therefore, so called ‘ownership’ and ‘participation’ have very little meaning as he observes that clientelistic practices are unequal, hierarchical and exploitative, but in many instances this is not how poor people fundamentally experience or evaluate them (Devine 2006). However, Schmidt *et al.* (1977) found that the most persistent negative connotation associated with the idea of clientelism is that it inhibits individual capacity for autonomous action. They assert that it is linked to classic definitions of clientelism which stress the unequal power relations between patron and client that condition interaction and limit, often through coercion, the ability of clients to act in accordance with their patron’s interests (Schmidt *et al.* 1977). This is similar to what Lugard (1965) explained as ‘indirect rule’<sup>40</sup>, where the local ‘chiefs’ were an integral part of the machinery of the colonial administration. Lugard explains, ‘the chief himself must understand that he has no right to place and power unless he renders his proper services to the state’. Moreover, there were limitations on chiefs’ powers – they could not raise or control armed forces, raise taxes, appropriate or redistribute land, and ‘in the interests of good government the right of confirming or otherwise the choice of the people of the successor to a chiefship and deposing any ruler for misrule is reserved to the Governor’ (Lugard 1965: 207). Frank (1972) reveals the inert-linkages between external rule and a local dominant class. He argues that this is not only imperialism of the world metropolis which has kept this basic structure intact over many centuries. The cooperation of dominant classes in the satellites has also been necessary. The dependency structure has permitted domestic ruling classes to appropriate part of the surplus. Consequently, they have little incentive to change the structure. They have benefited from underdevelopment<sup>41</sup> (Frank 1972).

#### Local elite interest group – Bangladesh case

According to Anu Muhammad (2006 b), in the last 30 years Bangladesh has had plenty of ‘development’ projects and accumulated a huge international debt for

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<sup>40</sup> Kiernan explains that for underdeveloped countries, indirect rule was power exercised by hegemon without responsibility, in some ways this was more harmful than direct rule. Indirect rule was intermittent and chiefly directed to removing undesirable individual or parties from power and making sure of governments congenial to hegemon’s interest (Kiernan 1978: 126).

<sup>41</sup> According to Frank the bourgeoisie use government cabinets and other state instruments to ‘produce a *policy of underdevelopment* in the economic, social and political life of the “nation” and the people of Latin America’ (Frank, 1972: 13).

attaining this 'development'. He illustrates how during this process, a number of consultancy firms, think-tanks and hundreds of NGOs have emerged, and many experts in different fields have been born. Different projects have provided opportunities for bureaucrats and consultants to travel to the other parts of the world to obtain training from or consult experts in the economic centres. Muhammad argues that Bangladesh now has plenty of experts, consultants and researchers in different fields who have become part of an international community hungry for projects and the blessings of the global institutions. Poverty alleviation projects have given enough affluence to local (as well as foreign) consultants, bureaucrats, NGO owners and researchers (Muhammad 2006 b). A similar view was expressed nearly two decades ago by Sobhan (1985) who suggested that this practice had been established as a development 'component' in Bangladesh. He observed that economists by then had become among the principal beneficiaries of the hundreds of millions of dollars being spent by the UN system and international financing agencies to 'understand' what is poverty and underdevelopment<sup>42</sup> (Sobhan 1985). 'Underdevelopment' and 'poverty' persist to provide the intellectual traders the opportunity to continue the mission to 'understand' - a highly rewarding and non-ending mission.

Muhammad (2006 b) argues that this is a mechanism through which research and education programmes have succeeded in creating an ideological hegemony by fostering clone intellectuals and experts. He explains how this process is being enacted through ideological hegemony. In a country like Bangladesh, undergraduate and graduate studies, especially in economics, are likely to be shaped and organised by the rules and priorities of the dominant agencies of the Western countries, mostly North America. Most of the textbooks seem to have little local relevance. The lack of contextuality is not generally considered as a problem; rather the whole text is considered universal and ahistorical, thus producing a specific variety of economics

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<sup>42</sup> However, the economists have never been a homogenous body. According to Muhammad (2006 a), 'the mainstream economists have never been so timid, passive, satisfied with self and submissive like they are now. Although critical views on aid dependence and rent seeking issues persisted, many economists have become absorbed into 'value free' consultancies. Economic research, discussions, publications gradually became almost wholly dependant on funds provided by goal agencies in connection with their strategic necessity. In fact, among the economists of Bangladesh there have been always some strong dissenting voices. Most of them, in fact, have represented nationalistic populist spirit rather than any radical alternative theoretical framework and vision. Needless to say, they have been all along a minority, and despite their reputation, unable to influence the younger generation who apparently prefer to be with the high-tide for security of career' (Muhammad 2006 a: 88).

with a 'divine' power and authority<sup>43</sup> (Muhammad 2006 a). Sobhan, therefore, insists that the poor co-exist with a small globalised elite in the third world, whose lifestyles have merged with those of their counterparts in the West. Expectations of this elite, their search for security, and their investment portfolios are all globalised (Sobhan 2002). According to Anu Muhammad, in Bangladesh's case, since the local ruling class (along with this globalised elite group) does have strong lumpen features and cannot be characterised as a productive bourgeoisie, Bangladesh is only a blind, mindless follower (Muhammad 2006 b).

Ahmed and Sadduddin (1984) have noted that, historically, the interest of the ruling elite in Bangladesh was reflected in its urban-biased development strategy. The ruling elite in Bangladesh has represented such dominant forces as the urban-based petty bourgeoisie and rich peasants in rural areas and has designed its development strategy in such a fashion that the dominant force became the chief beneficiaries<sup>44</sup> (Ahmed and Saaduddin 1984). Islam asserts that it is conceivable that the elite would agree to make concessions to the poor, provided the resources to finance reformist measures are obtained, but not from a share in the growth of their own incomes and assets, but from external sources such as a substantial flow of foreign aid. In fact, the governing elite would probably want to have their 'share' from the flow of foreign resources, leaving a proportion for the poor (Islam 1978). This interest of the elite groups can be understood from a comment made by a former member of the planning commission of the Ministry of Finance, where he indicated that very few of the poor would suffer directly if aid was completely eliminated (Farouk 1982).

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<sup>43</sup> Muhammad (2006 a) however also observes that, in a peripheral country like Bangladesh, there is another aspect. Ideas that have been formed and influenced in the West quickly get accepted without much scrutiny. Therefore, the analysing career path of an economist from a promising student to that of a 'successful' professional, as a teacher or a researcher or a policymaker or an executive in 'development' agencies, gives a clear picture of construction of a person who becomes a tool of a broader machine dominated by the big corporate bodies of Western countries that suit well with the doctrine of unquestioned and dominant economics. This is what he calls 'ideological hegemony' that works for 'manufacturing consent' to run the present system of high poverty, inequality, repression and deprivation (Muhammad 2006 a).

<sup>44</sup> Whereas Islam (1978) notes the experience in post-independence Bangladesh reveals that the dominant middle-classes are unwilling to surrender their privileges. The rural elite successfully prevented any attempt at land reforms and at lowering ceilings of landholdings and maintained a system of subsidies or agricultural inputs such as for irrigation water, fertilisers and pesticides etc (Islam 1978).

Ahmad argues that in a country like Bangladesh, the middle class should have led popular movements to bring the poor people's interest onto the centre stage. But, under the existing socio-economic structure, a majority of the middle class either are part of the present structure or beneficiaries of it (Ahmad 2006). Anu Muhammad (2006 a) suggests, as an example, that this can be perceived from the settling pattern of a first class economics graduate of a first class university in the country. He raises the question, where do such graduates who could have contributed to greater benefits stand in a country with 140 million people running in a vicious cycle of poverty-crime-drainage-plundering-destruction? He further explains how the 'mainstream' economists of Bangladesh are part of an international development community (as beneficiaries) who think, act, speak and write in similar breath, although some of them live in the country but that matters little in their 'rational behaviour'. He suspects that such a situation does not encourage the new graduates to act on behalf of national or the mass of the people's interest. Instead, the context kindles them to become as 'mainstream' development thinkers (Muhammad 2006 a). This led Sobhan to suggest that these new coalitions of forces, which were effectively consolidated over the course of the 1980s, have contributed to the perpetuation of poverty and an unjust social order (Sobhan 2002) that characterises Bangladesh in dominant development discourse.

In the next part of this literature review we discuss the idea of civil society: its historical origin and recent emphasis and usage in development discourse especially as a means to carry 'voices from below' (through participation) in producing development policies. This review critically looks at as to what extent the idea of civil society in its recent form can actually serve as a bridge between the policy making process and participation by the poor or whether it is used as offering 'lip-service' according to the hegemon/patron's interest.

Part – 2:

Civil society – (re) discovery for inclusion or carrying aspirations from below?

### **2.2.1 Preamble**

During the 1980s (towards the end of the Cold War) several movements in Eastern Europe and in the global South embraced the idea that civil society expressed the aspirations for freedom of citizens, their right to a voice and to representation. This is the conventional wisdom in academia about civil society. However, this research argues that this understanding is biased and politically motivated, as well as having been used as a Western democratisation agenda. The agenda of democratisation can be entangled with neo-liberal principles of market economy targeted for underdeveloped and developing countries, and civil society can be pushed/strengthened to achieve such preferred type of ‘democracy’ (see 2.1.2). The revival of civil society in 1990s was originally an ‘invention’ by the West (for more details please see sections 2.2.2, 2.2.3 and 2.2.4) for the Eastern European socialist countries after the Cold War (later on the idea was extended to developing countries). In this process, the idea of civil society was brought to centre stage in such a way as only ‘civil society’ could guide the former socialist countries to a democratic system (read similar system as in the West).

This chapter begins with a brief history of emergence of civil society to comprehend that recent re-invented discourses are Western constructions; spread through a hegemonic global power structure. Although this construction of civil society signifies citizens’ involvement, participation, action, protests and voices for common interest, this chapter will argue that the idea of civil society ‘was there’ in those societies before any intervention, discovery or strengthening process. Perhaps, the idea was in traditional, non-formal guise but the reality of civil society was present in those societies where the idea has been pushed in its rediscovered form. Later on, this chapter will discuss various definitions of civil society from different standpoints to understand its diverse properties. This chapter also discusses the role and influence of the donors in promoting the idea of civil society involvement in poverty reduction policies, and finally provides an overview of Bangladesh’s civil society.

### **2.2.2. (Re) discovery of civil society**

The meaning of civil society has varied according to historical context and the form of political authority. The term civil society has always been associated with the formation of a particular type of political authority, for example, as an authority that

seeks greater good and/or pursues common goals. But the ambiguity of the concept arises from its changing meaning over time. For seventeenth and eighteenth century thinkers, civil society was defined in contrast to the nature of the state (Kaldor 2004, Chandhoke 1995). For Kaldor (2004) and 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. Black argues that there was no clear distinction at that time between civil society and the state, rather civil society was a generic term for a secular constitutional order (Black 2001). 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. However, she also insists that there is an alternative argument that draws on the post-modern version of civil society which denies the Eurocentric character of civil society and suggests that there was something approximating civil society in other parts of the world, even if there was not the same emphasis on individual autonomy (Kaldor 2004).

According to Kumar (1993), the term civil society conveys an attractive combination of democratic pluralism with a continuing role for state regulation and guidance, which appears attractive to societies seeking to recover from state socialism. At the same time it seems to offer help in the refashioning of radical politics in those societies where socialism has lost whatever appeal it once possessed (Kumar 1993). 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 *burgerliche 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'. According to Stiles (2002), Habermas conceives of civil society as an anti-hegemonic force in society, whose purpose is to aggregate the interests of power of the marginalised members of society, that has been described by Gramsci as the 'other'. Kumar observes, civil society for Gramsci is indeed not to be found in the sphere of production or economic organisation but in the state. The formula most commonly found in Gramsci is: the state equals political society plus civil society. Political society is the arena of coercion and domination; civil society that of consent and direction (or leadership). The hegemony of a ruling class is expressed through the 'organic relations' between the two realms (Kumar 1993). For Marx, civil society is bourgeois society. It is built upon modern class inequalities. The state is not above civil society but an expression of class rule operating to maintain civil society and the dominant economic interests within it (Marx 1843/1979).

Gibbon (1998) and Steinstra (2001) argue that to Habermas, it is impossible for capitalist forces, whether in the private sector or in the state apparatus, to be legitimate participants in civil society, rather, they are the target of social mobilisation. The social mobilisation perspective sees the civil society within a discourse of development. It is the liberal position, in which civil society has come to signal the ensemble of associations which exist outside the state (mostly as an 'opposition') and the private sector as well as has become a common parlance (Bratton 1988; 1994, Makumbe 1998, Rothchild and Chazan 1988, Stiles 2002). Habermas 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' (Habermas 1996: 365). This view portrays civil society as a liberating social force that challenges the hegemony of the other sectors. Jenkins (2001) argues that perhaps the most important issue in the growth of civil society is the form of collective 'consciousness' that shapes perceptions and experiences of the society. He insists, 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 (Jenkins 2001). Sobhan (1998) asserts that the more a society walks away from bureaucratic control and encourages supremacy of civil engagements the scope for flourishing of social capital enhances. Social capital refers here to the capacity of states or societies to establish a sense of community which leads a significant proportion of the society voicing their concern and seeking active involvement in the affairs of the community, and sharing the benefits of community action (Sobhan 1998). Rahman argues, in addition to creating a benign environment for development, a civil society can also play a crucial role in promoting democratisation and participation (Rahman 1999). However, Habermas notes that the public opinion that is worked up via democratic procedures into communicative power cannot 'rule' of itself but can only point the use of administrative power in specific directions (Habermas 1996).

In recent years, the idea of civil society has undergone something of a renaissance and its efflorescence is often considered to be the most likely route out of development 'problems' in the poor countries, particularly in Africa (Diamond; Linz and Lipset 1988, Harbeson; Rothchild and Chazan 1994, Landell-Mills 1992, Mercer 2003). Gurza Lavalle, Houtzager and Castello (2005) observe that there is considerable evidence that civil society has become the *de facto* and *de jure* representatives of particular segments of the population with interests in the design, implementation, and monitoring of public policy. They note that governments are, for a variety of reasons, drawing this new set of collective actors into their policy processes. Conversely, many civil organisations are themselves knocking on government policy doors with increasing insistence (Gurza Lavalle, Houtzager and Castello 2005). According to Lavalette and Ferguson (2007), civil society is a concept that distances the organisations, activities and participants from control by the state. Its present vogue 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. They observe that 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 (Lavalette and Ferguson 2007). Stiles argues that civil society has become not only the source of sound policy and highly-trained experts to provide government with ideas and staff, but it also serves a crucial watchdog function by holding the government accountable to the people (Stiles 2002).

These conceptualisations 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 to the global level – where difference, rather than commonality, is the rule. For example, any definition of civil society based on western experience may appear inappropriate against the specific experiences of Islamic and Arab societies where diverse tribal and other groups contest control or autonomy within the social power structure. Furthermore, the states and societies with long colonial experiences and with numerous political, racial and ethnic sub-groups which are ‘fighting’ for autonomy cannot reflect the ideal type of civil society as delineated in western values.

Although there are disagreements among the theoreticians about the understanding of civil society there is a common presumption that civil society is a good thing. The idea of civil society became popular and was used frequently by social scientists during 1990s (Grugel 2000, Kumar 1993). The idea of civil society claims several antecedents (McIlwaine 1998, Mohan 2002) which are most commonly recognised as belonging to either the liberal or the post-Marxist schools of thought (Mercer 2003). The time is significant as it was the time of demise of the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European communist regimes. There was a desire by the United States and other European countries to promote ‘democracy’ abroad at this time, especially where governments and administrations were influenced by Soviet model and/or socialist political ideology (Kumar 1993). The whole effort was geared to spreading political systems similar to their own, so international actors could devise democracy promotion strategies. They focused much effort on promoting citizen participation and activism – what quickly came to be known as vibrant civil society (Ottaway 1996). The new activists have been organised in small non-governmental organisations (NGO), often loosely tied in broader networks, and see themselves as the embodiment of a mobilised civil society. On the other side of the spectrum, donors and international agencies rethought their programmes in developing countries due to massive corruption and inefficiency by the governments in those countries (Howell 2002, Ottaway 1996). As a result, development projects and other programmes (i.e. service delivery) have involved NGOs, bypassing the governments, once again aiming to promote and include citizen participation and social mobilisation which would ultimately lead to the desired changes. The role of donors and NGOs in promoting the idea of civil society will be discussed later in this chapter (see 2.2.4).

Promoting the idea of civil society was initiated to justify activities by the West in introducing similar political systems and development models in former socialist and developing countries in ways which would be 'acceptable' to their populations and to the international community (Gurza Lavallo; Houtzager and Castello 2005, Kumar 1993). According to Chandhoke civil society is a modern concept because it epitomises a clear dichotomy between civil and political life. However, the distinction between civil and political, or the separation of civil from political society is still unclear. The ambiguity with which civil society has been treated is largely due to the fact that the term was deliberately used to distinguish a particular form of social and political organisation from the nature of the state (Chandhoke 1995). However, a few important points can be identified that serve as the basis for the continuing discussion. First, as conventionally defined, civil society is clearly a western (or northern) construct. The thinkers who have played instrumental roles in the concept's development have been Europeans, living at particular points in history, and their ideas understandably have been 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 (Warkentin 2001). 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. According to Cohen and Arato, civil society should be seen not only passively, as a network of institutions, but also actively, as the context and product of self-constituting collective actors (Cohen and Arato 1994).

### **2.2.3 Re-visiting the definitions of civil society**

This section discusses various definitions of civil society to comprehend the idea from various standpoints and its properties as scholars have described it. It is believed to be useful to look at different contexts of civil society, especially to understand the process how the idea has been drafted into poverty reduction policies and gained an NGO focus, which is discussed in the later section (see 2.2.4).

According to Chandhoke (1995), Hegel is credited with theoretical innovation and is widely regarded as the first theorist who distinguished the state from civil society.

Hegel saw civil society as essentially an achievement of the modern world, where the individual can legitimately pursue his self-defined interest. Civil society is progressive, enlightening and emancipatory. It allows the realisation of individual potential. Chandhoke insists, for Hegel, civil society was a set of social practices constituted by the logic of the capitalist economy and reflecting the ethos of the market, but which had an existence distinct from the economy. He located these social practices between the family and the state and invested them with historical significance (Chandhoke 1995).

Although above clarification is very broad but it explains one point, that civil society is not the whole society but only part(s) of it. However, it invites the question as to whether all organisations in between family and state represent the civil society? If all of these institutions are not part of civil society then what are the different characteristics of the organisations which are included in civil society (with those organisations that are not in it)? There is an intention to create a demarcation between voluntary and non-voluntary organisations too (Warkentin 2001, Whaites 2002). The concept of voluntary association contains ambiguities: what should be identified as voluntary? Voluntary organisations may be informal, semi-formal or formal organisations where membership is completely a matter of free choice. To illustrate, a cooperative society or a social club is a voluntary organisation because the decision of membership for any individual is open while the decision of membership of a family is not chosen. However, belongingness to any religious belief in most parts of the world is not chosen, but, religious groups are usually considered as a definite part of civil society. It is worth mentioning here that informal social organisations play a very crucial role in civil society in developing countries. Moreover, Ottaway asserts that joining political parties is a free choice but quite often a distinctive line has always been drawn between civil society and political society. Gramsci (in *Prison Notebooks*), explained that both civil society and political society play a political role and seek to influence policy decisions (Gramsci cited in Ottaway 1996).

According to Gurza Lavallo, Houtzaeger and Castello (2005), the interrelationship between societal and political actors would not be surprising for the rigid divisionary lines drawn between individual and political parties and the directions of the debate. Parties and candidates invest in the social field as part of their political strategy and

civil society cultivates preferred political support and alliances in order to carry out its objectives. They argue that it is precisely the civil organisations involved in this reconnection that take on the assumed representation of their public. On the other hand, the ordinary citizen is not the principal protagonist in the new participatory spaces for the design and monitoring of public policies, but rather civil organisations legally invested as representatives of the social sectors envisaged by these policies (Gurza Lavalle, Houtzaeger and Castello 2005). However, this has been observed that civil society groups do not aspire to control the government and exercise power, rather influencing policies in the public interest. Ottaway and Carothers argue that political society organisations, more specifically political parties aim to control the government. The consequence of this view is that civil society is virtuously dedicated to giving citizens a voice, while political society is power-hungry, self-interested, and considerably less virtuous (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). It can be argued that if a political party gains power, then it becomes the government and cannot be described as part of civil society. However where does this leave the vast majority of party members who do not achieve government office? They may organise autonomously within the party and some parties have their own civil society organisations (DFID 2006).

True, there are organisations of civil society that act purely as pressure or advocacy groups and have no intention of contesting public office. But civil society activists are often close to specific political parties, and many move freely between civil society organisations and parties (Chandhoke 1995, DFID 2006, Howell and Pearce 2002, Ottaway 1996). Furthermore, many political parties, including some in power, set up organisations of civil society in an attempt to capture some of the assistance that is available only to civil society organisations. Civil society is increasingly becoming part of political oppositions. However, less formal, local groups, sometimes referred to as community-based organisations (CBOs), rarely become openly political. CBOs are usually concerned about local development and welfare issues, focusing on service delivery or simply self-help. In its more sophisticated, advanced form, civil education is also training for political activism: citizens are encouraged to scrutinise the actions of politicians, to lobby them to enact reforms, and hold them accountable by voting them out of office (Ottaway 1996).

People make politics and civil society, but politics is a dynamic phenomenon created and shaped by individuals through their social interactions. We all know that ‘people are different’ from each other. Perceptions, ideologies and beliefs are likely to be quite different from those of someone else who supports another political party, subscribes to another religion, belongs to another ethnic group or lives in another country. If people have different ideas about what politics is, what it should be, and how to make it so, then it is less realistic to treat them analytically as if they were cookies all cut from the same mould (Warkentin 2001). 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 (Howell and Pearce 2002).

Cohen and Arato understand ‘civil society’ as a sphere of social interaction situated between economy and state, composed above all by the intimate sphere (specially the family), the sphere of associations (especially voluntary associations), social movements, and forms of public communication. Modern civil society is created through forms of self-constitution and self-mobilisation. It is institutionalised and generalised through laws, and especially rights that stabilise social differentiation. While the self-creative and institutionalised dimensions can exist separately, in the long term both independent action and institutionalisation are necessary for the reproduction of civil society (Cohen and Arato 1994). Former UN Secretary, Boutros Ghali, described civil society organisations as a basic form of popular representation in the present-day world. Their participation in international relations is, in a way, a guarantee of the political legitimacy of these international organisations (Ghali *cited in* Köhler 1998). However, the ‘international society’ approach offers an ahistorical analytical account of the modern international system that reifies the discourses and practices of ruling classes, and consequently fails to credit the essential role of popular political action in the development of the system. In essence the claim being

made is that international society is fundamentally state centric and therefore inherently incapable of theorising the role of collective political agency in world politics (Colas 2002).

Robert Cox 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 (Cox 1999). 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. This can happen through local community groups that reflect diverse cultures; and evolving social practices world wide. A more ambitious vision is of a ‘global civil society’ in which these social movements together constitute a basis for an alternative world order (Cox 1999). For Howell and Pearce, civil society has indeed established itself in a paradigmatic way in the field of development thinking and practice. The concept of civil society reflects multiple normative understandings of what is to be the relationship between the individual, the society and the state (Howell and Pearce 2002). Anheirer proposes a working definition for civil society as the sphere of institutions, organisations and individuals located between the family, the state and the market in which people associate voluntarily to advance common interests (Anheirer 2004).

Kaldor defines civil society as the medium through which one or many social contracts between individuals, both women and men, and the political and economic centres of power are negotiated and reproduced. She uses the term social contract both to emphasise and reflect the early modernist belief in the role of human reason and will as opposed to either chance or historical determination (Kaldor 2004). This definition is coherent with Ernest Gellner’s definition that civil society is a set of diverse non-governmental institutions which are sufficient to counter-balance the state and, while not preventing the state from fulfilling its role as keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent it from dominating and

atomising the rest of society (Gellner 1996). Deakin sees the altruistic properties of civil society across the world – the fall of Berlin wall, and the long queue for voting in South Africa are said to be achievements of civil society in those countries. There is a space left by the state in his view which needs to be filled. Which bodies should operate in this space, that is, the area customarily designated ‘civil society’? Which individuals and groups should be engaged on the basis of balance between spontaneity and organisation, individual and community based action, legal and commercial conditions for operating (Deakin 2001)?

For the World Bank, civil societies are varied in their nature and composition. For this reason, definitions of civil society vary considerably based on differing conceptual paradigms, historic origins, and country contexts. 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 2006).

The Department for International Development (DFID), UK comprehends that the notion of civil society is rooted in Western European and North American political thought and experience. This raises questions about explaining the concept. The issue is complicated by the tendency to confuse how things should be in an ideal world with how things actually are. The DFID defines civil society as located between the state, the private sector and the family or household, where society debates and negotiates matters of common concern and organises to regulate public affairs. It 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.
- Social movements and networks (DFID 2006).



Thus the definition of civil society is both an aspiration and a description of a partial and emergent reality. It presupposes that the normal autonomy of individuals does not imply only selfish behaviour but encompasses the potential for human beings to develop institutions that express widely agreed norms based on actual discursive practice. To some extent civil society is about politics from below and about the possibility for human emancipation. Individuals can, however, choose whether or not to participate in civil society (Cohen and Arato 1994, Kumar 1993).

Chandhoke (1995) and Ottaway (1996) argue that it has been taken for granted that civil society expresses diverse voices which is a new phenomenon in some parts of the world. Yet, how can we know how many voices there are, what their strengths and weaknesses might be, or their potential for democracy and greater social equity, and what impact they could potentially have? Furthermore, it deserves critical attention, why should such a concept be particularly attractive to the West? Is not the revival of discourse on civil society in the East and the South simply part of a project to attain what the advanced capitalist democracies already have: civil society guaranteed by the rule of law, civil rights, parliamentary democracy and a market economy? Chandhoke and Ottaway insist that civil society has come to embody a whole range of emancipatory aspirations, which focus on the defence of human rights and human dignity against state oppression, and which mark out an autonomous sphere of social practice, rights and dignity for the individual (Chandhoke 1995, Ottaway 1996).

According to Chandhoke (1995), the focus on civil society has arisen partly from disenchantment with participation in the formal structures of the political power. It is the task of civil society to restore communication and communitarian support structures among its inhabitants. It is equally the task of civil society to maintain an ethos different from that of the state, the bureaucracy and the economy (Chandhoke 1995). Civil society is accordingly conceptualised as a space where people pursue self-defined ends in an associational area of common concerns. It comprises a social realm including a plurality of institutions and associations and voices; a domain of autonomous moral choice; and a legal system incorporating basic rights that protect and demarcate this social realm (Cohen 1988). It is therefore conceptualised as a space which nurtures and sustains its inhabitants rather than controls them and their relationships.

Which organisations should be under the flag of civil society is still ambiguous; and is not unbiased or free of pre-suppositions based on the agendas, politics and objectives of those who define civil society and demarcate civil society organisations from other social institutions. If all organisations in between family and state are to be considered as part of civil society, both human rights organisations and terrorist groups are in this category. But needless to say, there is not the least likelihood of a terrorist group being accepted as part of civil society. The line drawn between the public and private roles of these organisations (between family and state) is ambiguously defined.

Houtzager *et al.* points towards the functional roles these organisations play (conventionally understood as civil society organisations) in the logic of privatisation and of redistribution of responsibilities between society, the state and the market (Houtzager *et al.* 2002). Ottaway observes, in practice, the word civil society is almost invariably used to denote organisations that share certain positive ‘civil’ values (Ottaway 1996). Nevertheless, there may be hardly any consensus at this point based on different standpoints or political values. One popular example can be cited here – Nelson Mandela, the much acclaimed first president of post-apartheid South Africa, once ‘identified’ as ‘terrorist’ by the United States. Another problem in understanding the boundary of civil society is its ideological nature. What is so ‘civil’ in civil society? Norton (1993) explains that civil society is more than an admixture of various forms of association; it also refers to a quality – civility – without which the milieu consists of feuding factions, cliques, and cabals. Civility implies tolerance, the willingness of individuals to accept disparate political views and social attitudes, sometimes to accept the profound idea that there is no right answer. Thus, a robust civil society is more than letterhead stationery, membership lists, public characters and manifestoes. Norton insists civil society is also a cast of mind, a willingness to live and let live (Norton 1993).

Fine and Harrington argue that small groups can be seen as a cause, context, and consequence of civic engagement. The attachments of individuals to small groups in which they participate permit us to understand how public identities develop and how individuals use these identities (Fine and Harrington 2004). Thus, small groups promote civic engagement by placing individuals in a position where they have more to gain, or less to lose, by cooperating with the group than they do by acting as solitary agents. The incentive structure is reinforced within small groups by regimes

of monitoring and sanctioning (Hechter 1987). Through small groups, individuals find arenas to enact their autonomous selves and to demonstrate allegiance to communities and institutions. They create social order without recourse to legal institutions, as in rural farming communities in which issues of land boundaries can be problematic (Ellickson 1991). The outcome of group interaction is a culture in which civic participation, citizenship, and nationalism are created. Small groups provide arenas in which the action of civic engagement is played out. It is a discursive space where ideas of patriotism, nationalism, civic religion, and other public issues can be explored. In the course of interaction, participants in small groups define some social problems (but not others) as worthy of a collective response. Small groups also provide a space in which movements grow that can mobilise interests and resources, and agree tactics needed for civic engagement in advocacy and lobbying policy makers (Ottaway 1996).

Migdal observes that two different types of civil society can be found in different countries – ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ civil society. He explains that in countries where the state is strong, traditional civil society is weak and modern civil society is strong. If the state is weak, so is modern civil society but traditional civil society strengthens (Migdal 1996). Citizens rely on civil society networks in many aspects of their lives and ‘modern’ civil society can therefore, be organised into formal, professionalised NGOs. According to Migdal, ‘modern’ civil society, defined as a set of NGOs, has clear boundaries that separate it from the family and indeed from the rest of society as well as from the state. ‘Traditional’ civil societies are loosely structured but culturally sanctioned mechanisms for swapping labour and mobilising effort in the performance of large collective tasks, and are less specialised and formal than ‘modern’ civil society organisations (Migdal 1996).

#### **2.2.4 Donor driven civil society and its role in poverty reduction**

With the end of the Cold War and the apparent triumph of liberal democracy and capitalist routes to development, donor agencies harnessed the concept of civil society to promote a paradigm of development that was no longer limited to the agencies of state and market players. Stiles (2002) has argued that the ‘civil society empowerment’ initiative is well underway among donor agencies in many parts of the

world. It is seen as a key element in the promotion of human rights, democracy and grassroots development (Stiles 1998). It consists of supporting both development and democracy by working around government institutions, which are widely considered corrupt, unresponsive and/or inept, and providing resources directly to nongovernmental actors. This premise is based in turn on the liberal/pluralist conception of society's relationship to the state, where civil society associations serve to aggregate and articulate mass opinion and preferences (Dahl 1971). Mercer argues that dominant development discourses have scripted the liberal interpretation of civil society as the only game in town (Mercer 2003), and moreover, that civil society is inherently good for development (Bickford 1995, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, Orvis 2001).

Hickey and Bracking note that 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). However, Carley and Smith suggest that civil society, through democratic participation, should be brought much more fully into the processes of policy making and development. They insist that without this, sustainable development will not be achieved despite all the rhetoric in general support of the concept (Carley and Smith 2001). Moreover, Jenkins argues, relating to the wider political economic context, today's governments cannot ignore the needs of significant parts of the population in any sustainable future, even if this is what the dictates of the global market economy require (Jenkins 2001). The World Bank also acknowledges that in last two decades civil society influences have helped shape global public policy. This dynamism is exemplified by successful advocacy campaigns around such issues as banning land mines, debt cancellation, and environmental protection which have mobilised thousands of supporters around the globe (The World Bank 2006).

Pearce argues that the North now evades responsibility for poverty in the South, where no geopolitical interests drive aid programmes, and southern governments have a much weakened voice in international forums (Pearce 2000). Such a paradigm envisages civil society playing a role not only in democratisation but also in economic

development. By the mid-1990s the idea of civil society had become part of everyday development discourse within the wider initiatives of supporting the emergence of competitive market economies, building better-managed states with the capacity to provide more responsive services and just laws, and improving democratic institutions and deepening political participation (Archer 1994). In supporting civil society in the South, donor agencies pursue a combination of broad goals. These include promoting democratisation, hastening economic development, reducing poverty and strengthening civil society as a goal in itself. Support for the emergence and strengthening of NGOs has formed a central part of this agenda (Archer 1994, Howell 2002, Howell and Pearce 2002). According to Stiles (2002), in most developing countries civil society empowerment strategy has been focused almost entirely on the agencies known as nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). According to Sobhan (2000) 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. He insists that in South Asia but even more so in Africa and post-socialist Europe, a civil society is being manufactured by donor resources (Sobhan 2000). Stiles asserts that this stems largely from the fact that in places where grassroots democracy has yet to take hold and where the private sector is still at the 'robber-baron' phase of maturation, there is so much corruption and nepotism that external donors do not trust the integrity or capacity of organisations normally associated with 'civil society' (Stiles 2002). However, if civil society is to be found in NGOs, researches reveal that NGOs are frequently found to be donor-dependent and subject to 'personal rule' (Ndegwa 1996); representative of elite interests; incapable of or uninterested in political lobbying; and fragmented (Fowler 1993, Hearn 2001, Mohan 2002). NGOs, by virtue of their relatively independent character, their non-profit status, and their links to poor communities that they have generally served well, offer donors a relatively safe and convenient means of avoiding both the public and private sector and all their dangers (Stiles 2002).

According to Howell (2002), NGOs potentially depoliticise the arena of association, celebrating its plurality and diversity, but clouding its political content. It cannot be assumed that because business associations, NGOs and trade unions all operate within the space of civil society that they have access to similar resources or share similar goals and values (Howell 2002). Donors have administrative requirements for

supporting and strengthening civil society (Ottaway 1996). The groups must be organised in a formal way because donors cannot provide support for an organisation that is not registered in some way, that does not have a name and address, or that cannot be audited. For practical reasons, donors also prefer to deal with organisations that speak, literally and figuratively, the same language as themselves. Fluency in English, social ease with foreigners, command of donor discourse and physical proximity to donor offices are significant influences on donors' choice of partner organisations (Ottaway and Carothers 2000). Given that donors' interest in civil society has as a prime objective of democratisation, aid support to civil society is biased towards those groups that similarly promote this goal. Civil society assistance, however, is not limited to fostering democratisation. It also accords with a broader agenda of promoting neo-liberal economic policies (Howell 2002, Howell and Pearce 2002). Partnerships among local governments, business and community groups; dialogues and consultations around macro-economic policies, and poverty reduction; and support to neo-liberal economic think tanks and policy institutes, all serve to forge a consensus around economic strategies of privatisation and liberalisation (Howell and Pearce 2002).

Donor enthusiasm for the concept of civil society soon translated into a range of practical initiatives aimed at securing the space for people to associate for supporting particular organisations. The reasons for the donor discovery of civil society are complex, relating in no small part to the end of the Cold War and the changing global political context. It seemed as though the concept of civil society had always been part of development rhetoric and practice. At first donor agencies tended to reduce civil society to NGOs, but as governance programmes expanded in the post-Cold War context, they increasingly involved other types of civil society organisations in their programmes (Howell 2002). Donor agencies have tried to foster civil society by creating spaces for dialogue, alliance and coalition-building. Perhaps the most comprehensive example of this approach is the involvement of civil society organisations in the formulation of national poverty reduction strategy papers which will be discussed below.

Nevertheless, this section does not intend to criticise NGOs; rather it seeks to comprehend the relationship between NGOs in civil society alongside an emphasis on

civil society's role in poverty reduction (more specifically from the PRSP experiences – as in most cases 'participation' in the PRSPs was dominated by the NGOs). We have seen above that in recent discourses NGOs are part and parcel of contemporary civil society and they have been blessed by the donors to give voice or organise and strengthen civil society in developing countries. Therefore, a critical perspective on NGO is deemed to be useful in understanding the participatory process of production of a national poverty reduction strategy.

Since 1990, the concept of civil society has been 'grabbed' by NGOs as one relating closely to their natural strengths (Whaites 2000). Civil society is intimately connected with the role of local community associations or groups, and with the indigenous NGO sector. For northern NGOs this leads to an intellectual association between civil society and local 'partner' or implementing organisations. This creates unprecedented new relationships between donors and NGOs, which would have been inconceivable during the Cold War when NGOs were considered politicised voices of anti-state opposition forces. Opportunistic NGOs have mushroomed during this time as they have become an instrument in the new policy agenda of many bilateral and multilateral donors (Howell and Pearce 2002). All European NGOs, to a greater or lesser extent, have felt similar pressures to reform, modernise, and justify their activities since the 1990s. In addition, all share a commitment to development in the South and the construction of a moral basis for international activities (Grugel 1999). Munck argues that in one historical conjuncture the NGOs could act as agents of progressive historical change, in another they were to become social 'transmission belts' for the new imperial project of global neoliberalism in which political development was promoted through an impoverished version of democracy (Munck 2006). Anderson and Rieff have drawn a parallel between the international NGO movement and the Western missionaries of the colonial period. They argue that both carry the gospel to the rest of the world and thus seek salvation and goodness (Anderson and Rieff 2005). The ways in which development NGOs perceive civil society, and consequently plan projects to facilitate the work of civil associations, can have a significant effect on the evolution of civil societies in the countries where they work.

The democratising function of civil society assumed a higher profile among multilateral agencies, and NGOs were identified as a possible point of contact and one of its building blocks. The idea was that NGO supported projects could have wider and much larger economic, social and political objectives as NGOs acquired new ways of thinking about 'partnership' and the implementation of projects (Whaites 2000). Whaites explains, this process was spurred on by the UN, which moved to the fore in promoting civil society as a development issue. UNDP, UNICEF, and ECOSOC introduced procedures to provide voluntary associations with greater access to their systems, and the ECOSOC review of NGOs discussed the possibility of funding southern NGO participation at UN business meetings. 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).

There is nothing wrong for civil society to flourish in association with NGOs, which can offer new forums for communities, and this had much to do with its growth in developed states. However, Howell and Pearce argue that NGOs were gradually conceived as 'alternative' deliverers of social services and welfare, thus providing a solution to the limited capacities of the state as well as the inequalities of capitalist development (Howell and Pearce 2002). Nevertheless, criticisms of NGOs have focused on their technical deficiency, their lack of accountability, and their excessively politicised and critical character. This has undermined their credibility among the technocrats within donor institutions, who have demanded rapid and measurable outputs from investments in the NGO sector. And it has weakened the influence of the pro-NGO social-development advocates within those institutions. For example, Bangladesh has a large number of NGOs but it is unclear whether even this number can offer a sustainable substitute for state spending. This is not to say that NGOs in Bangladesh are not doing good works. It must be recognised though, that increasing numbers of NGOs, however dedicated and efficient, can never offer rapid solutions to a problem on the scale of global poverty (Pearce 2000). Lofredo argues that NGOs (in his own language EN-GE-OHs) are a bit like the birds and the mice in the fairy tale of Cinderella and want to help poor people and support the Fairy



Godmother as she goes about her noble business<sup>45</sup>. Yet the amount of aid money that goes not to the poor but to local NGO managers is trivial compared with the colossal sums that are drawn off by the well-intentioned programmes that are promoted by the big multilateral institutions, the billions in loans, and the mega project budgets (Lofredo 1995).

However, there is a different strand of civil society thinking which has also been influential in some parts of the world in recent decades. That is, in order to provide assistance, aid agencies need to break down the abstract idea of civil society when operationalising democracy in different parts of the world in ways that can be supported with limited amounts of aid (Ottaway 1996). She illustrates how civil society is such a component, and a particularly attractive one, and for her, developing civil society means promoting government by the people and for the people and hence, democracy promotion in developing countries remains on the political agenda of most industrial democracies. Leaders in the developing world, including many with no democratic credentials and no visible intention of acquiring them, have embraced the rhetoric of democracy (Ottaway 1996). The idea of the common good and the public interest conceal the reality that all societies are made up of groups with different and often conflicting interests, and that all groups are equally part of the society, whether their goals conform to a specific idea of civility or not.

The questions of relevance and practical policy value are generating wide debates even within Western societies. If the concept of civil society is historically specific and ultimately extremely fragile, then it becomes relevant to ask whether it has meaning outside the context in which it originally evolved. Comaroff and Comaroff argue that the idea was rediscovered, and given new contemporary relevance, by dissident intellectuals in communist Eastern Europe in the 1980s, who were engaged in anti-totalitarian struggle. They insist that the cycle has been completed by the return of the concept back to the West where it has been 're-remembered' along with

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<sup>45</sup> Lofredo illustrates, 'projects' are the fairy tales at this point. Cinderella is the poor, or the *beneficiary*. The fairy godmother is the international agency representative. The little mice and birds (who dance after the marriage of Cinderella with the Prince) are EN-GE-OHs. The *magic coach* is the funding. And the marriage with the prince is sustainable development. The only difference is that in the real world, it is the birds and mice who marry the prince, and the EN-GE-OHs who ensure their own sustainable (self) development. It all depends on understanding the subtle charm of projects, and their intimate relationship with EN-GE-OHs (Lofredo 1995).

a realisation that the West has been living it without noticing as part of the unremarked fabric of society itself (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

In a study of Palestine, Muslih applies the construct of civil society not only in a non-western but also in a stateless setting. He notes that as conventionally conceptualised, civil society regards the state as an indispensable agent responsible for referring and regulating the functioning of civil society (Muslih 1993). Then contesting this argument, Muslih insists that civil society is not the exclusive domain of one country or continent, nor is it the exclusive domain of a particular type of political system. Almost all societies have within them civil formations, regardless of the system of government. Thus, Muslih concludes that there exists what can be termed a vibrant civil society among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, even in the absence of formal state institutions (Muslih 1993). On the other hand, Lewis (2001) explains the relevance of the concept of civil society in non-western societies with the example of Africa. He argues that four different answers can be identified to the question ‘is the concept of civil society relevant to Africa?’. The first is a clear ‘yes’ based on the idea of a positive, universalist view of the desirability of civil society as part of the political project of building and strengthening democracy around the world. The second is a clear ‘no’ based on the argument that a concept which emerged at a distinctive moment in European history has little meaning within such different cultural and political settings. The third is an adaptive view which suggests that while the concept is potentially relevant in non-Western contexts it will take on local, different meanings and should not therefore be applied too rigidly. Fourth, there are those who imply that the ‘relevance question’ is probably the wrong question to ask, arguing that the idea of civil society – whether explicitly recognised as such or not – has long been implicated in Africa’s colonial histories of domination and resistance (Lewis 2001). The idea of civil society cannot easily be dismissed as having little meaning outside its Western origins, but nor can it simply be exported by Western donors and used crudely to build good governance, poverty reduction and other development policies in developing or transitional country contexts.

### **2.2.5 Civil Society in Bangladesh – an overview**

In Bangladesh, civil society is synonymous with *Shushil Shomaj* in Bengali which means gentle society or wise society. There has been relatively little research on civil

society in Bangladesh either as an idea or an empirical reality, either through ethnographic work, theoretical analysis or historical study. 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 'good governance' agenda (Lewis 2004). Consequently, the Bangladesh government nowadays speaks of a need for consultation with non-governmental organisations and civil society in various development and social policies. Recent thoughts on civil society are greatly influenced by western development concepts, and Bangladesh is heavily dependent on international aid in both government and NGO programmes. Some NGO leaders speak about an alliance of different groups within civil society from grass-root level associations, women's groups, trade unions etc. in order to mobilise citizens in support of various political and social objectives (Eade and Pearce 2000). However, civil society in Bangladesh has multiple local meanings and historical perspectives that are politically contested and transforming continuously.

The ideas of social mobilisation and voluntary work have been present in Bangladeshi society in its distant past. Private or small group voluntary works can be found in citizens supporting the founding of local schools, mosques, libraries and gymnasiums, construction and repair of roads and bridges, as well as local level garbage collection, although formal institutions exist for these actions. This is outstandingly visible in times of natural disasters and various relief works. Religious charity played a role in the Islamic duty of *zakat*, the payment of one fortieth of one's income to the poor, and the Hindu tradition of providing food to *sadhus* and *faqees* (Zaidi 1970). Hashemi (1995) and Hasan (1999) identify 'traditional' civil society organisations that include students, lawyers, journalists, cultural activists and so on. However, organised forms of civil society historically played a monumental role in the struggle for Bengali nationalism, for building a secular society and for democratic rights. According to Rahman (1999) in Bangladesh an active civil society has been playing strategic role in strengthening the process of democratisation. The substantial beginning was made in 1952 when students and cultural activists protested against the cultural hegemony of the then Pakistani ruling class and shed blood for making Bengali one of the national languages (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 narrow political parties (Hasan 1999).

Therefore, it is obvious that the idea of civil society was already embedded in Bangladesh both in formal and informal forms and is not a subject for invention or creation by donors or any other external sources.

However, recent times have witnessed a significant growth of an NGO-focused civil society, and there are different views about the emergence of this NGO-centred civil society in Bangladesh. The war with Pakistan in 1971 which led to independence, ravaged a country with an already fragile economy. Subsequent natural disasters and famines have created a suitable environment for NGOs to initiate programmes in Bangladesh. Nowadays hundreds of local NGOs can be found at national and local/rural levels. Some of these NGOs have already established themselves in the eyes of some of the largest NGOs in the world. International relief efforts link local activists and entrepreneurs with the ideas, organisations and resources of the 'aid industry'. These NGOs provide services such as credit delivery and community health care, they build local organisations for the landless, and some have become involved in policy advocacy. This suggests that a new set of relationships has emerged between the people and NGO service providers (Hasan 1993, Lewis 1993). Moreover, it has been observed that the NGO sector in Bangladesh has contributed to a dominant view of Bangladesh as a vibrant civil society. Perhaps, this has happened in accord of Bangladesh's enormous dependence on foreign aid as almost all NGOs are funded by foreign aid, and a number of government projects are running totally on external economic sources. However, Rahman observes the role of foreign assistance has been crucial in Bangladesh and hence understanding the donor perception of civil society is also important (Rahman 1999). Stiles insists that in Bangladesh donors are continuously pressing about 'good governance' and therefore are very keen to see the organisations using aid becoming a voice in development policy making, and as a pressure group on the government (Stiles 2002).

Sarah White suggests that perhaps ultimately the donors have 'captured' NGOs and civil society in Bangladesh (White 1999). The emphasis on NGOs, particularly NGO-centred civil society in Bangladesh can obscure a range of other important civil society processes, movements and activities. It is true that the failure of the state in service delivery and other aspects (such as good governance), militarisation and attempts to restrict pluralistic voices (or voices from the people from below) has

contributed to the emergence of 'newer' forms of civil society such as NGOs (and other umbrella organisations and alliances). But on the other hand, the NGOs are not the sole representatives of true civil society. This view characterises the 'donor model' of civil society which is generally led by the dominant NGOs. Karim (2001) finds evidence that some NGOs have used their economic power as lenders to exercise political influence by delivering votes to political parties. He explains, NGOs are, of course, a crucial part of Bangladesh's civil society but civil society in Bangladesh should definitely include both the 'old'/traditional and newer forms (Karim 2001). Therefore, this research proposes a working definition of civil society in a Bangladesh context that is civil society consist of individuals and groups of academics, journalists, cultural activists, lawyers, students and professionals along with NGOs (development activists), farmer groups, faith based groups, women's associations, trade unions, community groups, cooperatives and other social groups – who speak on behalf of the poor and common people, whose voices are least heard in development policymaking. Perhaps, there will not necessarily be consensus on most of the issues; but differences of opinion and constructive arguments can be expected to produce the best outcomes for citizen interests.

Before concluding this part of the literature review it is worth underlining the relevance of civil society in terms of poverty reduction. This requires clarification about the role civil society can play in poverty reduction in a national context, which is one of the key interests of this research. It is important that the elite class (read policy makers) should understand the psychology and demands of civil society. Although the elite class comprises a very low percentage of the population of any society, it contains the people who make or shape the main political and economic decisions. According to Hossain and Moore, this group consists of ministers, legislators, owners and controllers of mass media, upper level public servants, senior members of the armed forces, police and intelligence officers, editors of major newspapers and key persons in the development NGOs. They define issues to be taken up as political and policy problems and which are to be tackled and what count as legitimate and feasible options (Hossain and Moore 2002). It is important to understand the social significance of civil society, its impact on local communities, ties with elites and connections with poor people.

Without an in-depth understanding of civil society, engaging with it can result in harming the poor. It is important to provide people with space for association, critical reflection, debate and action, and through these a means for poor people to claim their right to live in an effective and accountable state. While civil society has a role to play in poverty reduction, donors sometimes exaggerate its importance (Howell 2002). The nature of civil society varies enormously between countries and between different historical periods in any given country. The character of the political regime and the relations between state and civil society in any given setting also affects the nature of civil society. Therefore, the DFID, UK asserts that policymakers, politicians and donors need to recognise that civil society has social divisions and power imbalances. It is essential that any engagement with civil society is based on an understanding of the local context (DFID 2006).

However, there has been little theoretical justification or empirical investigation into the assumed positive relationship between civil society and poverty reduction. Logically, civil society provides a space where the poor and marginalised can articulate their interests, in a way that is not possible in the market or state – hence its appeal to donors (Hasan 1999, Lewis 1993). Yet such a view ignores the vast social, economic and political inequalities that underpin civil society as much as the market or state. Such disparities affect the distribution of power and resources within civil society, rendering it difficult for poor groups to organise, let alone influence government policy or social attitudes. Whilst support for pro-democracy groups may contribute to donor objectives of democratisation, it may not necessarily fulfil goals of poverty reduction. Activists in human rights groups, environmental organisations, legal reform groups and members of professional associations are generally urban elites, with relatively high levels of education and social connections with other social and politically powerful groups. For many of them, poverty reduction is not the key issue that fuels their activities (Hasan 1999, Hashemi 1995, Karim 2001). According to Stiles (2002), NGO leaders in Bangladesh, sketch the beginning of their work to the simple idea of organising the poor with the aim of empowering them – at the expense of the rural and urban elite. Rutherford explains, dissatisfied with what they considered as over bureaucratisation of mainstream organisations, they aspired to build an organisation that could mobilise the peasantry along Maoist lines (Rutherford 1995). Nevertheless, Stiles observes that there was clearly a strong mass movement

tradition among NGO founders in Bangladesh. But, few of these organisations have been able to maintain this tradition. One by one, each has been pressured by donors to set aside their radical messages (Stiles 2002). Moreover, Gauri and Galef insist that the NGO sector in Bangladesh is highly organised and homogeneous. Therefore, it is essential to identify the forces of pro-poor political and social change and ensure their involvement in poverty reduction processes, as Gauri and Galef (2005) suggest that the similarities among Bangladeshi NGOs, whether big or small, are more striking than their differences<sup>46</sup>.

In many highly aid-dependent economies such as Bangladesh, local civil society organisations are materially dependent on donor grants. Whilst donor support makes it possible for local civil society organisations to hire staff, establish offices, organise practical activities, and network, it also creates its own tensions and constraints. Donor agencies have their own agendas, time-frames, goals and objectives which may not always dovetail with those of local civil society groups. To the extent that donors can persuade local organisations to implement certain programmes and agendas, there is the risk that local agencies increasingly lose sight of their own priorities, values and agendas (Howell 2002, Kaldor 2004, Stiles 1998). Furthermore, whilst the field-offices of donor agencies are under pressure from headquarters to deliver results within short periods (of three or five years) the pressure to implement projects may force local civil society groups to move at a pace beyond their capacity. In doing so, they may be compelled to abandon other activities and goals which they value (Howell 2002).

A review of civil society engagement in PRSP processes carried out for DFID argued that donors should not simply assume that civil society will be constructively involved - this is likely to prove complex and difficult to manage. Given the country experiences there remains a great deal of uncertainty around PRSP at every level of

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<sup>46</sup> According to Gauri and Gaelf (2005), the majority of NGOs in Bangladesh utilise a branch and headquarters structure, conduct similar kinds of activities and focus overwhelmingly on credit services, garner more of their revenues from service fees than from donors, hire mostly salaried rather than volunteer staff, are secular rather than religious in orientation, engage in occasional lobbying activities and consciousness raising, and hire middle class college educated men as managers. They also observe that, NGOs were largely involved in service delivery, with the most common sectors being credit, health care, and sanitation. The most important revenue source for NGOs was fee for service, especially in the case of the big NGOs (Gauri and Galef 2005).

government, within civil society and between the two. Participation will only be secured if civil society institutions are convinced that donors and governments are willing to countenance real participation (DFID 2006). Perhaps this can truly and effectively include participation from civil society in formulating as well as implementing national poverty reduction strategies. Ronaldo Munck (2006) questions whether global civil society (GCS) is the 'royal road to democratisation', market regulation, and 'the good life' in short, or whether it is a slippery path for social movements that are being 'bamboozled' by neoliberal globalisation into a controlled environment where even critical voices serve the overall purpose of stabilising the existing order? Lavalette and Ferguson (2007) suggest that the comforting and apparently 'democratic language' of civil society is being utilised to mask an ongoing project of privatising state welfare provision both in the UK and across much of the developing world. However, Philip Nel (2003) argues that the type of democracy promoted by this ideology in Africa (and elsewhere) – can and should be questioned. The socio-economic impact of this form of democracy must be considered, and no attempts to separate economics from politics should be allowed to obscure this. According to Munck (2006), the idea of civil society, in its recent use, has been delineated as a royal road to a global democratic polity but he suspects that this can also be a slippery slope towards becoming the social wing of the neoliberal agendas against the subaltern people and regions of the world (Munck 2006). Therefore, this can be understood that civil society may have a role to play in creating a polyphonic atmosphere in the realm of social development, especially in the poor countries where the voice of the poor are rarely being heard in the policy process, but civil society can also be used to promote a particular form of 'democracy' and service provision and a particular type of statecraft as a means of opening up closed economies to the needs and demands of global neo-liberalism.

In the next part of this literature review we look at the idea of participation, another vogue concept in contemporary development discourse, how this can be intermixed with civil society and masqueraded an external approach that pretence to be 'produced' and 'owned' locally.



**Part – 3:**  
**Participation – an iron hand in a velvet glove**

### 2.3.1 Background – a need for participation

According to Long (2001), 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*. People/experts hired by these institutions were trained in economics, engineering or other, mostly technical disciplines. These people were expected to improve the economic performance of the developing countries, build roads, schools and hospitals, and provide expertise which would improve the lifestyle of the poor (Long 2001). Clearly, the whole process was dominated by the people who held the power, authority and control to change (or to improve) the livelihoods of other societies. Local people had hardly any significant role in this process. This appears similar to the ideas of Paulo Freire (1974), as he has explained how the act of extension, in whatever sector it took place, meant going to another part of the world, to 'normalise it' according to their (the dominant and powerful) way of viewing the reality, to make it similar to their world (Freire 1974). Richardson observes that 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 decision-making process (Richardson 1983). Cornwall (2000) and Laderchi (2001) note that from the 1970s to the 1990s, a generalised consensus took shape that people's participation in projects was an important component of development programmes and a means to their success (Cornwall 2000, Laderchi 2001). Chambers 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 (Chambers 1997).

Lerner observes that in most of the development literature, there is an assumption that there is a continuous evolution that proceeds from a traditional state towards a modernisation goal and follows steps that are similar to the Western industrialised nations (Lerner 1964). Development programmes are therefore, often designed as a mechanism to transfer Western knowledge and values to those traditional and developing countries. However, according to Lewis (1962) and Tax (1976), a great deal of information on the geography, history, economics, politics and even the

customs of many traditional, poor and underdeveloped countries are known on the development circuit, but, in contrast, very little effort has been made to understand the psychology of the people, particularly of lower socio-economic groups, their problems, how they think and feel, what they worry about, argue over, anticipate or enjoy (Lewis 1962 and Tax 1976). Sol Tax therefore argues that development efforts are often inefficient and even destructive (Tax 1976). Lewis asserts that in many of the underdeveloped countries not only the external development actors, but also the educated native elite generally have little first-hand knowledge of the culture of the poor, due to the hierarchical nature of their society that inhibits such communication across class lines (Lewis 1962).

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>47</sup>. Chambers explains 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? Chambers asks how were these errors possible and why they were so sustained (Chambers 1997)? Ann Richardson argues that this led to fundamental changes in public attitudes to authority, making people no longer willing to accept decisions made by others on their behalf. The gap was widened between those who made decisions and those on whose behalf such decisions were made, and this has brought in its wake pressures to reduce this distance by a variety of means, including participation. She insists that official decision-makers, whether elected or appointed,

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<sup>47</sup> Kapoor 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 (Kapoor 2005). 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 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 (McGee with Levene and Hughes 2002).

were judged to be too remote to understand the needs of the ordinary citizens. It was felt that those affected by decisions should be able to exercise some influence over policies, to ensure that their perspective was not lost in the cumbersome process of deliberation. Not only was this seen as a key means of ensuring a fair process, and creating better decisions, but it was also believed that the act of participation would bring greater fulfilment and understanding to those involved. Participation, like motherhood, was clearly 'a good thing' (Richardson 1983).

Participation by poor and marginalised people in development initiatives adopted to benefit them has been acknowledged as important in achieving sustainable development. Because who better than poor people themselves to understand their economic and social conditions and the problems they face, manage and cope within their everyday realities, and have insights that may help shape initiatives intended to benefit them (Long 2001, Chambers 1983)? Paulo Freire has explained that every human being, no matter how 'ignorant' or submerged in the 'culture of silence', is capable of looking critically at his/her world, and, provided with the proper tools, s/he can gradually perceive his/her personal and social reality and deal critically with it (Freire 1974).

Efforts to bring about participation in development have a long history, embracing a range of contrasting perspectives and methods (Cornwall 2000). On the other hand, Kapoor (2005) argues that participatory development ostensibly implies discarding mainstream development's neo-colonial tendencies, Western-centric values and centralised decision-making processes. Kapoor insists that 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 (Kapoor 2005). Participation has therefore become a new development orthodoxy (Kapoor 2005, Cornwall 2003). According to Cornwall (2003) participation appears to hold out the promise of inclusion in creating spaces for the less vocal and powerful to exercise their voices and begin to gain more choices, and therefore, participatory approaches appear to offer a lot to those struggling to bring about more equitable development (Cornwall 2003).

Kapoor (2004) observes that 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. Kapoor (2005) illustrates that 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). Kapoor further asserts that 'empowerment' dimension in such an approach gives it an almost sublime character, so that it has come to be associated with a series of seemingly incontestable maxims, for example, it is naturally progressive and tends to flow as blameless and honourable (Kapoor 2005). It creates a 'feel good' community experience, but covers up the backstage influence (Oxfam 2004). It also promotes the sense of sharing power, but manages to centralise it by personalising and mythologising the role of the facilitator (Kapoor 2005).

### **2.3. 2 Revisiting the definition of participation**

According to the World Bank, participation increases public accountability, reduces corruption and bureaucratic sclerosis, and provides better (local) inputs to public policy (World Bank 2001). The World Bank defines participation as a process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives, and the decisions and resources which affect them (World Bank 1996). In its *Participation Source Book* (1996), the World Bank distinguishes participation from 'consultation' and 'listening'. It recognises that consultation and listening are essential prerequisites for participation but not synonymous with participation. Because in the listening and consultation process a person who is being 'listened to' or 'consulted with' does not learn nearly as much as the person doing the listening and consulting. 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' instead of 'popular participation' (World Bank 1996). These stakeholders are supported by the Bank and their participation is crucial, as these stakeholders include the borrowers (such as representatives of client countries, elected officials, line agency staff, local

government officials), indirectly affected groups (such as NGOs), and the Bank (Bank management and its staff).

Above definition and clarification by the World Bank seems 'generous', 'attractive' and of course oversimplified. Yet the World Bank's definition clubs together all stakeholders, ignores inequalities which affect the ability of different stakeholders, particularly those who are poor and marginalised, to take part effectively in decision-making (Tandon and Cordeiro 1998), and conceals the hierarchical and hegemonic relationships among the stakeholders. However, Rietbergen-McCracken and Narayan (1998) suggest that participation can take different forms, ranging from information-sharing and consultation methods, to mechanisms for collaboration and empowerment that give stakeholders more influence and control. The use of the terms 'methods' and 'mechanisms' in this description makes participation something that is done to or for people by outsider agencies, narrowing the scope of activities in the form of invited participation. 'Participation' thus makes it possible to claim that at least some 'stakeholders' have been informed about a development project which is intended to benefit them. Richardson argues that publicity enables citizens to be better informed about existing and future policies, but it does not ensure citizen participation. Publicity gives members of the society no particular role in the policy-making process (Richardson 1983). Da Cunha and Junho Pena assert that participation by a misinformed community group may distort public policy (Da Cunha and Junho Pena 1997). However, it is also observed that 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 (Walt 1994, Moser 1993). Lots of good policy exists which is not implemented properly, reflecting a gap between policy making and policy implementation.

The Development Advisory Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) describes participation as a process by which people take an active and influential hand in shaping decisions that affect their lives (OECD 1993). However, there is another approach which sees participation as a democratic right of citizens (Sida 1996, Dowd 1999, UNDP 2002). This fundamental right stands at the centre of democratic governance and human development. Da Cunha and Junho Pena (1997) and Dowd (1999) argue that in the context of a specific

project, participation can be used to produce a better match between project outputs and local wants; to align the distribution of benefits and costs with the needs and aspirations of a community. The concept of the 'rational economic man' is deeply embedded here and, therefore, it has been taken for granted that an individual will take part for his/her own and greater (collective) interest based on 'rationality' that allows cooperative solutions. The implicit assumption here is that participation will be voluntary (Da Cunha and Junho Pena 1997, Dowd 1999). Dowd proceeds to argue that, if each individual is free then s/he is free not to participate, and the decision on whether or not to participate is for him/her alone. Dowd notes that forced participation violates that freedom and is therefore indefensible. However, he also explains that participation is not some kind of public good that should be promoted for its own sake. Participation is merely a means to one or more ends, and the only valid ends are those of the individuals' concerned (Dowd 1999). Participation has therefore turned into a mechanism of democracy, and this language of democracy dominates in recent development circles. At national levels it can be seen in the rhetoric of 'civil society' and 'good governance'. At the programme and project levels it appears as a commitment to 'participation'. This is trumpeted by agencies right across the spectrum, from the huge multilaterals to the smallest NGOs. Hardly any development programme can be found these days without some participatory traits.

According to Hoddinott (2002), participation offers the promise that the design and implementation of interventions will more closely reflect the preferences of the population that they are designed to serve. However, this benefit is contingent on the ability of communities to engage in collective actions. However, he notes that there is a risk that community participation may result in the capture of benefits by local elites to the detriment of the poor. Furthermore, failure to delegate true decision-making authority (all for *de jure* but not *de facto* participation), may result in beneficiaries being reluctant to act because of concerns that they will be subsequently overruled (Hoddinott 2002). For Gurza Lavallo; Houtzager and Castello the research and policy interventions agendas concerned with democratising democracy are strongly attached to the idea of participation, be that the direct presence of those eventually affected or benefiting from public decisions or face-to-face deliberation. Participation by groups and sectors of the population considered under or badly represented in the locus of

political representation, is thus a key means to spur on and improve the functioning of political institutions (Gurza Lavallo; Houtzager and Castello 2005).

### **2.3.3 Participation: counting the reality from the bottom or legitimating development from the top?**

A set of perspectives on participation can be identified. According to Cornwall, in the first, people participate as ‘beneficiaries’ of development and are called upon to help make contributions to interventions that are intended to benefit them so as to increase the effectiveness of these interventions. In such cases, participation seems to be done *for* people. It often consists of people being invited to take part in consultative processes and cajoled to play a role in shouldering costs, for their own good. The second argument turns the tables in positioning participation as a process owned and controlled *by* those whom development is supposed to benefit. As such, it can be associated with broader struggles for democracy and equity in which the otherwise excluded participate in order to gain rights over and entitlements to resources. The third position emphasises the need for a closer relationship between those who work in development and those who are intended to benefit. Participation in this case intends to work *with* people, rather than on or for them (Cornwall 2000).

Nonetheless, White (1996) and Cornwall (2000) argue that the use of the terms ‘community’, ‘beneficiary’, ‘poor’ and ‘people’ in these initiatives evokes the ideal of a homogeneous social group that recognises shared interests and works together harmoniously for the common good. Yet all too obviously, the participant groups and other stakeholders within the spectrum of ‘participation’ are not homogenous. These are highly diverse in character and have different interests; particularly groups such as bureaucrats, politicians, contractors, consultants, scientists, researchers and those who fund research; and national and international organisations, their bureaucracies, companies, firms of consultants, and research institutes all have different interests based on different agendas and objectives. However, sharing in participation does not necessarily mean sharing in power and control (White 1996, Cornwall 2000).

Moreover, participation can take multiple forms and serve many different interests. Promoting the principles of inclusion and consensus building can understate the political nature of the policy process. One of the main objectives of participation is



arriving at a consensus. Once the key community 'stakeholders' are gathered, relevant information is collected, people have their say, and a collective decision is reached. According to Ilan Kapoor, a development programme that ensures participation is thus taken not to be prescriptive but reflective of community interests and needs. To the extent that consensus is an attempt at making development smooth and complete, and thereby avoiding the risks and messiness inherent in participation, it is the product of self-delusion (Kapoor 2005). However, critics insist that when consensus-based decisions are single, as most often they are, they overlook or suppress community differences and tensions. Frequently, they ignore precisely those issues that are most difficult to address – such as class inequality, patriarchy and racism (Mohan and Stokke 2000, Mosse 2001). Indeed, the quality of the consensus and the power relations involved in reaching it are crucial. One danger is that decisions are often made on the basis of inadequate participation; for example, beneficiaries are consulted *after* the programme design and goals have already been set<sup>48</sup> (Kapoor 2005).

In fact, it is precisely this ability to accommodate a broad range of interests that explains why participation can command widespread acclaim. If participation is to mean more than a facade of good intentions, it is vital to distinguish more clearly what these interests are (White 1996, Holland and Blackburn 1998). Verba and Nie (1972) describe what they call 'ceremonial' or 'support' participation. These are defined as citizens 'taking part' by expressing support for the government like marching in parades. They coined the term 'pseudo-participation' to refer to procedures by which members are induced to agree to decisions already taken (Verba and Nie 1972). Carole Pateman (1970) defines a two-fold aspect of participation based on the degree of power available to the participants. 'Full participation' is where each member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions; 'partial participation' is where two or more parties influence each other in making decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party (Pateman 1970). Geraint Parry (1972) puts forward the concept of 'unreal'

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<sup>48</sup> Kapoor 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 (Kapoor 2005).

participation where participation is a mere facade because the decisional outcome is structurally predetermined.

According to Johnson and Wilson (2000), power relations between different stakeholders cannot simply be wished away. In particular, the unequal power relationship between outside agency and project beneficiary makes it difficult to obtain participation because this relationship is subject to manipulation and dependency (Michener 1998). Thus, the more powerful may exert and extend their 'power over' during participatory and partnership processes, and this may be aided by the internalisation and acceptance of those power relations by the less powerful. The tendency of participatory (and by extension, partnership) 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).

Sarah White (1996) describes two main ways in which participation in development planning is politicised. For her, the first is the question of *who* participates. This recognises that 'the people' are not homogeneous, and that special mechanisms are needed to bring in relatively disadvantaged groups. The second concerns the *level* of participation. This points out that the involvement of local people only in the planning phase is not enough (White 1996). She also distinguishes four major types of participation and shows their political purposes. The first of her categories is 'nominal participation', which serves the purpose of 'legitimation' for the people at the top who design and implement development programmes. People at the bottom may feel 'included' by this type of participation; but the function of such participation is decorative, what she calls a 'display'. Secondly, she describes 'instrumental participation' where participation by local people may be necessary (such as in building a school) and serves 'efficiency' interests (projects can be cost-effective using local labour). Local people may experience such participation as a 'cost' and may have little say on whether they want the school as such. The functional aspect of this type of participation can be seen as a 'means' to achieve the ends of the project. Thirdly, she identifies 'representative participation' which ensures the 'sustainability' of project for development planners. Such participation can be seen as 'leverage' for the people at the bottom and this can generate the 'voice' from below. Fourth is the

idea of participation as the practical experience of being involved in considering options, making decisions, and taking collective actions which in itself is 'transformative' in nature. It leads to greater consciousness of what makes and keeps people poor, and greater confidence in their ability to make a difference by virtue their 'empowerment'. Such participation can functionally be a 'means' to empower the poor (White 1996).

Farrington and Bebbington (1993) propose a simple axis that distinguishes depth and breadth of participation. 'Deep' participation engages participants in all stages of an activity, from identification to decision-making. Yet it remains 'narrow' if only a handful of people, or particular interest groups, are involved. A 'wide' range of people might be involved, but if they are only informed or consulted their participation remains 'shallow' (Farrington and Bebbington 1993). In the cases of such 'pseudo', 'unreal', 'nominal' and 'shallow' participation, critics observe that these occur because the official agencies require such stamping for legitimation. Such participation (and its process) is neither equivalent to gaining control over decisions or empowering people at the bottom. People need to feel able to express themselves without fear of reprisals or the expectation of not being listened to or taken seriously. This cannot be guaranteed no matter how well-meaning the instigators of the process may be, for while they may create space for people to speak up, the latter have no control over what may happen as a consequence. Therefore, participation can be seen as a 'new tyranny', as a legitimising means and the idea of participation is critiqued for failing to deliver development (Cooke and Kothari 2001). Participation, then, seems more like an act of faith, intended to prove the attachment and involvement of local people in the development programmes thus legitimating by proving that the programmes carry local voices and desires in contrast to the top-down approach.

On the other hand, in a validating endeavour, from participants' own point of view, participation might be perceived as a considerable burden, taking them away from their families and other pleasures without any gain. They may have better things to do with their time. Dahl writes that the cost is, plainly, that the time might be used for doing something else, something more interesting and important than going to such a meeting (Dahl 1970). The poorest may view direct participation as risky and time consuming (Hickey and Bracking 2005). According to Miah (1993), the poor have

neither the time nor the energy to spend on something which apparently does not give them any material benefit. Moreover, speaking up in the general forums is more of a task which is preserved for the rich. Furthermore, there is a question of articulation which the poor lack because of their lack of education (Miah 1983). One variant of this view is that people may take an initial interest in participation if only for its novelty, but this will not be sustained over time. There is little reason to introduce elaborate measures for participation given the amount of consumer interest it will attract. White explains that as participation is a process, its dynamic over time must be taken into account. There is a tendency in the rhetoric of participation to assume that it is always good for people to take an active part in everything. She argues that people have other interests such as in leisure. Nevertheless, she fears that people often participate for negative reasons – they do not have confidence that their interests will be represented unless they are physically there. One can grow tired of being an ‘active citizen’ (White 1996).

However, according to Gaventa and Robinson, translating voice 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. Houtzager and Pattenden note that strategies from ‘below’ need to build and support collectivities that can continue to exercise voice and exert pressure for change (Houtzager and Pattenden 2000). The importance of strategies that enable poor people to engage more actively in making and shaping development has become a virtual orthodoxy. Two lines of thinking can be identified, with some blurring of boundaries between them. One strand picks up on forms of induced participation that characterise many ‘projects with people’ (Oakley 1991). Moving from enlisting communities in implementation, to engaging them in contributions of labour, time or cash, to involving them in user committees, to handing over control for design, delivery and maintenance of projects, this line of thinking situates communities as ‘users and choosers’ (Cornwall and Gaventa 2000). The second line of thinking emphasises creating an aware citizenry who are able to assert their rights, engage in holding government to account, and organise to make effective use of the spaces made available to them by governance reforms. In this view, participation is itself a basic

democratic and human right, the starting point for defining and asserting the rights and responsibilities of citizenship and demanding that the state honours its obligations (Cornwall 2000).

When participation is incorporated into development programmes, it is subjected to a plethora of organisational demands. Kapoor (2005) argues that it is made to conform, for example, to 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). Kapoor further notes that it is also moulded to suit project needs, becoming a management 'tool' to help increase project sustainability and results. As a consequence, participatory development is transformed into a package – discrete and manageable to suit the institutional culture, and modular to make it flexible and transferable to various project sizes, tasks and contexts (Kapoor 2005). In contrast to this institutionalised process of participation, Miah (1993) observes that people in rural traditional institutions do not directly take part in the decision making. In traditional institutions decisions are taken by the bigwigs and ordinary people remain silent spectators of the whole scene. For example, he describes how in the cooperatives, although a decision has to be made by mutual consultation, in most cases general members hardly have any say. Instead decisions are made by the top-brass (for example, president or general secretary of that cooperative). He further explains that the reasons for this can be found in the socio-economic structure of the society itself. In traditional institutions the village elites have always held the sway. The poorer section of the society had not been able to make any dent into the power base (Miah 1983).

Critics have pointed out that participation is far from inclusive and bottom-up. It reconfigures power and value systems which may end up being exclusionary if not tyrannical (Mosse 1994, Cooke and Kothari 2001, Kapoor 2002). Kapoor (2005) observes that 'participation as empowerment' morphs into 'participation as power'. Participation may appear pure and unmediated but, for this very reason, it is often deployed to wield authority, helping to maintain elite or institutional hegemony. Therefore, romanticising participation, according to Kapoor, as an apparent inclusive technique may be dangerous: innocently or benevolently claiming that one is helping a Third World community become participatory is not just self-aggrandising, but also

risks perpetuating elite, panoptic or institutional power, all at the expense of the Third World community (Kapoor 2005). According to Cornwall, the salient feature of the discussion of participation is to be understood through the differences between rhetoric and reality (Cornwall 2003). On the one hand, the idea of participation is replete with grand-sounding promises of empowerment of the marginalised, and on the other hand, in practice participation 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). Hence, Cornwall (2003) notes that distinguishing between forms of participation that work through enlistment and those that genuinely open up the possibilities for participants to realise their rights and exercise voice is therefore important, for these differences are something that blanket critiques of participation tend to disregard.

This research therefore argues that it needs to recognise that participation is a political issue. There are always questions to be asked about who is involved, how, and on whose terms. People's enthusiasm for projects depends more on whether they have a genuine interest than whether they participated in its construction. Enhancing citizen participation to empower the poor requires more than inviting or inducing people to participate through incentives or by offering them spaces to speak. It requires active engagement in nurturing voice, building critical consciousness, advocating for the inclusion of women, children, illiterate, poor and excluded people, leveraging open channels to widen spaces for involvement in decision-making, and building the political capabilities for democratic engagement. Through this, people create their own spaces and enact their own strategies for change. 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.

The following chapter discusses methodological techniques used to understand the inter-linkages of participation in the process of formulating the PRSP of Bangladesh. A number of civil society representatives (academics, journalist, writer, developmentalists, NGO activist, newspaper editor, gender expert, representative of ethnic minorities), and key people who played a major role in preparing the PRSP were interviewed in this regard. In addition, to understand the nature of participation from a wider section of society a review of six Bangladeshi national newspapers were

carried out for thirteen months prior to finalisation of the PRSP. An online survey was also posted to get direct views from Bangladeshi citizens. It was perceived, for this research, that a combination of approaches would offer a holistic picture to understand the inter-connections of civil society (on behalf of poor people) and its role for participation in the production of Bangladesh's PRSP.

## **Chapter – 3: Methodology**



### **3.1 Need for methodology**

All research is specific – whether it is ethnographic or questionnaire research, or a content analysis or an experiment. In social sciences the first thing researchers do is *describe a process or investigate a relation* among variables in a population (Bernard 2000). Credible results come from the power of the methods used in this process of description and/or investigation. One useful way to consider this is to think of methods as tools, and methodologies as well-equipped toolboxes. With this analogy, methods can be understood as problem-specific techniques and methodology denotes an investigation of the concepts, theories and basic principles of reasoning on a subject (Moses and Knutsen 2007). However, the research question is viewed as a crucial early step that provides a point of orientation for an investigation. It helps to link the researcher's literature review to the kinds of data that will be collected. As such, formulating a research question has an important role in the research process that helps to militate against undisciplined data collection and analysis. Decisions about research design and methods are made in order to investigate research questions (Bryman 2007). Based on the research question in chapter – 1, (see 1.1), this chapter will explore the methodological approaches (such as multiple approaches [epistemology], interpretation, validity and reliability, methodological techniques, ethical issues and analysis of data) used in this investigation.

### **3.2 Methodological approaches – different ways are possible**

There are quite simply different ways of knowing, and researchers in the social sciences need to be aware of these differences and how they affect the methods they choose to study social phenomena (Moses and Knutsen 2007). A research question can, in almost all cases, be attacked by more than one method (Robson 1993). Hence, the justification of methodology is closely linked to the school of thought one aligns with. It would doubtless be possible to carry out this particular research in a different way, using a different methodology with careful choice of a different epistemology. However, three interconnected, generic activities define the research process. They go by a variety of different labels, including theory, method and analysis. Empirical materials bearing on the question are collected and then analysed and written about. Every researcher speaks from within a distinct interpretive community, which configures, in its special way, the multicultural, gendered components of the research act. An individual enters the research process from inside an interpretive community

that incorporates its own historical research traditions into a distinct point of view. This perspective leads the researcher to adopt particular views of the 'other' who is studied (Denzin and Ryan 2007, Denzine and Lincoln 1998).

Qualitative research is typically multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret these things in terms of meanings people bring to them. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of casual relationships between variables, not processes (Denzin and Ryan 2007). Whatever approach is taken, researchers seek answers to questions which stress *how* social experiences are created and given meaning. They deploy a variety of interpretive strategies, including participant observation; traditional, auto and online ethnography; case study; and visual discourse analysis, as well as grounded theory strategies. More precisely, they generally adopt a mixed method approach; a combination of multiple methodological tools.

Mixed method research is the type of research in which a researcher (or team of researchers) combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research (for example, use of qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner 2007). A mixed method approach to social inquiry distinctively offers deep and potentially inspirational and catalytic opportunities to meaningfully engage with the differences that matter in today's world, seeking not so much convergence and consensus as opportunities for respectful listening and understanding (Greene 2008). In practice research needs to be heterogeneous, because that is how the social world is shaped. By the inclusion of as much heterogeneity as possible, the findings are more representative than if there had been a less rigorous selection process. Therefore, this research applied a combination of methodological instruments. Details about these tools are illustrated in the 'data collection techniques used in this research' section (see 3.4).

### **3.3 Interpretation**

We have explained above that analyses of collected data in the social sciences consist of interpretations from the researcher(s)' points of view and different ways are

possible in this regard. The interpretive (hermeneutic) tradition has come into the social sciences with the close and careful study of free flowing texts (Bernard 2000). Relating the acts and beliefs of individual agents to objective social and cultural structures, including those dynamics beyond the conscious grasp of individuals, has always constituted a major challenge to social science and theory. The author can engage in a dialogue with those studied (Denzin and Ryan 2007). Understanding human agency requires intentional concepts grounded in the agent's background contexts which constitute a social structure that transcends individual agency. This underpins of a reflexive social science, takes into account its own conceptual construction of the object domain without giving up claims to objectivity and adequate understanding. This marks the major contribution of hermeneutics to the philosophy of human and social science (Kögler 2007). This is an expression of what Giddens (1984) called the double hermeneutic which characterises the social sciences. The sociologist has a field of study phenomena which are already constituted as meaningful. The condition of 'entry' to this field is getting to know what actors already know, and have to know, to 'go on' in the daily activities of social life. The concepts that sociological observers invent are 'second order' concepts in so far as they presume certain conceptual capabilities on the part of the actors to whose conduct they refer. But it is in the nature of social science that these can become 'first-order' concepts by being appropriated within social life itself. The appropriateness of the term derives from the double process of translation or interpretation which is involved. Giddens insists that sociological descriptions have the task of mediating the frames of meaning within which actors orient their conduct. But such descriptions are interpretive categories which also demand an effort of translation in and out of the frames of meaning involved in sociological theories (Giddens 1984).

### **3.4 Data collection techniques used in this research**

It has been mentioned in chapter-1 that this research aimed to investigate whether participation in the development of Bangladesh's PRSP had a meaningful impact towards policymaking process of poverty reduction. To understand the process of incorporating participation in national poverty reduction policy, this research adopted a mixed-method approach. Although a number of methodological techniques (elaborated later in this section) were used for data collection, broadly the

methodology of this research can be sketched out in three major stages (where different techniques were used).

- Semi-structured in-depth interviews
- Review of newspaper data
- Online survey

### **3.4.1 Semi-structured in-depth interviews**

#### **3.4.1.1 Interview as an investigation technique and narrative interviews**

As a method of inquiry, interviewing is consistent with people's ability to make meaning through language. Interviews are conducted to learn other people's stories as stories are a way of knowing. Every word that people use in telling their stories is a reflection of their consciousness. Individuals' consciousness gives access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experiences of people (Seidman 1998). An interview is a kind of conversation, a conversation with a purpose (Robson 1993). Interviewing involves asking people questions, but it is equally about listening carefully to the answers (David and Sutton 2004). Interviews are, by their very nature, social encounters where speakers collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) *accounts* or *versions* of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts (Rapley 2007). What kind of conversation is an interview then? According to Cannel and Kahn, as cited by Cohen and Manion, it is 'initiated by the interviewer for the specific purpose of obtaining research-relevant information and focused by him on content specified by research objectives of systematic description, prediction or explanation' (Cohen and Manion 1989: 307)

Although telling stories is common in everyday conversations; the discourse of the interview is jointly constructed by the interviewer and the interviewee and, at the same time, draws attention to the ubiquity of narratives in semi/unstructured interviews (Gee 1986, Polanyi 1985). Data collected through in-depth interviews<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> 'The individual or depth interview is a conversation lasting normally for one to one and half hours. Prior to the interview the researcher will have prepared a topic guide covering the key research issues and problems. The interview starts with some introductory comments about the research, a word of thanks to the interviewee for agreeing to talk, and a request for

about individuals' lives, experiences and perceptions, and the role of the interviewer in producing the data should be taken seriously (Mishler 1999). The focus on the quality of interaction between the interviewer and interviewee is central to qualitative in-depth interviewing. It is stressed that conventional approaches to interviewing treat respondents as epistemologically passive and as mere vessels of answers. In contrast, Holstein and Gubrium argue that the aim of an interview should be to stimulate the interviewee's interpretive capacities, and the role of the interviewer should be to 'activate narrative production' by 'indicating – even suggesting – narrative positions, resources, orientations, and precedents' (Holstein and Gubrium 1995: 39). The interview therefore becomes a site for the production of data and an opportunity to explore the meaning of the research topic for the respondent.

It is well established that narrative<sup>50</sup> interviews are central to much research in the social sciences, and the distinctions made between in-depth, semi-structured and standardised survey interviews have become commonplace (Arksey and Knight 1999, Brenner 1985, Seidman 1998, Weiss 1994). Three main features of narratives should be understood. First, that they are *chronological* (they are representations of a sequence of events), second, they are *meaningful*, and third, they are inherently *social* in that they are produced for a specific audience. *Contents* of narratives provide a relatively accurate description of events and/or experiences through time. In each case, therefore, the analysis focuses on what the substantive elements of the accounts tell us about the social world (Elliott 2005). In narratives, attention is given to individual stories both as evidence and as a means of presenting insights about the social world (Bertaux 1981).

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permission to tape record the session. The interviewer should be open and relaxed about tape recording, which enables the whole conversation to be used for later analysis. It also allows the interviewer to concentrate on what is said rather than taking notes. Always double check that the recorder is working properly before the interview and take care to press the correct buttons in the interview itself' (Bauer and Gaskell 2003: 51-52).

<sup>50</sup> A useful definition of narrative is offered by Hinchman and Hinchman who propose that, narratives (stories) in the human sciences should be defined provisionally as discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997: xvi).

### **3.4.1.2 Interview structure, selecting participants and other techniques used**

The degree of 'structuring' in an interview refers to the degree to which the questions and other interventions made by the interviewer are pre-prepared by the researcher. On the spectrum of interviewing, from the point of view of the interviewer designing the session, interviews vary from semi-structured to heavily structured to completely unstructured (Wengraf 2002). Semi-structured interviews are where an interviewer has worked out a set of questions in advance, but is free to modify their order based on his/her perception of what seems most appropriate in the context of the 'conversation'; can change the way they are worded, give explanations, leave out particular questions which seems inappropriate with a particular interviewee or include additional ones (Robson 1993). It has been suggested that semi-structured interviews work very well in projects where the research deals with managers, bureaucrats and elite members of a community – people who are accustomed to the efficient use of their time. It demonstrates that the researcher is fully in control of what s/he wants from an interview but leaves both the interviewer and interviewee to follow new leads. It also enables the researcher to be prepared and competent but s/he is not trying to exercise excessive control over the respondents (Bernard 2000). In accordance to these flexibilities 36 Key Informants<sup>51</sup> were interviewed in this research. Details about sampling criteria and other techniques used during the interviews are presented in the next section.

#### Selecting Participants

In qualitative inquiries the numbers of respondents are necessarily small; the researcher must use his or her social scientific imagination in the selection of respondents (Bauer and Gaskell 2003). The principle of selection in such sampling (purposive in nature) is based on the researcher's judgment as to typicality or interest. A sample is built up which enables the researcher to satisfy a project's specific needs (Robson 1993, David and Sutton 2004). One of the key requirements in sampling is that the selected sample is not biased by either over or under representing different sections of the population (David and Sutton 2004). Interview participants must consent to be interviewed and interviewing requires that researchers establish access

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<sup>51</sup> Good key informants are people who can talk easily, who understand the information that the research needs, and who are glad to give it or get it for the investigation (Bernard 2000). We chose key informants who were in lead roles in preparing the PRSP of Bangladesh. We also selected people who were working on poverty and who were well-informed about the PRSP process.

to, and make contact with, potential participants who they probably have never met. It is believed that telephoning is often a necessary first step in making contact. To establish initial contact with very hard-to-get respondents, I had both emailed and telephoned these people about their consent for the proposed interviews. When email was unanswered (in few cases) follow up telephone calls were made and often secured appointments. In some cases I had to go through gatekeepers<sup>52</sup>; for example, interviewees' personal secretaries, research associates and administrative officers to get in touch with these prospective interviewees. I started these early contacts while I was staying in Liverpool to save field time in Bangladesh. I created a list of tentative respondents from the literature reviews, newspaper reviews and from the PRSP (where it was mentioned who was in the lead roles in its preparation). I was also flexible about snowball-sampling<sup>53</sup>, that is to say, I was ready to be advised (by those participants who I initially met) to interview other useful informants who I possibly had not chosen<sup>54</sup>.

This research seems to be in a very strong position to claim that in terms of poverty reduction and the formulation of a PRSP in Bangladesh, it interviewed the most appropriate persons who could contribute knowledge on this particular topic. First of all, the interviewees were highly renowned persons in their respective fields in Bangladesh. They came with a wide range of expertise and were capable of offering in-depth insights on Bangladesh's poverty. The list of interviewees contains people who were in the lead roles in preparing the PRSP of Bangladesh such as 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. In contrast to this group, this research also interviewed a number of academics, well known researchers and leading economists in the country, distinguished media and cultural

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<sup>52</sup> When interviewers try to contact potential participants whom they do not know, they often face gatekeepers who control access to these people. Gatekeepers can range from absolutely legitimate to self-declared (Seidman 1998).

<sup>53</sup> In snow-ball sampling the researcher identifies one or more individuals from the population of interest. After they have been interviewed, they are requested to name others who would be likely respondents for the research and so on. This is a useful approach when there is difficulty in identifying members of the population. It can be seen as a particular type of purposive sample (Robson 1993, Bernard 2000).

<sup>54</sup> I was advised to interview some members who were involved in preparing the background thematic group papers for the PRSP, and snow-ball sampling was very useful for this research.

personalities, and top personnel in NGOs working on poverty issues. Moreover, it also interviewed development activists, leading journalists, representative from ethnic groups, writers, leading thinkers in Bangladesh and the sole noble laureate of Bangladesh. Ideas and thoughts of these persons can often be found in national print and electronic media which confirms their authority in terms of research on poverty and poverty reduction policy. Most of them had a number of publications in national and international journals. The country, government and the people look forward for their suggestions and advice in crises. Most important, the majority of them were very well known for their works focused on issues of national interest. Although this research does not claim to have interviewed all or every possible individual who could contribute in terms of poverty and poverty reduction in Bangladesh, undoubtedly these interviewees were the people who possess the best possible knowledge, expertise and authority in this field of research.

#### Interview Schedules, Recording and Transcription

In in-depth interviews, interviewers use primarily open ended questions. The major task is to build upon and explore participants' responses to these questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his/her experience within the topic under study. Semi-structured interviewing is based on the use of an interview schedule which is a written list of question and topics that need to be covered during the interview (Seidman 1998, Bernard 2000). The actual content of the list of questions (in the interview schedule) is initially generated in negotiation with the relevant academic and non-academic literature, alongside thoughts and hunches about what areas might be important to cover in the interview (Rapley 2007). The interview schedule can be simple and is likely to include the following:

- introductory comments (probably a verbatim script)
- list of topic headings and possibly key questions to ask under the headings
- set of associated prompts
- closing comments

(Robson 1993: 238)

Such an interview schedule was prepared based on the literature review, initial observations and research questions (attached in Appendix - 3)



The focus in in-depth interviews is on the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee and on the form of the narrative provided rather than simply on the content (Elliott 2005). Therefore, it was clearly very useful to be able to tape-record these interviews. Recording also allows the interviewer to give full attention to the interviewee rather than needing to pause to take notes. For interviews lasting approximately ninety minutes it would be impractical to try and remember the interviewee's responses and make detailed notes at the end of the interview. Recording is therefore generally thought to be good practice in all qualitative interviews (Hermanowicz 2002, Seidman 1998), except where people ask not to be recorded (Bernard 2000). In particular, if the interview is understood as a site for the production of meanings, and the role of interviewer is to be analysed alongside the accounts provided by the interviewee, it is important to capture the details of the interaction (as much as possible). Recording interviews enables the interviewer to interact with interviewees and a recorded interview can be replayed and re-replayed. The primary method of creating text from interviews is to tape-record the interviews and to transcribe them and then selectively draw on the transcripts to provide illustrations of arguments (Rapley 2007, Seidman 1998). For this research, I used a *Dictaphone*<sup>55</sup> to record the interviews.

I myself transcribed almost half of the interviews. Due to the volume of data, I employed a professional transcriber for the rest. None of the interviews had the names of the respondents and there were no contents that would allow an interviewee to be identified. I asked the person to transcribe the interviews exactly. Nevertheless, I double checked all the interviews and filled in where required.

### **3.4.2 Review of Newspaper Data**

News archives are a key research resource for academics across the humanities and social sciences, as a source of information, as a subject for investigation in their own right, and as litmus of broader social, political and cultural trends (Deacon 2007). Innovations in computer and information technology offer ways of alleviating the problems associated with storing, retrieving and accessing news material. Newspaper

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<sup>55</sup> A Dictaphone is an even smaller recording machine than a tape recorder. The one I used was relatively small but was able to record interviews up to three hours in good quality. Another advantage of using Dictaphone is that it can be connected with the USB port of a laptop or computer and once the interview is transferred to laptop or computer it is ready to use again.

content is now routinely stored in various digital formats, which means it can be searched comprehensively, quickly and reliably, and in many cases can be accessed remotely. The broad scope and consistency of their coverage, as well as their wide availability, makes newspapers especially attractive as a source of data (Oliver, Cadena-Roa and Strawn, 2004). Nevertheless, the practicalities involved in using newspapers have also been questioned by several recent studies in which scholars have carefully assessed the reliability of media coverage of social events (Swank, 2000; Ortiz, Myers, Eugene Walls, and Diaz, 2005). Instead of directly observing, or interviewing, or asking someone to fill in a questionnaire for the purposes of research inquiry, a review of newspaper data is dealing with something produced for other purposes. This is an example of obtrusive research (indirect observation), that is, the nature of the document is not affected by the fact that it is being used for a research project (Robson 1993).

However, newspaper sources pose fundamental problems of methodology. For example, as suspected initially by Danzger (1975), are these data contaminated by journalists' selection processes (Danzger 1975)? Press biases are believed to be steady over time and across sources, allowing observations of variation in longitudinal and comparative studies. Nevertheless, the media require capital investment, skilled technical labour, a pool of journalists, and means of distribution which presupposes at least some rudimentary road transportation system. The social relations of the media, integral to distribution and consumption, are predicated on literacy, a readership with the financial means to afford newspapers and other print products, and a predisposition to purchase and to read. Unlike older oral media, and the electronic media of radio and television, the print media require access to a specialised language which helps erect barriers between social strata and classes (Geoffrey 1993). Despite these questions and cynicism about validity and bias in using newspaper data, Koss (1984) argues that it has now been established in social science research that liberal orthodoxy accords the press status as an independent institution that empowers the people. This more positive view of the role of newspapers is at the very heart of traditional liberal press history which argues that the press is controlled by market-led pragmatists who follow public demand. The dominating influence over the press is said to be the sovereign consumer (Koss 1984). However it can also be argued that the media acts as an agency of potentially powerful propaganda capable of shaping public

opinion and behaviour (Curran *et. al.* 1987). For the purposes of this research, given that the PRSP framework was based on a liberal growth oriented development approach, it seemed very reasonable to review newspaper data to explore whether preparation of a PRSP in Bangladesh had exploited the opportunity of utilising the press that was supposed to be an empowering institution.

Six Bangladeshi daily newspapers were selected for review over a period of thirteen months (October 2004 – October 2005). A few points, specific to the context of Bangladesh, need to be cleared up at this stage. First of all, newspapers in Bangladesh do not reveal their support of any political party unlike in western societies. Of course, this does not mean that Bangladeshi newspapers have no stated political vision or agenda, it might be inferred that such and such newspaper give moral or implicit support to a political party or ideology, but this is always implicit and not stated. Secondly, the sampling criteria for the newspapers. Six newspapers (three were in Bengali and three were in English) were selected based on popularity, credibility and acceptability. There was no research or statistics available that could provide rankings of newspapers' popularity, or information about circulation in Bangladesh. Some newspapers claimed the highest circulation but there was no concrete evidence in support of these claims. I discussed with a couple of my colleagues from Bangladesh and selected *The Daily Prothom Alo*, *The Daily Ittefaq* and *The Daily Jugantor* for Bengali and *The Daily Star*, *Bangladesh Observer* and *The Daily Independent* for English ones. I believed, although we did not have any referral point from any research or other sources, but most people in Bangladesh would have agreed from their common sense knowledge that at that particular time these were the appropriate newspapers to collect views expressed by general citizens from home and abroad representing wider sections of the society on a nationally important issue such as poverty reduction. Nevertheless, while these six newspapers take a broadly similar stance they may have different readerships therefore collecting views from six different newspapers seemed a workable approach to avoid any possible bias. Thirdly, the reliability and authority of this review. It has to be acknowledged that the contributors came more from the relatively privileged section of the society. They were educated and had some sort of awareness about ongoing issues. This was consistent with the research that was trying to understand participation by civil society (and other general citizens) on behalf of the mass of the people, who were not

sufficiently educated (or illiterate), not very vocal or did not have any direct voice in the process of national policy making (see chapter – 2 for more discussion), especially on poverty reduction although those people were the majority of the poor in the country. Finally, 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. We intended to understand what went into the newspapers (as a platform where someone could voluntarily express a view) about the PRSP and its preparation. Also, during this time more views and opinions were published in the newspapers because it was known (to those who were concerned about poverty, development activists, academics, members of the parliament [as the draft had sent to them], and to the civil society) that the PRSP was about to be finalised.

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 all the above mentioned six newspapers during October 2004 to October 2005 were used for analysis. In some cases, special interviews with a renowned economist, developmentalist or vital player in national development were included in the review. Newspapers’ reporting of events attached to the PRSP process were avoided; rather the research stuck to the personal views expressed voluntarily by citizens of Bangladesh. Preliminary information about the review is presented below and more analyses based on this review are in chapters 4 – 6.

Table – 1: Types of news about poverty and PRS

Types of news	No	%
Editorial	29	22.48
Individual views from citizens inside Bangladesh	91	70.54
Individual views from citizens from abroad	9	6.98
Total	129	

Table-1 shows that 129 news items were published in these newspapers about poverty, poverty reduction, development and the PRSP. Among these news items twenty-two percent were editorials while the rest were written by citizens inside Bangladesh (70.54 %) and from abroad (6.98 %). Citizens of Bangladesh who wrote from abroad were from Japan, Spain, Switzerland, New Zealand and the United

States. Citizens who wrote from inside Bangladesh were mainly from Dhaka but there were a few from other parts of the country, such as from Chittagong, Mymensingh, Rangpur, Nilphamary and Shirajgonj. Table–2 shows that they came from a wide range of occupations representing wider sections of the society. A few of these writers were academics (9 %) both from home and aboard. The largest number of these writers was professionals (48 %), and this included very different occupations. For example, it included economists, bankers, lawyers, journalists, development activists, ambassador to UN, agriculturalist, trade analyst, columnist and other media personnel.

Table – 2: Civil society representation from the views published in newspapers

Authors' Occupations	No	%
Academics	9	9
Professionals	48	48
Former government employee	10	10
Occupation has not mentioned	25	25
Others	8	8
Total	100	

A number of former government employees expressed their views too, and this category was comprised of former secretaries from different ministries, former diplomats and a former Chief Justice (who was also the head of an interim government). The 'others' category embraced views from independent researchers, freelance writers, a poet, a leftist politician and members of parliament. For a quarter of the contributors occupation was not mentioned.

### 3.4.3 Online Survey

This was another technique used in the research to understand people's perception of the participatory process in the formulation of Bangladesh's PRSP. This section explains the justification for conducting an online survey, and gives details about the survey that was carried out. Later on, there is some preliminary information from the survey to demonstrate the representative nature of the respondents (more results are in chapters 4 – 6).

### 3.4.3.1 Survey and Online Survey

Before discussing the online survey, I think it would be best to discuss survey technique as a tool for data collection in the social sciences. The survey technique is the most commonly used data gathering tool in the social sciences and related applied fields (Neuman 2006). A survey is the collection of a small amount of data in standardised form from a relatively large number of individuals, and the selection of a sample of individuals from a particular population. Surveys work best with standardised questions where it is believed that the questions mean the same thing to different respondents. In its simplest form, the survey involves collecting the same standardised data from a group of respondents over a short period of time. The respondents are almost always selected as a representative sample from a larger population (Robson 1993).

In recent times there has been increasing use of online or e-surveys in social research. The potential was outlined by Coomber (1997), who indicated that the Internet was a new interface between researcher and a wider range of respondents (Glover and Bush 2005). The turn of the century has seen the popularisation of the Internet as a research medium for the collection of primary data. Gaining popularity first in marketing research, and then in the field of communications and media research, Internet-based data collection is now part of the mainstream canon of methodological choices. The promise of the Internet for survey data collection lies in the power of self-administration and interactivity on the one hand, and the advantages of speed and massive reductions in cost over interviewer-administered surveys on the other (Couper *et. al.* 2007, Couper 2000, Stewart and Mills 2005). For some groups among the population, such as company employees, members of professional associations, and college students, email access has reached nearly all and these groups can relatively easily be surveyed over the Internet (Schaefer and Dillman, 1998).

Online survey technique can provide access to populations that are difficult to reach with traditional survey methods. The Internet can provide a sense of social distance for some target populations, resulting in more open responses in online surveys than in other data collection methods. The Internet also can be a convenient way to participate for those with computer experience and a preference for completing a survey in their leisure (Lyons *et. al.* 2005). From a practical standpoint, online

surveys have several other advantages. In general, the benefits of conducting online surveys range from potentially larger sample sizes and faster response rates to less data processing and lower costs (Scriven and Smith-Ferrier 2003, Bachmann, Elfrink and Vazzana, 2000, Jackson and DeCormier, 1999, McDonald and Adam 2003, Mehta and Sivades 1995). Online surveys can be delivered in a matter of seconds and have been reported to have faster turnaround times and fewer respondent errors. Also, the process of sending e-mails and setting up online surveys is less expensive than conducting face-to-face, postal and telephone surveys. In many cases, online surveys can reduce the marginal costs of data collection to zero because researchers avoid the costs associated with printing and mailing the survey and including return postage. Through an online survey, not only do researchers get access to a large number of unknown respondents at dramatically lower costs than traditional methods, but members of the general population too can put survey questions on dedicated sites offering free services, and collect data from potentially thousands of people. The ability to conduct large-scale data collection is no longer restricted to organisations at the centre of power in society, such as governments and large corporations. This opens up a whole new realm of survey possibilities that were heretofore impossible or extremely difficult to implement using more traditional methods (Lyons *et. al.* 2005, Couper 2000).

One further major advantage of online surveys is that once the software is installed, the researcher can collect the questionnaires automatically and the data often can be used more or less directly for analysis (Scriven and Smith-Ferrier 2003, Van Selm and Jankowski 2006). In as much as respondents, when filling in a questionnaire, enter data directly into an electronic file, there is no need for a separate phase of data entry. This reduces costs and the time necessary to complete the research project. Another characteristic of an online survey is the automatic coding of close-ended questions by the computer, leaving only open-ended questions to be manually coded. Data cleaning remains necessary in online surveys, but can be efficiently performed with Internet facilities (Van Selm and Jankowski 2006).

These were the reasons I chose to conduct an online survey. The research needed to learn the perceptions of the PRSP process of a representative sample of Bangladeshi citizens, up and down the country as well as across the world who were living abroad

for various reasons (i.e., education, work). Perceptions of this sample would reflect the participatory nature (or otherwise) of the PRSP which was one of the key research interests. A traditional pen and paper survey for an individual researcher of such a representative sample was impossible. There were not enough funds for this purpose. Online survey, however, offered the opportunity in its simplest form to collect data from a wide range of people. The starting point of carrying out this online survey was to produce a questionnaire<sup>56</sup> based on the research question(s) and early observations from the literature review. A questionnaire design can strongly influence response rates and the quality of the survey data. Survey research depends on the cooperation of people in responding to the questionnaire. A major determinant of that cooperation is the length of the questionnaire (Punch 2003). The most essential component of the questionnaire is, predictably, the question. At the most basic level, questions are ‘open or close ended’<sup>57</sup> (Thom 2007). However, a questionnaire might also include ‘Likert-type scales’<sup>58</sup> (Kelly, Harper and Landau 2008). Our questionnaire contained open and close ended question as well as few Likert-type scale questions (See Appendix – 4). The questionnaire length was reasonable and depending on Internet speed it needed 10-25 minutes to complete the whole questionnaire. This survey was a kind of ‘Hyperlinked web-based survey’<sup>59</sup> and was posted into the University of Liverpool’s web-page<sup>60</sup>. The survey was published both in Bengali and English for user compatibility. The hyperlink of the survey was emailed to my personal contacts, different government and non-government organisations in Bangladesh, chat boards and discussion forums, online communities and professional groups (who shared a

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<sup>56</sup> Bulmer (2004) defines a questionnaire as, “any structured research instrument which is used to collect social research data in a face-to-face interview, self-completion survey, telephone interview or Web survey. It consists of a series of questions set out in a schedule, which may be on a form, on an interview schedule on paper, or on a Web page” (Bulmer 2004: XIV).

<sup>57</sup> Open-ended questions allow the respondents to answer in their own words, whereas close-ended questions give the respondents fixed answer options from which to choose. These choices can be dichotomous, as in a yes or no question, or can provide a range of response options (Thom 2007).

<sup>58</sup> It is common practice for questionnaires to include closed questions in the form of statements where one scale end-point represents strong agreement and the other represents strong disagreement (Kelly, Harper and Landau 2008).

<sup>59</sup> A more useful mode of online surveying for research is hyperlinked web based surveys. Participants would be invited to participate in these web surveys by way of a uniform resource locator (URL) embedded in email messages. Recipients of these email messages click on the hyperlink that then starts their browsers and directs them to the web page containing the survey. The questionnaires take the shape of one or more pages where the respondents click buttons and boxes, fill in text boxes, and eventually submit their responses (Scriven and Smith-Ferrier 2003).

<sup>60</sup> I am grateful to Barbara Flynn of Computer Service Department (CSD) of the University of Liverpool for her generous support and assistance. The survey was available on [www.liv.ac.uk/sspsw/research/survey.htm](http://www.liv.ac.uk/sspsw/research/survey.htm)



common list-serv address), a number of universities in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia to pass it on to their Bangladeshi students (with the presumption that a good number of Bangladeshi students study in those universities) with a request to forward the email to each individual's personal, social and professional networks. There were two cash prizes of Taka 5000 and Taka 10000 for the highest forwarder of the original email (with a Cc to the researcher), and for a randomly selected participant to accelerate the dissemination of the survey link and to encourage people to take part in the survey. Announcement of the winners was made on the same webpage after the completion of the survey.

Despite the growing use of the Internet for research, there were still some important challenges that needed to be addressed. Internet sampling methods can potentially be biased if the survey population either lacks or has an unequal access to the Internet or skills in its use. For example, some people may not be familiar with functions such as selecting from pull down menus or scrolling from screen to screen (Scriven and Smith-Ferrier 2003, Couper *et. al.* 2007). There may also be gender representation bias. A sharp 'digital divide' still exists between the young and the old (Loges and Jung, 2001, Rice and Katz 2003, Couper *et. al.* 2007). For college populations, members of professional societies, and other specialised populations, Web surveys may be the ideal medium with few coverage and sampling problems (Couper, 2000).

There are several factors that can explain why response rates could be relatively low for online surveys. One explanation is that respondents may not have the skills or confidence to either respond to the surveys or to return them correctly. Another factor that can affect email survey response rates particularly in the workplace relates to spamming. Unsolicited surveys may be considered intrusive to employees and can negatively affect their willingness to participate in surveys. Another problem with using emails as a survey method is that employees may be discouraged from reading an unsolicited email because of the threat of viruses being transmitted from email files (Scriven and Smith-Ferrier 2003).

The challenges of conducting an online survey was a concern but at the same time, I found the advantages were more attractive. As one of the key features of this research was to understand *participation* in developing a national policy, it was believed that

technological advances should be exploited to ensure participation from the widest possible section of the society. Especially in the case of Bangladesh while a good number of Bangladeshi citizens live abroad for various reasons, their voices were never heard and/or considered in such case. Moreover, the combination of data collection techniques would off-set some biases such as age, gender and computer skills. The next section gives some preliminary information about the respondents who took part in this survey which reflects its representative character. Our arguments are, firstly, together with other data gathering techniques, these data (from the online survey) offer some very useful observations about what people perceived to be happening in the case of Bangladesh's PRSP. Secondly, this online survey can be treated as a model exercise. Government is a much bigger entity than an individual researcher, and with its institutional and resource support could make an effort like this, especially when it was supposedly involving its citizens in building a national poverty reduction policy.

#### **3.4.3.2 Preliminary information from the online survey**

The online survey was live from 5 May 2006 to 30 October 2006 and offered participation in two languages, Bengali and English. The English survey received four hundred and sixty-four responses and the Bengali one had eighteen. In cross-national research, Harzing (2005) raises an imperative question; could the language of the questionnaire influence a person's response? We have no idea whether this was the case in our survey for Bengali responses. Presumably one reason might be that the users' computers were not compatible with Bengali software. The computer compatibility of multiple languages may have affected the survey. We managed to publish the survey questionnaire in both languages but when we opened up the Bengali version it was in un-extractable cryptic codes. Hence, our working number of respondents is 464 and all these are from the English version of the survey.

It was interesting to observe that these data came from men and women of different age groups, occupational backgrounds, from up and down the country as well as Bangladeshi people from all over the world who were living abroad. This observation leads us to the standpoint that, if the intention is genuine, together with technological advancement and other conventional ways, the online survey is very likely to get the views from the widest possible sections of society. We could also see the enthusiasm

of people who were not in the country at that time were very keen to express their views. Across the world Bangladeshi citizens are involved in different occupations and their insights claim significant importance and relevance on national development. We argue that the government as a much bigger entity than an individual researcher can simulate and/or employ a combined approach on a greater scale and get that level of response which can truly claim to ensure participation from all possible sectors of the society. Analysis or distillation of these data in a policy formulation process is a professional task and, again, involvement and interplays of experts from both government and the non-government sectors in such process can make the whole process participatory. As explained earlier, the non-response rate is a challenge for any online survey – we also experienced that problem. We must acknowledge that it is not clear whether it was a methodological problem or a technical issue. But throughout the tables and analysis we point out the actual number of respondents and missing numbers (who did not answer any given question). Among the respondents 10.34% were female and 46.34% are male while 43.32% did not answer the question.

**Table – 3: Gender Distribution of the respondents**

<b>Sex</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
Female	48	10.34
Male	215	46.34
Did not mention	201	43.32

N=464

Respondents came from different age groups. The youngest respondent was aged 17 while the survey received views from people as old as 73. We have banded the sample into several categories. The following table shows that the survey got more responses from people of who were in the age-group of 26-33 (20.69%) than any other age-band. However, a good number of the respondents were from the age group of 17-25 (11.85%) and 34-41 (10.99%). Again 47.84% did not mention their age.

Table – 4: Age group distribution of the respondents

Age group	No.	%
17-25	55	11.85
26-33	96	20.69
34-41	51	10.99
42-49	13	2.80
50-57	21	4.53
58 and over	6	1.29
Did not answer	222	47.84

N=464

The respondents had a wide range of occupational backgrounds. The survey's largest number from a single occupational group was student (13.36%). The distribution across occupations is presented in the table below. The 'other' category in this table includes former defence personnel, between jobs, retired, housewife, unemployed. Some 202 respondents (43.53%) did not mention their occupation.

Table – 5: Occupational distribution of the respondents

Occupation	No	%
Student	62	13.36
Research and Development	27	5.82
Education / Training	25	5.39
Engineering	17	3.66
NGO Personnel	17	3.66
IT Management	17	3.66
Executive / Senior Management	14	3.02
Government Services	11	2.37
Professional (medical, legal aid etc.)	10	2.16
Sales / Marketing / Advertising	10	2.16
Media / Creative arts	8	1.72
Accounting /Finance	7	1.51
Human Resources / Personnel	6	1.29
Self-Employed / Owner	4	0.86
Manufacturing / Production / Operation	4	0.86
Customer Services / Support	4	0.86
Other	19	4.09
Did not mention	202	43.53

N=464

The survey obtained responses from the Bangladeshi citizens in different parts of the world. The largest number of responses came from Bangladesh (31.25%), but the survey also obtained responses from US (8.41%), UK (6.90%), Canada (2.59%), Australia (2.59%) and Japan (1.29). A number of people from other countries participated in the survey and are in the 'other' category of the following table. This

category includes responses from Bangladeshi citizens who were living in Austria, Malaysia, Sweden, South Korea, Thailand, Belgium, Cambodia, Congo, Finland, Germany, India, Italy, Kyrgyzstan and Switzerland.

Table – 6: Regional distribution of the respondents (global)

<b>From (country)</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
Bangladesh	145	31.25
United States	39	8.41
United Kingdom	32	6.90
Canada	12	2.59
Australia	12	2.59
Japan	6	1.29
Others	19	4.09
Did not mention	199	42.89

N=464

We asked the respondents to indicate which district they were originally from (regardless of their status of that time – whether they were then living in Bangladesh or abroad). Although the following table is sparse, it shows that we received views from people from 50 districts out of the 64 districts in Bangladesh in spite of 207 respondents not answering the question. These responses are presented in the table below in alphabetical order.

Table – 7: Regional distribution of the respondents (Local)

From (district within Bangladesh)	No	From (district within Bangladesh)	No
Bagerhat	2	Lakshmipur	4
Barisal	6	Lalmonirhat	1
Bhola	3	Madaripur	2
Bogra	10	Manikganj	3
Borguna	1	Mymensingh	4
Brahmanbaria	2	Naogaon	2
Chandpur	7	Narayanganj	6
Chittagong	16	Narsingdi	4
Comilla	15	Netrakona	1
Cox's Bazar	1	Nilphamari	1
Dhaka	71	Noakhali	6
Dinajpur	4	Pabna	5
Faridpur	7	Parbattya Chattagram	2
Feni	3	Patuakhali	1
Gailbandha	4	Pirojpur	5
Gazipur	1	Rajbari	3
Habiganj	1	Rajshahi	3
Jamalpur	1	Rangpur	2
Jessore	4	Satkhira	1
Jhalakati	1	Shariatpur	1
Jhenaidah	1	Sirajganj	3
Khagrachari	3	Sunamganj	3
Khulna	6	Sylhet	10
Kishoreganj	4	Tangail	6
Kushtia	3	Thakurgaon	1
Did not mention			207

N= 464

### 3.5 Ethical Issues

As always in social science research, there were ethical issues to be considered while collecting data from and about people. These mainly included confidentiality and anonymity, respecting people's privacy, and their right to know what would happen to the information they provided (Punch 2003, Clark and Sharf 2007). Plummer (2001), describes ethical debates in qualitative research as being a process marked by ambivalence, situated within actual experiences, and understood as 'struggling with the self' but a struggle that must be shared publicly because 'we need stories and narratives of research ethics to help fashion our own research lives' (Plummer 2001: 229). I was very much aware of these issues. In the case of interviews, prior consent was obtained to conduct the interview and use the narratives for research purposes. Permission was obtained to use their real names (in practice, in most cases this thesis

uses occupational identities), but based on my self-judgment discretion was used to keep some statements fully 'anonymous'. In terms of the online survey, I was the only person who dealt with the collected data, and identities of all participants were kept safe. Although in terms of announcing the prize, two names and addresses were used, we found that as long as it was not known what responses they had given this was not going to affect them in any way.

### **3.6 Validity and reliability**

When proposing and/or constructing meaning and description from data questions arise about meaning and interpretation. How do we know that what the participant is telling us is true? Research should strive for the best possible quality of data. We can look at the quality of data, first from a technical point of view, using the concepts of reliability and validity (Punch 2003). Data needs to be interpreted in relation to both the conceptualisation of the research question and the method by which it was generated. Different types of data cannot be unproblematically added together to justify a single truth or reality (Brannen 2007). A researcher should inquire into a respondent's version of the truth and aim at *knowledge*. That is, research is a scientific endeavour and is successful if, in the end, it produces knowledge that is broadly accepted, even if truth is considered a local concept (Moret *et. al.* 2007). Given this circumstance (which we believe is very common in social sciences research) we illustrate with the following arguments about our data why the analyses are to be considered valid and reliable.

Firstly, by interviewing a number of participants, it is possible to connect their experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others (Seidman 1998). However, beyond the broad objectives of description, conceptual development and the testing of concepts, qualitative interviewing may play a vital role in combination with other methods. For example, insights gained from qualitative interviews may improve the quality of survey design and interpretation (Bauer and Gaskell 2003). Secondly the convergence of findings stemming from two or more methods 'enhances our beliefs that the results are valid and not a methodological artifact' (Bouchard 1976: 268). Furthermore, Campbell and Fiske introduced the idea of triangulation where more than one method is used as part of a validation process (Campbell and Fiske 1959). Use of multiple methods reflects an attempt to secure an

in-depth understanding of the research question(s) investigated. Objective reality probably can never be captured. Triangulation is not a tool or a strategy of validation, but an alternative to validation (Denzin 1989, Fielding and Fielding 1986, Flick 1992). The combination of multiple methods, empirical materials, and different perspectives in a single study is best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, and depth to any investigation (Flick 1992:194).

### **3.7 Analyses of data**

This research collected both qualitative and quantitative data. Irrespective of whether a study generates qualitative or quantitative data, the major task is to find answers to the research questions. Qualitative data may be useful in supplementing and illustrating the quantitative data obtained from an experiment or survey (and vice versa). Analysis has to treat the evidence fairly and without bias, and the conclusion must be compelling, not least in ruling out alternative interpretations (Robson 1993). Analysis is the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain why those patterns are there. It develops ideas and can be tested with early observations. This can modify the ideas which can be tested again and so on. If the process of analysis is sound it might be continued (Bernard 2000). This research used interpretive analysis and a grounded theory approach. In interpretive analysis the idea is to continually interpret the words of texts to understand their meanings and their directives (Bauer and Gaskell 2003). Here, data serve to discover new findings, and therefore the procedure is such that in the end one knows more than at the beginning. The relation between data and concepts is fundamentally open; concepts serve to arrange data and to understand them in a substantially new way (Gunter 2000, Bernard 2000). The grounded theory approach is a set of techniques for (a) identifying categories and concepts that emerge from the text, and (b) linking the concepts into substantive and formal theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Strauss and Corbin 1990). This approach was used specifically during the analysis of interview data. Throughout the grounded theory process, the researcher keeps running notes about the coding and about potential hypotheses and new directions for the research. Grounded theory is an *interactive process* in which the analyst becomes more and more *grounded* in the data (Bernard 2000). Analysis is not purely a mechanical process. It hinges on creative insights, which may well occur when the researcher is talking to a friend or colleague, or in those moments of contemplation when driving, walking or taking a bath (Bauer



and Gaskell 2003). The following passage illustrates how the qualitative (interviews and newspaper review) and quantitative (online survey) data were analysed in this research.

In contrast to the analysis of quantitative data, strategies for qualitative data are more diverse, less standardised, and less explicitly outlined by researchers. This allows the researcher to move from description to a more general interpretation. For analysing the interview data; transcripts were created first. I read and re-read those, and identified emergent themes according to the aims and objectives of the research. These themes were coded on NVivo. A sample coding pattern (that helped create the nodes under which the texts were coded) is attached in appendix – 5. After entering these coded data into different nodes in NVivo, the data were retrieved and extracted, searching for general patterns and contradictions.

In terms of reviewing the newspaper data I coded the selected articles (based on the themes that emerged through careful reading of these texts) in NVivo. I extracted these coded nodes and conducted a qualitative content analysis<sup>61</sup>. Krippendorf (1980) distinguishes two key concepts of *framework* and *logic* in relation to content analysis. The framework of a content analysis involves a clear statement of the main research question, the kind of data, the context relative to the data, and the naming of inferences from the data to certain aspects of their contexts or the targets of the inferences. This is to say that, to accomplish these inferences, the researcher needs to have an operational theory about data-context relationships. Logic deals with the procedures involved in the selection and production of data, the processing of data, methods of inference and analysis, including the assessment of validity and reliability (Krippendorf 1980).

With the data collected from the online survey, the aim was to distil the relationships between the variables, and to express these relationships in simple statistical terms which could be understood by non-technical readers. The main output was frequency

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<sup>61</sup> A fundamental distinction between qualitative and quantitative methodologies can be found in the location of meaning in media texts. Quantitative content analysis emphasises a fixed meaning of media texts that can be repeatedly identified by different 'readers' using the same analytical framework. Qualitative content analysis procedures emphasises the capacity of texts to convey multiple meanings, depending upon the receiver (Gunter 2000).

analyses<sup>62</sup> where interconnections with the qualitative findings could be explored. Chapters 4 – 6 include these analyses where chapter 4 looks at the evidences of participation in Bangladesh's PRSP. Chapter 5 discusses the role and involvement of civil society in the development of PRSP process and in formulation of past anti-poverty policies. Chapter 6 aims to represent reflections and suggestions understood from the research data in terms of poverty reduction in Bangladesh. Interpretation and representation from one language to another is always difficult. It was felt that there are also connotations and terminologies used in one language (in Bengali) that may not actually reflect the same meaning in another language (in English) and/or may be misleading and may have different meaning. Efforts were made to translate and represent these terms as accurately as possible and some words and phrases are put in single quotation marks to emphasise the vocabulary which respondents themselves used.

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<sup>62</sup> A simple means of exploring many data sets is to recast them in a way which counts the frequency (the number of times) that certain things happen, or to find ways of displaying information (Robson 1993: 318).

**Chapter – 4**  
Participation: the evidence

## **Introduction:**

Based on the research data, this chapter will discuss how the idea of participation has been used as a form of ‘deceit’ to justify an imposed framework. In doing so, first, we will critically look at the claim of having ‘enough’ participation in the PRSP of Bangladesh (by the people who led the process). We will explore the arguments being made to establish the PRSP of Bangladesh as participatory. At the same time, we also look at arguments that refute such a claim. Later on in this chapter, we will reveal the underlying objective of participation in the preparation of Bangladesh’s PRSP. We will investigate why ‘participation’ from ‘all relevant stakeholders’ was needed and how it was exercised as a means for legitimisation in the case of the PRSP of Bangladesh. We will also understand from our research data how perceived ‘participation’ can result in those who are least powerful and without voice being rendered even more marginal and disempowered. Afterwards, in the formulation of Bangladesh’s PRSP, we will explore whose participation did matter, whose participation was meant to be ensured and in doing so who has pulled whose strings? We will explain who was in control from behind the scene. Do the government really wanted to ensure that voices and experiences from the poor should be reflected in the national poverty reduction strategy or was it the donors who wanted that there has to be some form of ‘participation’ in the PRSP and determined which form of participation would suffice (through their power to accept or reject a PRSP).

### **4.1 Participation in the PRSP of Bangladesh: *Enough for this time, but inadequate for the future* – how much is enough?**

Those who were involved in preparing the PRSP of Bangladesh such as members of the National Steering Committee, consultants and associated secretaries proclaimed that the PRSP of Bangladesh was prepared with participation and consultation from all possible stakeholders of the society. Only a few other informants, from some NGOs, supported this claim. On the other hand, a number of academics, developmentalists, journalists and NGO activists rejected such a statement and argued that whatever form of participation took place to formulate the PRSP were nothing but pretence of participation.

In this section of this chapter, initially, we will illustrate the arguments underlying the claims that participation was real and later on, we will look at the arguments of those who reject this claim<sup>63</sup>.

#### **4.1.1 'Enough for this time but inadequate for the future'**

The first and main argument of those who agreed that the PRSP was prepared in a participatory manner was that; PRSP had involved 'enough' participation in contrast to the usual practice of Bangladesh's policy making process and especially in comparison to previous Five Year Plans [Ahmed Q. M., Rahman H. Z., Choudhury A. M., Choudhury Rasheda K., Choudhury Rezaul K., Rahman Arifur, Anam] (Rahman 2005 a). Five Year Plans were used as the reference point for national plans of action for poverty reduction and other development programmes. A few informants described the PRSP process in Bangladesh as a 'paradigm shift' [Ahmed Q. M.] (Hossain 2005) and a 'significant departure' [Anam] from what used to happen in Five Year Plans. It was also said that previous plans with more participation would have been more effective as a reference point but at least the government had undertaken the responsibility to include people's views in the PRSP [Anam], and therefore it had introduced the idea of people's participation in policy making [Ahamad]. Others observed the PRSP as a better policy than the Five Year Plans [Islam N.] and thought it had opened a 'new window' for participation [Choudhury Rasheda K.]. It was felt that, before the PRSP, previous national policies had been very restrictive in regard to participation from general citizens and the poor. According to Nazrul Islam, a leading urban researcher and retired professor of geography and urban planning and Rasheda K. Choudhury, chairperson of an umbrella body of organisations for popular participation and mass education, Five Year Plans were made by the bureaucrats but in the case of the PRSP professionals and various other groups, were also offered space to participate. They explained that

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<sup>63</sup> A couple of points need to be noted for clarification. First, there was some cross-over within the viewpoints expressed. To illustrate, a few informants agreed that in contrast to previous policies Bangladesh's PRSP had adopted some features of participation but at the same time they were very critical about the process. Similarly, a number of informants were critical about the PRSP but observed a few good points in it. Second, where interview data is referenced this is indicated by the use of square brackets [ ] to distinguish this from bibliographic references. This device has been used to avoid repetition and confusion within the text of the thesis. Unless otherwise stated all interviews were carried out in 2006.

at least the committee had talked with the NGOs, arranged dialogues and workshops with people other than bureaucrats [Islam N., Choudhury Rasheda K.].

The people who prepared the PRSP claimed that the PRSP included more participation than its first phase; the IPRSP, which was entirely coordinated by one particular cell of the Planning Commission. Other ministries including other cells of the Planning Commission had not been well informed about the IPRSP [Ahamad, Ahmed Q. M., Rahman H. Z.] (Rahman 2005 b). Some critics and the lead consultant for the PRSP argued that a corporate NGO organised a few consultation meetings just as a ‘show’ but these were neither useful nor were used in the IPRSP [Ahamad, Muhammad, Rahman H. Z.]. According to Arifur Rahman [2006], a NGO activist, from the background of preparing Five Year Plans, the PRSP at least offered some spaces for discussion, consultation and adopted inputs from different sectors of society. Our research observed similar mixed-perception in its online survey<sup>64</sup>. Fifty seven percent of respondents mentioned that they had heard about the PRSP. At the same time 27 percent said they did not know about the PRSP and 15 percent did not answer the question.

Table – 8: Have you heard of the PRSP?

Response	Had heard about the PRSP	
	No. of respondents	%
Yes	267	57.54
No	126	27.16
Did not Answer	71	15.30

N = 464

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

This research also suggested that more people came to know about the PRSP during the second phase (from IPRSP to PRSP). In the online survey, for respondents who said that they heard about the PRSP (total of 267, see Table – 8), most indicated a time line which suggested that they had been made aware of it sometime after the IPRSP and just before the PRSP. Results from the online survey are presented in the following table.

<sup>64</sup> For details about the survey please see chapter – 3.

Table – 9: When did you hear about it?

	No	%
Very recently*	80	29.96
In between 2 to 3 years	79	29.59
In between 1 to 2 years	50	18.73
In between 6 months to 1 year	36	13.48
In last 6 months	22	8.24

N= 267

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

In terms of participation by experts and relevant ministries, initial consultations were made within the government under the national steering committee which dragged in various other ministries. Following the preparation of an IPRSP by the Economic Relations Division (ERD) of the Ministry of Finance in 2002, the General Economic Division (GED) submitted the draft PRSP to the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) on July 31 2004 (Haque 2005, Haque 2005 a). Twelve major ministries, mainly finance, commerce and planning, were assigned as lead ministries for different thematic groups (Haque 2005 a, Observer 2005). The draft PRSP was also sent to donor organisations for their observations. On the basis of the recommendation of the donors the document was revised in July 2005 (Hossain 2005 b, Haque 2005 a). However, the GED also requested all parliamentarians to give their inputs (Rahman 2005 b, Observer 2005, Haque 2005 a). However, it was claimed that in the transition phase from the IPRSP to the PRPS, the leading research organisation in the country, Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies (BIDS), was hired to develop the background thematic reports [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Shahabuddin]. Among the 13 thematic reports, BIDS prepared eight and a number of researchers from BIDS were involved with the interaction and consultations from different ministries, NGOs and civil society [Shahabuddin, Asaduzzaman]. It was also claimed that these thematic reports were reviewed by well known experts on behalf of the related ministries, who gave their inputs to the final draft [Rahman H. Z.].

A similar paperwork exercise was used in previous policy and planning in Bangladesh. Hossain Zillur Rahman, the lead consultant for the PRSP and Q. M. Ahmed, Member Secretary of the PRSP National Steering Committee (NSC) argued that in the case of the PRSP, donors were demanding a single, centralised poverty

\* Did not mention a certain time

reduction strategy and that was the motive behind the PRSP in Bangladesh but what was important is that the government intended to prepare such a document of its own [Rahman H. Z., Ahmed Q. M.]. In the first phase, an interim-PRSP was prepared. H. Z. Rahman asserts that in spite of national consultants being involved in the process, it was much more dominated by donors. He explains that then there was a transition from IPRSP to full PRSP [Rahman H. Z.]. Q. M. Ahmed [2006] and Kamaluddin Siddiqui, Chairman of the NSC, argued that this committee was chaired by the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister in order to convert the IPRSP into a full PRSP. The committee steered the whole process and was the nucleus of everything. The PRSP was the first of its kind (a participatory planning document) in Bangladesh<sup>65</sup> and used two streams of participation; one was participation by experts and by the ministries. The other was participation by the people at large including civil society [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M.].

Those who led the PRSP process argued that as regards participation, there were several forms. First, there were six day-long regional consultation meetings in six divisional districts which included people from all possible sectors of the society for example, public sector personnel, private sector personnel, NGOs, civil rights activists, human rights activists, professional groups, assetless people, landless people, farmers and so on [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M., Siddiqui Kaniz, Hossain]. The district commissioners were asked by the members of the national steering committee to organise these meetings and every effort was made to get views from local people [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M.]. It was cited in the PRSP that

“An inclusive consultation approach was followed to cover all types of stakeholders. Consultations were not entirely open-ended. A combination of structured and open-ended methods of consultation was followed, with care being taken to infuse participatory rigour to the consultation process. Two imperatives were specially considered: (i) ensuring participants’ informed, active and committed participation in discussions, and (ii) ensuring a conducive ambiance for participatory discussions” (GED 2005: 21).

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<sup>65</sup> Although another attempt was made by a Minister in 1994-1995 to prepare a policy in such a manner that was not approved by the then government. Therefore, it might be considered as a first document with participation from various sectors of the society [Ahmed Q. M. 2006].



Booth (2005) argues that the PRSP process was mostly technocratic and was restricted to quite a small number of strategically placed officials. Lack of political buy-in affected the process negatively. Yet, Ismail Hossain, a consultant for the PRSP argued that in one sense it may seem all highly bureaucratic but from the Bangladesh's PRSP perspective it was not like that; everyone participated and spoke their minds, and constant efforts were made to ensure no groups were excluded from the process (Hossain 2006). Two other positive features were pointed out. First, the PRSP was prepared with local consultants and national money [Choudhury Rasheda K., Choudhury A. M., Siddiqui Kaniz, Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M.]. A number of donors came forward with funds and external assistance but the government decided to use its own resources and no foreign or northern experts were involved in the process [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M., Siddiqui Kaniz, Choudhury A. M.]. Second, there was massive pressure on the government to complete the PRSP quickly, but the government took its time and consulted with various people before preparing the document [Choudhury Rasheda K.].

According to the Member Secretary of the NSC, participants in divisional level day-long consultation meetings gave their opinions in discussion groups and also in the plenary sessions after the discussions. Participants were divided into different groups based on their social and occupational backgrounds to discuss particular issues such as education, employment, power, law and order, environment, health, transport and communication, women and children. Discussions in the plenary sessions were carried out both in structured and unstructured ways [Ahmed Q. M.]. Kaniz Siddiqui, a consultant for the PRSP and Q. M. Ahmed [2006] also noted that special efforts were made to ensure the participation of women (if three people had raised their hand to speak and one was a female she was given preference to talk first) and the government officials played only a facilitating role<sup>66</sup> [Siddiqui Kaniz, Ahmed Q. M.].

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<sup>66</sup> Cornwall (2003) argues that the public location of activities made it difficult for women to attend, let alone participate. The decision to time these one-off events to capture seasonal migrants reflected a concern with maximizing male participation with little regard for women's availability. She also insists that participatory approaches have much to offer, but will only make a difference if they are used with sensitivity to issues of difference. Rather than the 'add women and stir' approach to addressing gender, what is needed is strategies and tactics that take account of the power effects of difference, combining advocacy to lever open spaces for voice with processes that enable people to recognise and use their agency (Cornwall 2003). However, Derbyshire argues that even where women's groups have been integrated into participatory exercises, women generally remain marginalised from government, civil

There were also seven face-to-face consultations with the poor. These were group consultations with particular groups of people such as housemaids, garment workers, street hawkers and vendors, potters, snake-charmers and fishermen. A number of research associates conducted these meetings and tried to get particular views on poverty reduction [Ahmed Q. M.]. The six regional district level consultations were not the only elements in the overall participation process, explained the lead consultant for the PRSP. He claimed that participation in the PRSP was more like a two-fold process [Rahman H. Z.]. People who led the PRSP process explained that, first, participation was ensured within the government and then there was a good level of interaction between the government and experts. Various ministries were involved and participated through their attachment to the steering committee. The regional level consultations tried to bring the views before the national steering committee. Meanwhile, a team was formed to prepare the draft PRSP. This team did not prioritise demands of any particular ministry, organisation or individual. It assessed the merits of all demands and arguments from the country's strategic perspective without any political influence or bias, otherwise the PRSP could have been an *encyclopaedia of wish lists* and politically motivated. This is how the draft of the PRSP was prepared [Rahman H. Z. 2006]. It is mentioned in the PRSP that

“Secretaries from different ministries, who are also the members of the NSC, as well as other high officials of the different ministries, attended the regional consultation meetings. The honourable minister for Finance and Planning inaugurated one regional consultation meeting. The presence of high level policy-makers and government officials reinforced the importance of such consultations and bolstered the enthusiasm of the participants” (GED 2005: 23).

Second, the draft was distributed to donors, NGOs and Members of Parliament who were requested to comment on the draft [Siddiqui Kamaluddin 2006, Ahmed Q. M., Siddiqui Kaniz, Hossain]. In addition workshops were convened to get the views of MPs. The PRSP committee also consulted with the Parliament Standing Committees. MPs gave their views and comments in these discussions. Also there were three major

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society and grassroots decision making and women's organisations feel removed from macroeconomic debates central to PRSPs (Derbyshire 2002).

meetings with the parliamentarians because of the demand and excitement from them although it had been planned to hold only one [Rahman H. Z., Ahmed Q. M.].

Parliamentarians from all major political parties were invited and took part in these meetings. The steering committee also tried to push the idea that the PRSP should be discussed in the parliament although Five Year Plans and other development policies had not been discussed in the parliament before [Rahman H. Z.].

“The most extensive consultation process on the draft PRSP was undertaken with the honourable MPs. At the behest of UNDP’s project titled ‘Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy’, three meetings were organized with a large number of the honourable MPs belonging to all the political parties. These meetings were chaired by the honourable Speaker of the Parliament. The honourable MPs made a number of observations pertaining both to the draft document and the PRSP preparation process. While commending the quality and comprehensiveness of the document, Honourable MPs were unhappy at the lack of opportunities for being consulted during the preparation process. They reiterated the importance of agriculture, specifically the importance of enhanced subsidy. They paid particular attention to the issue of resource availability for the implementation of the PRS. Honourable MPs also cautioned on the negative fall-outs of the globalization process for peasants and workers and pointed out inconsistencies in the position of developed countries which put such emphasis on poverty reduction and yet put up barriers on the meagre exports from developing countries such as Bangladesh” (GED 2005: 39-40).

The people who led the PRSP process indicated that the National Steering Committee as the National Poverty Focal Point received thematic reports, conducted district level divisional consultations, collected inputs from parliamentary standing committees, and also gathered secondary consultation reports organised by NGOs. Therefore, the participatory process drew on multiple perspectives and angles. The participatory features of the PRSP were therefore not just the six regional meetings; rather the PRSP was participatory because participation at first emerged within the government (through a number of ministries), as well as between the government and expert communities in both structured and unstructured ways. At the same time, participation

by the poor was included as discussed above. Then the draft was produced by December 2004 and there was a space of a few months before the PRSP was finalised in October 2005. During this time the committee had collected comments and views on the draft from multiple standpoints. This was done by convening meetings with special groups such as ethnic minorities, women groups, NGOs, academics, newspaper editors and with 'wisemen' who were highly renowned for their work both in Bangladesh and in international arenas - people such as Rehman Sobhan (a leading political economist and chairman of a policy research centre) and Dr Muhammad Yunus (founder and chairman of Grameen Bank who later won the Noble prize in 2006) [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Rahman H. Z.].

The people who prepared the PRSP therefore argued that there was 'enough' participation in the PRSP, and also suggested that it was not possible to consult 140 million people [Siddiqui Kaniz] in all 64 districts of the country [Ahmed Q. M.]. They further explained that the government and the PRSP committee had to consider resources and the outcomes from participation. Given the resource limitations, a set timeline and as it was the first time for including participation in a national policy, it was believed that the PRSP had adopted enough participation. This was especially in contrast to previous practice in formulating such policies within the country and in comparing PRSPs of many other countries [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M.]. At the same time it was felt that such participation would not be adequate for future reviews of the PRSP as it was now already known how better participation could be ensured through lessons from this PRSP exercise [Ahmed Q. M.]. The Chairman of the National Steering Committee acknowledged that, given the country context the PRSP was undeniably sufficiently participatory even though genuine participation was not ensured, but that this would be addressed properly in reviews of the PRSP [Siddiqui Kamaluddin].

#### **4.1.2. 'There was ad-hoc participation, not enough participation'**

In this section we will look at the counter arguments in contrast to the claim of incorporating *enough* participation in the PRSP of Bangladesh. Strong scepticisms were raised by its critics about the type of participation. The critics also perceived that there was not enough scope or space for participation in the whole process. In our survey, just under 22 percent of the respondents found the process of formulating the

PRSP offered adequate options to include the views of all relevant sections of society. On the other hand, nearly 40 percent did not think the process offered sufficient spaces for including views from various segments of society.

Table – 10: Do you think the PRSP of Bangladesh in its preparation offered enough options for including views from wider sections of the society?

<b>Response</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	58	21.72
No	106	39.70
Do not know	53	19.85
Did not answer	50	18.73

N=267

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

Many critics suggested that the government was merely trying to be seen to consult at a wide level. One argument suggests that the PRSP ‘attempted’ to include participation from people of all possible sectors in the society (as prescribed by the donors) to give it a flavour as if it had been produced locally and was owned by the people of Bangladesh. The intention was to characterise the PRSP as a framework that had not been imposed on Bangladeshi citizens and the government from the outside (Prothom Alo 2005). Critics claimed that the need for a PRSP had not been realised through the participation of the people of Bangladesh. It was rather obvious that the PRSP approach was exported with a ‘skeleton’ or ‘structure’ from outside the country and accepted without any debate or question, and therefore true participation could not be ensured in this case, as it was never a locally produced/owned idea. Any claim of including participation was nothing but fulfilling a given condition [Muhammad, Akash, Akhter, Ahmed M.]. Anu Muhammad [2006] took particularly hardline arguing that the PRSP could not be truly participatory as it had been foisted on people from the outset.

“.....the idea of participation in the PRSP was very contradictory. Statements like ‘PRSP should include participation from all possible stakeholders of the society’ confirms that first of all, the idea of preparing a PRSP must be accepted. Was there the slightest of option for any section of the society to make the decision whether the PRSP framework should be accepted or not? Whose participation has determined the necessity of preparing a PRSP? The

straightforward answer was no-one's – therefore, whatever form of participation followed was equivalent to 'no participation'. Any participation, regardless how comprehensive it was, means absolutely nothing” [Muhammad].

Our research heard from others who also rejected the claim of participation. These arguments started with great concern about the thematic reports, the background documents for the PRSP (see 4.1.1). It was asserted that the thematic reports were a kind of literature review, and had not been prepared in a participatory manner [Rahman Atiur]. Furthermore, there were major doubts from the researchers who prepared these thematic reports that these were not incorporated properly as the main drafting team for the PRSP did not include any researchers who prepared these reports [Asaduzzaman, Shahabuddin]. We have observed in section 4.1.1 that the PRSP claimed to have consultation and participation from all possible sectors of the society. Strong disagreement existed in opposition to such a claim. It is quite understandable that it was not possible to consult every one of 140 million people, but six divisional meetings organised by district commissioners in hierarchical settings cannot represent the population of the country, maintained the critics. Moreover, the PRSP insists that general and topic-wise discussion guidelines were developed by the National Poverty Focal Point (NFPF) and those were placed before the National Steering Committee for approval (GED 2005: 23). This reflects that consultations were pre-designed and controlled. Sceptics suggest that presence of 'high-level' policymakers and government officials perhaps not only 'reinforced' the importance of participation but also intimidated the poor and hindered the free flow of 'participation'. Q. K. Ahmad, president of Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA) and chairman of Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) argued that consultations and meetings in poor people's own settings would have offered useful and in-depth insights into Bangladesh's poverty and that this would have been possible within the time and resources used for the PRSP [Ahmad]. However, the major question was how the products of participation and consultation had been absorbed into the PRSP<sup>67</sup>. According to

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<sup>67</sup> According to Sanchez and Cash, most governments appear to have equated participation with consultation and consequently civil society involvement has been mainly in the form of consultations, rather than more in depth forms such as joint agenda setting or decision-making. With some exceptions (such as Zambia), the participation of civil society organisations during the process has been restricted to commenting on drafts and attending national/provincial workshops. They also argue that

Debapriya Bhattacharya [2006], executive director of a civil society research group, the suspicion was that nothing had been done in that respect because it was quite unbelievable that any farmer would disagree with agricultural subsidies, and no worker except a few groups of beneficiaries would agree on privatisation [Bhattacharya] yet both were incorporated into the final PRSP.

However, the PRSP claims that *comments were accommodated in finalising the group reports* (GED 2005: 23). In the case of national level consultations and how those helped formulating and/or improving the policies it (the PRSP of Bangladesh) reveals that *the final PRSP has incorporated relevant suggestions emerging from these consultations* (ibid: 39). It is also noted in the PRSP that poor people who came into those consultation meetings were enthusiastic, open-minded, bold in discussing the issues which directly affected them and also made thoughtful suggestions (ibid: 6). The PRSP acknowledges that the participants were *very happy* to have been able to participate in the consultation meetings and contribute to the country's economic policy making (ibid: 6). With regards to the consultations with the MPs and other civil society organisations the PRSP further claims that *relevant suggestions from these consultations have been incorporated in this final document* (ibid: 7). These are some of the few statements in the whole PRSP document which claim that consultation at the divisional and national level were of some use. Nevertheless, statements like these do not explain what exactly was incorporated (so that people could realise that their priorities, desire and hope was there) and how voices from below helped developing a national policy. SUPRO, a local NGO that organised parallel consultations on PRSP issue in Bangladesh observed that the consultants tried to satisfy their patrons in political leaderships by ignoring some popular issues such as corruption of political parties, political manipulation in the administration, lack of commitment by the political leaders, land reform, technocratic and bureaucratic complexities in litigation and so on. It argues that alternative and different views should have been seen in the national policy even though some people (political patrons) would not have been very happy with those. The SUPRO report also observed that whatever form of participation took place was limited and not spontaneous. Rather participation was

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Government officials often lack skills to run meaningful processes of participatory dialogue with civil society and therefore the organisation of the consultation process was not able to feed these consultations into policy making (Sanchez and Cash *undated*).

highly bureaucratic and participation by the ordinary people was not welcome (SUPRO 2005).

Abul Barkat, general secretary of Bangladesh Economic Association and a professor of economics argued that it was not true that the landless farmers had not urged land reform so that they could have a means to survive [Barkat]. To illustrate, agricultural growth that benefits the poor is strongly associated with an equitable distribution of land. According to Rahman (2005 a) and Haque (2005), enormous inequality in land distribution or landlessness is a key cause of poverty. Quite a large number of farmers and rural inhabitants do not have any land of their own, as a consequence, either they must refrain from growing crops, which was their primary economic activity for subsistence, or they had to enter into a tenant relationship with large landowners which held them in poverty on most occasions. A good number of these landless people migrate to cities in search of work and this contributes to the level of urban poverty (Rahman 2005a, Haque 2005). Shihab Uddin Ahamad, an NGO activist, argued that the PRSP did not explain the pains and miseries of poor farmers, workers, and housemaids as it is claimed through the face-to-face consultations (see 4.1.1), neither has it presented the desires of these people. Had there been discussions with such groups their stories should have been in the PRSP [Ahamad].

Representatives from ethnic minorities also denied that they were included in the participatory process. Sanjeeb Drong, represents ethnic minorities and works on ethnic minority issues, explained that the IPRSP process simply overlooked the ethnic minorities and the PRSP included them at the very last minute as a result of their own lobbying with donors and other pressure groups [Drong]. Zuckerman (2002) argues that a few PRSPs paid attention to ethnic minority and other diverse groups, but only in an inconsistent, 'add-on' way rather than through mainstreaming (Zuckerman 2002). However, Farzana Islam, a professor of anthropology argued that the PRSP process in Bangladesh did not reach to the level of the common people and that even people who were educated and conscious about the society did not know what was going on about preparing a PRSP [Islam F.]. A similar observation was found in the online survey, where only one third of the respondents admitted taking part at any stage of PRSP preparation.



Table – 11: Have you participated in any stage of its preparation?

<b>Had participated in any stage of its preparation</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	89	33.33
No	153	57.30
Did not answer	25	9.36

N=267

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

Anisul Haque, a writer and columnist and Nazrul Islam argued that if there was adequate scope for participation and enough publicity, debates and dialogues, people would at least have known what was taking place. It did not happen in the case of the PRSP's preparation. Most of the academics, professional groups, journalists and media people were unaware about the whole process [Haque, Islam N.].

“.....PRSP is a strategy paper. Whether or not we [as a country] will be poor is depending on this paper. Therefore, it should have been discussed in a larger forum. Newspapers should cover more articles and reports on it, open discussion and debates were expected in radio and television so that it could become a broader issue and general people could have participated. Being in the press I can confirm this is what I did not find” [Haque].

G. M. Quader, a member of parliament and one editorial in *The Daily Independent* (17 May 2005) noted that the MPs at a workshop jointly organised by the Parliament and the UNDP, criticised the government for not involving them in the preparation of the PRSP (Independent 2005, Quader 2005). Quader explains that there were 39 MPs in that workshop along with the Speaker of the Parliament, UN officials and economists. He described this as shocking that in this gigantic task of producing the national PRSP the parliamentarians who represent the broad masses were not involved in the formulation of the strategy; rather they had been asked to give their input to rubber-stamp the idea that MPs were involved (Quader 2005). Rahman argues that this seemed more like staging a Shakespearian drama, Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark on the stage (Rahman 2005). Even the Finance Minister expressed his dissatisfaction publicly and called the PRSP ‘bogus’ (Rahman 2005 b). Therefore, any claim of including parliamentarians in a formal or informal way was rejected by the critics. It was felt by the critics that given the country context, a national poverty

reduction strategy should have been the first concern of the representatives of the people, who were voted for by the people as members of the parliament and the paper should have been debated in the parliament. At the same time local government should have played a larger role in identifying local problems and ways forward [Anam 2006, Majumder B. A. 2006, Chaudhury Rezaul Karim 2006]. It was said that participation from local government was nowhere and the parliament played a very marginal role [Bhattacharya], and the inclusion of MPs through meetings with Standing Committees was nothing but a ‘token’, as otherwise approval of the PRSP would have not been possible [Asaduzzaman].

The whole process of participation was said to be a ‘ploy’ (*chol*). The PRSP only just achieved that level of participation which was absolutely necessary for authentication [Islam F.]. Initially it had been prepared by the consultants and experts, according to a donor provided outline, when there was no chance of participation by the society or even government to determine the outline [Muhammad]. There were few meetings and consultations with various selected groups to give the PRSP a participatory face and scepticism remained as to how far the outcome of these consultations had been added in the final version of the PRSP. Furthermore, the whole process had been convened on an ad-hoc basis to maintain a deadline or time-line. Khushi Kabir, executive director of a gender focused NGO, argued that the number of meetings and the number of participants were seen as more important than the views generated from those discussions [Kabir]. Similar views were also found in the online survey where a mere 18 percent of the respondents believed that preparation of the PRSP was participatory and included views from ordinary people.

Table – 12: Do you think preparation of the PRSP was participatory?

<b>Response</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
Yes	49	18.35
No	74	27.72
Don't know	48	17.98
Did not answer	96	35.96

N=267

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

## **4.2 Participation: A useful tool for ‘covering up’**

After examining the claims of incorporating ‘enough’ participation in the preparation of Bangladesh’s PRSP (in 4.1) we will now explore the underlying features of participation, explained by our informants. In chapter-2 we have observed how participation in development discourse can be *pseudo* (Vebra and Niel 1972) or a *new tyranny* (Cook and Kothari 2003). On the other hand in that same chapter we discussed the features of genuine and in-depth participation (Cornwall 2003, White 1996) in contrast to other approaches to participation that can be used only for validation or rhetoric. In this section we will discuss how the need for participation was felt in case of the Bangladesh’s PRSP. We need to understand what happened in Bangladesh in terms of the legacy of ‘participation’ in building a national poverty reduction strategy. It is believed to be useful to understand why some people found some form of participation was ‘enough’ in preparing a national policy, whereas critics identified it just as a cover up and means for validation of an extrinsic policy. Later on, we will explain how the media could have played a larger role in ensuring participation.

### **4.2.1 Why Participation?**

Some informants expressed several thoughts on participation and its necessity in developing a national poverty reduction strategy in Bangladesh. A first group, who were involved in the preparation of Bangladesh’s PRSP, believed that researchers and experts working for long days already knew what needed to be done as the problem had been precisely delineated by them [Ahmed Q. M., Choudhury A. M.]. They asserted that people from the bottom had stories which may be helpful but at the same time, they observed that these were highly generalised, and therefore efforts had to be made not to contradict the wisdom of experts but to keep listening to the people at the bottom through consultation meetings [Ahmed Q. M.]. From a cost-benefit point of view the PRSP committee had to also think about the output of those local consultations. It had been found that local consultations were producing similar sorts of data and were costing a lot of money [Siddiqui Kaniz].

Another view was expressed arguing that participation could have been a vital tool for empowering the people but strongly criticised the hierarchical approach of participation in the national poverty reduction strategy that had been adopted in

Bangladesh's PRSP. They described participation (adopted in the PRSP of Bangladesh) as *trendy, fashionable* [Islam N., Arefeen, Majumder, Rahman H. Z.], *popular* [Islam F.], or even *bogus and deceitful* [Muhammad]. For them participation was a global phenomenon in the development discourse. As they explained, the worldview of a poor or destitute person is based on very limited experience as such as s/he is unaware of global institutions and is not informed about the politics of international development. For him/her, obtaining two meals per day may mean poverty reduction but it is highly problematic whether such a view would suffice in thinking about poverty reduction in a national context. They also asked why participation was important only for developing a national policy for poverty reduction while many other policies of greater national interest, for example, various mineral and gas field contracts with trans-national companies, and privatisation of national industries did not include participation [Islam F., Muhammad]. They suggested that participation should be informed and ensured within an institutionalised mechanism rather than any rent-seeking fashion. Otherwise participation would always be socio-political verbosity and remain useless; or would provide a safeguard or some sort of credibility for the development planners at the top who intended to justify their programmes in the name of people's participation. Muhammad Jafar Iqbal, a writer and professor of computer science argued that pretending to include participation might work for approval of a policy but is no good for the national interest [Iqbal].

Mozaffar Ahmed and others argued that it was obvious that participation could help in setting priorities. Wisdom is not a monopoly and what participation could do is to change one's mind-set including the mind-set of policy makers [Ahmed M., Hossain, Yunus]. Views from others, they argued, could have been heard and taken into consideration to formulate a more efficacious policy and in addition participation could unleash people's productivity and creativity and help them become authors of their own future. They felt local people know more about themselves and about the local situation than outsiders. They live with the given reality, suffer from their problems and have a strong desire to solve those problems as they will continue to live there for generations (Daily Star 2005). A people-centred development strategy can create the opportunity for economic growth to significantly benefit the poor. According to Majumdar (2005) and an editorial published in The Daily Independent

(17 May 2005), in the past, development formulas for poverty reduction were imposed from the top or external sources and failed to achieve desired outcomes. Non-participation by the poor in key areas of development led to a wide chasm in the development process. Thus to make development policies effective and sustainable development policies have to be participatory and pro-people (Independent 2005, Majumdar 2005). A pragmatic example could be gleaned from a former Bangladeshi Prime Minister who described the success of tackling devastating floods and other natural disasters as people's own efforts supplemented by government support that had significantly reduced these calamities' adverse effects (Daily Independent 2004). It was therefore obvious that it was not only the specialists who knew best when the question was about providing food, clothing, healthcare, education to the masses and reducing poverty in society but that every citizen who was living with the given circumstances could give useful insights. For Shihab Uddin Ahamad [2006], Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] and Daily Independent (2004 a), experiences of common men and women are useful, enriched with pragmatic everyday life knowledge. Their worldviews and life experiences could have helped in prioritising goals and agendas, and also could have been cross-checked and intertwined with specialised knowledge [Ahamad, Ahmed M.] (Independent 2004 a). According to Iqbal [2006], undoubtedly people at the bottom can help identify key points that are beyond the imaginations of middle class elites and policy makers who have never experienced such things and have no idea how to live and rise above them [Iqbal]. In the case of Bangladesh's PRSP, it was felt that representative participation from all related sectors of society could have been ensured (Prothom Alo 2005 a, Prothom Alo 2005 b). It was also argued that policies towards poverty reduction needed to be spontaneous and self-reliant (Prothom Alo 2005 c). Muhammad Yunus, the country's sole Noble Laureate, argues that the PRSP should not be a framework that delivers the message that poverty reduction is entirely a task for the government, to be supervised by donor organisations, with ordinary citizens watching the process from a safe distance. Rather citizens should be able to criticise the process, make headlines in the newspapers about poverty reduction policy and bring strong comments to meetings and conferences. He suggests that poverty reduction policies should be formulated in a way offering adequate opportunities for everyone to take part and the PRSP just did not do so (Yunus 2005).

Barkat [2006] argued that participation is just not a banner; rather it is a political process and also a part of political enlightenment [Barkat]. The most important objective for participation should have been to understand poor people's perspective why they are poor and how they think they can overcome poverty [Haque, Barkat]. According to Khushi Kabir [2006], Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] and Abul Barkat [2006], participation would not turn into an *encyclopaedia of wish lists* as poor people will not just offer a list of demands on what needs to be done. Instead they will tell their stories which will explain why and how they have become poor, their miseries and pains, their efforts to get out of poverty and the constraints they face, their apprehension for the future and the things they would like to do in the given context [Kabir, Ahmed M., Barkat].

“Certainly, these stories would enlighten priorities in effective policy aimed at significant poverty reduction. It is possible to decide priorities from the top, according to the targets and objectives of the people who fund development projects, but participation from below will help developing more effective and implementable strategy. Participation has multiple dimensions and the participation-seekers have to bear this in their mind. If they decide not to care about the views of the poor and learn from these instead just wanting a kind of validation or amplified voice for their own ideas; this will jeopardize the purpose of participation as well as the possibility of poverty reduction” [Ahmed M.].

Nevertheless, participation can also be paradoxical. On the one hand, there are uninformed poor people in non-favourable settings for participation but with insightful life experiences. On the other side of the spectrum there are experts on poverty, development and economics to bring people's voices into the actual policy. Knowledge of real life is conditioned by life experiences, not necessarily by education and derived or received knowledge from any other sources. Participation, therefore, has to be adequately valued. Bhattacharya [2006] and Mahmud [2006] observed that there was a dilemma regarding participation in the PRSP in blending the views from poor people (who lack information and institutional knowledge) with expert knowledge [Bhattacharya, Mahmud]. People who were engaged in bringing participation from the bottom to the top felt that this was an extremely painstaking

task and the challenge was to make participation matter [Rahman H. Z.]. The following quotation from the lead consultant for the PRSP proposes what might be the ideal process of ensuring participation in national policy formulation.

“...the common practice in Bangladesh, to include participation, is to go to any village and talk to a group of people and come back with a list of popular demands. Recent experiences suggest strong media presence is notable as a flashy cover. This kind of participation can be identified as audience rental participation where the organisers have their agenda. In such meetings, basically the organisers somehow manage an audience to be present; to listen to the organisers and at the same time the organisers make a list of local demands in the name of participation or listening to the people. In such way, participation can be very cacophonous; hundreds of people may say hundreds of things. The professional task is to distil those voices and channel these voices into decision making. It is not like these voices would remain as footnotes in the policy. After distillation of these voices, it requires validation by going back to the same people and checking whether the distilled points are the correct synthesis of what they had said before. So participation needs a three fold mechanism. Listening, distillation and validation and it is imperative to understand whether these have been done or not” [Rahman H. Z.].

In the following section we will see what critics said about what had been done to ensure the participatory aspect in the PRSP of Bangladesh.

#### **4.2.2 *Amar Kaj Ami Korbo, Tore Shudhu Jigai nibo*\***

In this section we will explore the insights our research has gleaned into what happened in the preparation of the PRSP of Bangladesh. Firstly, it was felt that the claim of including participation was nothing but a routine practice [Seraj, Drong, Iqbal]. According to Farzana Islam [2006], Farida Akhter [2006] and Sanjeeb Drong [2006], the usual practice in development policies in Bangladesh in adopting participation by the authorities has been just to fulfil targets [Islam F., Akhter, Drong]. This is to say that a particular number of consultation meetings would be

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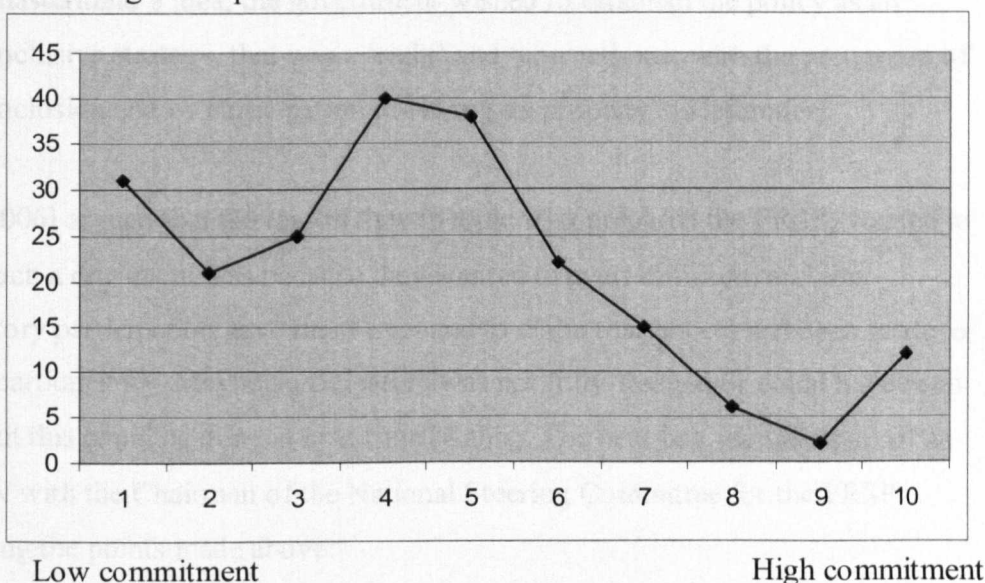
\* This is a local phrase that can be found especially in the northern part of Bangladesh which means, ‘I will do my job [according to my wish] and will only ask you [for the sake of asking/soliciting]’

convened and there had to be participants from specific groups and often the distribution of numbers of those participants are pre-determined [Drong]. Iqbal [2006] illustrates the process, generally a committee is formed to make a policy and the committee works in its own way. If consultation or participation is required, the committee calls meetings where the participants put their signatures on a pre-drafted meeting report. These meetings help the authorities to claim participation has taken place although most of the people remain ignorant about the whole thing [Iqbal]. Shykh Seraj, a media personality who works on agriculture and farmer's participation argued that it has become a tradition and common practice in Bangladesh that organisers do not take proper notes at these meetings, especially what they are not keen to hear. Very little of the participation is reflected in the actual policy [Seraj]. Secondly, it was observed that the framework of the PRSP was not favourable for ensuring participation [Asaduzzaman, Akhter]. M Asaduzzaman, one of the researchers who prepared the thematic reports, notes that participation cannot be ensured by circulating a draft policy and inviting comments. Such an approach gives the impression to the groups/individuals to whom the draft is circulated that only minor changes are possible and therefore no-one takes participation seriously and the whole process is like a *stage show* [Asaduzzaman]. An example was cited to explain this. If anyone is asked what sort of dress s/he is looking for, then s/he can select its colour, texture, design or other features based on his/her needs and taste. But if a selected design is provided and then a person is requested to make it his/her own, then at the best s/he can only make a few minor changes here and there. S/he neither can change the design nor reject it if s/he has no other choice. Participation in Bangladesh's PRSP was like fitting outside views and opinions into a given outfit [Akhter]. Moreover, Kazi Shahabuddin, director general of BIDS, argued that it was not possible to collect actual information about the real picture at the 'bottom' in a couple of hours [that happened in the divisional consultation meetings]. Participation by the poor claimed in the PRSP was therefore nothing but superficial [Shahbuddin]. Finally, critics argued that the PRSP was prepared with pre-conceived ideas and that the participatory elements were seeking legitimation, justification and credibility [Islam N., Muhammad, Ahmad, Akash]. They explained a document like the PRSP of Bangladesh which operationalises the ideas of the World Bank and IMF needs validation, justification and credibility to relocate any risk of failure. It needs a safeguard and validation from the local authority because the structural adjustment



programmes of the World Bank and IMF have often failed and bred further poverty in poor countries [Akash, Majumder, Ahmed M., Muhammad] (Rahman 2005 b, Observer 2005). It was further argued that to avoid such criticism the World Bank and IMF included the clause that the PRSPs should be prepared in a participatory manner and therefore, the government made this effort to involve the people [Barkat, Rahman Atiur]. Our survey asked the respondents to rank the commitment of the government and PRSP committee in ensuring participation by ordinary citizens. Among 267 respondents who said they had heard about the PRSP; 212 of them ranked the government/PRSP committee from 1 to 10 where 1 indicated the lowest and 10 reflected highest level of commitment. The survey found that people believed government and PRSP committee's commitment was very low, as can be seen in the following chart where the skew to the right confirms the observation.

Figure- 1: Commitment from the government and PRSP committee in ensuring Participation



N=212, Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

For Q. K. Ahmad [2006], the whole mechanism of hunting participation was similar to accumulating the necessary marks to pass an exam. The donors made it clear that if the document did not include some features of participation in the PRSP it would not be approved, therefore, the government purported to include participation so that they could claim that the PRSP had been prepared with discussion and participation from local people. Instead it was really a process that was led entirely by the government

according to the suggestions from the World Bank and IMF [Ahmad]. Hence, as explained above, Badiul Alam Majumder, country director of Hunger Project, Bangladesh compared participation [in the PRSP of Bangladesh] with a local phrase of the northern part of Bangladesh, *amar kaj ami korbo, tore shudhu jigai nibo*, which means that one would do his job in his own way and would ask others only for the sake of asking or to have a reason to claim it as a joint work [Majumder]. He further claimed that

“The consultants and others who led the PRSP process had done their job according to donor conditions. They had arranged a few consultation meetings and had invited some poor people. But certainly they did it in the way they wanted or was directed to do it. The reason why they undertook the exercise was because they wanted to prove that this was a ‘nice and fine’ document which had engaged everyone. Although ultimately it operationalised the mastermind’s idea, the government wished to establish the policy as an inclusive strategy, that was a ‘right’ and ‘correct’ one, with the pretension of inclusion and/or participation justifying its property” [Majumder].

Kabir [2006] argued that the reason they (people who prepared the PRSP) wanted to justify such a document was because they wanted to avert criticism, and this justificatory participation gave them a ground to claim that efforts had been made to make it participatory. Maybe participation was not fully-fledged or could have been better, but this could be done in next time [Kabir]. The next box includes part of an interview with the Chairman of the National Steering Committee for the PRSP confirming the points made above:

Q: What do you think, why participation was taken into the PRSP?

A: Because that was the only way available to us as it had to be in that way

Q: Are you saying PRSP did take a kind of token participation?

A: More or less; Yes, what else I can say.

Q: Why did you need to include token participation?

A: Because that was the available option to us, we could not do any other.

Q: Could you not prepare a PRSP without such a token kind of participation?

A: We might, but more interestingly the problem of token participation is that you can use it for policy formulation but cannot ensure participation in its implementation.

Look at the implementation strategy of the PRSP, local government is nowhere, poor people are not there.

Q: Then what was the token participation for, to justify or to cover up.....?

A: If you say it is justifying, then you can. But on the other hand, I say something is better than nothing. We now have the experience of having an exercise with the people to find our priorities. A massive change will happen; I did not have any such expectation on this occasion

Siddiqui, Kamaluddin [2006], Interviewed on 24 August 2006

#### **4.2.3 Media – A missed opportunity**

According to Ali and Rahman (1999), the media never received the serious attention of social researchers in Bangladesh. They argue that there are many areas, for example, literacy, poverty alleviation, industrial development, where the media may play a considerable and important role by giving adequate coverage of news on various economic, social and political as well as other matters. By covering news and views properly the media can also help in integrating and/or coordinating different segments of the society (Ali and Rahman 1999). Our research found a consensus on the role of media in terms of its possibilities of ensuring broader participation in the PRSP. We found that media was a major source of information for those in the online survey who were informed about the PRSP. The majority knew about the PRSP from newspapers (24.72%) while television and other mass media (14.98%) were also important sources. Other major sources were their occupation (20.6%) and friends

(19.1%). It is interesting to observe that web sites and research reports of non-governmental organisations informed more people (4.49%) than government organisations' web sites or research reports (2.25%).

**Table – 13: Source of information for the people who had heard about the PRSP**

<b>Where did you hear about PRSP</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Newspaper	66	24.72
As Part of your occupation	55	20.6
Friends	51	19.1
Television or any other mass media	40	14.98
Seminar/conference	19	7.12
Web site or research report of International/Non-Government Organisation	12	4.49
Web site or research report of Government Organisation	6	2.25
Others	18	6.74
<b>Total</b>	<b>267</b>	

N= 267

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

It was noticed that the media has their own (commercial) interests [Ahmed M.] and perhaps it also has a knowledge gap to bridge in creating awareness and generating a national debate on issues such as poverty reduction [Siddiqui, Kaniz]. Nevertheless, it was widely agreed that the media had the potential to generate in-depth public debate which could have fed into the PRSP. Unfortunately, the media played a very limited role [Rhaman Atiur, Islam F.]. There was no evidence that the PRSP committee had taken any views from the media. No significant debate was generated within the media about such an important issue. While experts, consultants and bureaucrats made a national poverty reduction strategy, the media and the mass of people were very far away (Daily Star 2005 a, Daily Star 2005 b). Whatever was the form of consultation at divisional levels and with the poor, the media would have been able to help those taken back to that level again to check whether their views were reflected correctly or whether they agreed with the way the experts and consultants had interpreted their views (Prothom Alo 2005, Rahman 2005 b). Yet it was very obvious that the whole process was not beyond the reach of the media. If thoughtfully planned; the media could have been a useful tool for ensuring broader participation from wide sections of society [Anam, Ahmed M., Rahman Atiur].

There were arguments both in favour and against a role for the media in preparation of Bangladesh's PRSP. People who led the PRSP process denied that the media had not given proper coverage to the PRSP [Rahman H. Z.]. This was also claimed that sometimes the media had misled or misinterpreted the PRSP process [Ahmed Q. M.]. However, it was acknowledged that if the media were ignored, then fewer people would know about the issue. Some critics observed that the media had given modest coverage and had published reports, editorials and columns both supporting and criticising the PRSP approach [Islam N., Choudhury Rasheda K., Shahbuddin Kazi, Ahmad]. Nonetheless, people of the PRSP committee found the commentaries published in the media were not very substantial and mostly arguing that nothing was happening or that the whole process was donor driven [Rahman H. Z.]. In contrast to this, some argued the media had brought forward many critical and constructive views on the PRSP. B. K. Jahangir [2006] and Q. K. Ahmad [2006] insisted that economists among others wrote critical articles that could have been fed into the PRSP, but that did not happen [Jahangir, Ahmad].

“...I have written a few articles in the newspapers, I have seen a few other people writing in the newspapers on the PRSP. But I doubt whether the PRSP committee has read any of it. I agree that these articles could have been fed into the PRSP but I must say it did not happen” [Ahmad].

Perhaps the visual media could have also done better if used appropriately. Of course it had to be in the plan of the people who formulated the PRSP.

“.....Media could have played a very strong role in the PRSP process but the media have been ignored by the people who were in-charge of it. We could have broadcast and made more programmes on poverty and the PRSP if we were requested. Newspapers could have published more commentaries if they were sensitised properly. This has not happened. What happened is the PRSP has been made without any appropriate awareness and involvement of the print or electronic media” [Seraj].

### 4.3 Participation or ‘muting’?

We have discussed how participation can be used as a means of authentication and/or legitimisation (see chapter 2 and 4.2.2). Here we explore data how participation can also silence other people, especially the powerless.

For B. K. Jahangir, a political thinker and former professor of social science, the ideal reason for participation is that someone may have new insights or ideas that can enhance the understanding on a particular issue. If this is not ensured, there is no reason for seeking participation [Jahangir]. Rasheda K. Choudhury [2006] argued that fundamental problems lie in who designs the criteria, targets and objectives of participatory meetings and consultations. She explains that in most cases the people at the top design and outline the nature, form and even tentative outcomes of participatory meetings. There is absolutely no access for the people at the bottom at this initial stage. Therefore, any participatory meeting or programme masterminded only by the people from the top, cannot be truly participatory [Choudhury Rasheda K.].

Given the usual practice in Bangladesh, very often in the name of participation the organisers practice muting<sup>68</sup> [Islam F., Choudhury Rasheda K., Akhter]. To illustrate, in participatory meetings the organisers generally allow those people who would only reflect their views. Alternative voices are carefully overlooked to avoid ‘chaos’. Sometimes the organisers invite only those people who they already know and are sure will support the proposed agenda. A person or two might get invited to express a moderately different standpoint to avoid the meeting becoming monotonous [Choudhury Rasheda K.]. Jahangir [2006] argued that however, in a local rural consultation meeting, if someone questions the power structure or criticizes any ongoing activities, s/he might be threatened verbally or in some other way which is enough to intimidate him/her as s/he belongs to bottom section of the local power structure and finds it best to keep quiet. Such a person will stay away from meetings, consultations or similar participatory set-ups in the future. Practices of participatory

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<sup>68</sup> Informants explained muting as a process of silencing people (who are generally less powerful or powerless). In this process participants become to realise that their voices are hardly of any use and consultations are just a mere custom. So either participants refrain themselves from talking or the organisers hold the power not to listen even someone manage to speak. This is more like pressing the mute button of a remote for the television.

consultation can actually be repressive and can suppress marginal and alternative voices [Jahangir]. A common feature of meetings is that some people are vocal and dominate the session while others remain silent and say nothing at all [Hossain].

Experience of a NGO activist explained:

“...let me tell you how government led local consultation goes on. The audience is undoubtedly extremely hierarchical, there must be a few locally influential administrative persons, distinguished personalities such as a professor from a university or something like that, local trade union leader, a few from the local elite class or business sector and of course there will be a few poor. Such a meeting starts with the introductory speech from the admin person and then the distinguished person. They do not seem to like to stop even though the meeting is already half over. Then somebody from the trade union and also from business groups must say something in such a ‘vital’ meeting. When they finish, by then it is nearly time, but still poor have not been asked to say anything. Then the chair will ask someone or two from the poor to say something ‘very briefly’. By this time no one really cares what s/he is talking about because the organisers are not in any mood to listen to them. In the meantime they have already heard from the ‘key people’. Now, this is quite understandable what these poor people will say who are not informed about the issue, have no psychological preparation or do not even know what will be discussed in the meeting, and how in this context six divisional meetings should be understood as ‘enough’ for producing a national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper” [Ahamad]?

Farida Akhter [2006] and B. K. Jahangir [2006] argued that there were ambiguities in the conceptual and structural arrangements of participatory consultation meetings for the PRSP. 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 meetings. 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. Participation in the consultation meetings was therefore something like the organisers invited people for views, people participating and the organisers

making the decisions about what to hear and accept [Akhter, Jahangir]. Jahangir [2006] and Shahabuddin [2006] insisted that participation should occur within a structure that would enable someone to take part within local institutions instead of in a hierarchical set-up as was the case in the PRSP where the organisers were in total control of accepting or rejecting anything. They asserted that participation through the institutions would not produce manipulated data from one particular day of few particular hours [Jahangir 2006, Shahabuddin 2006]. Mahfuz Anam, editor of a national daily newspaper argued that if there is no local institutional set-up and tradition of such practice, in an overnight and all of a sudden participation cannot produce views and voices from the bottom<sup>69</sup> [Anam]. The reality however, is that such a genuinely participatory practice has yet to be developed in Bangladesh [Shahabuddin, Jahangir].

Concerns were expressed that participation could not be ensured through such arranged meetings. In consultation meetings not only are there power relations; but participants lack opportunities to speak freely, especially for the poor. 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. Even if someone gets the rarest opportunity to speak s/he feels uncomfortable, hesitant and intimidated and therefore cannot speak freely in an air-conditioned room [Akash]. According to Haider (2005), it was the task of policy makers to understand the psychology of the poor who are shy, embarrassed and hide themselves rather than come forward with their views on poverty and poverty reduction (Haider 2005). The structures of the PRSP consultation meetings were not favourable for the poor to talk and discuss openly [Shahabuddin]. Shihab Uddin Ahamad and Rezaul Karim Choudhury [2006] explained that local level officers were asked to organise local level consultation meetings. These officers were overwhelmed by the directions from the top. They were asked to follow a set of guidelines and were unable to go beyond these. Neither were they interested in going

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<sup>69</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*). Whereas, Mutebi, Stone and Thin argue that 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).



beyond nor had they enough time to do so [Ahamad, Choudhury Rezaul K.]. They had to ensure that people who were attending would echo the voices from the top. Any enthusiastic person with a different idea who came to the meeting certainly did not find the environment friendly and preferred to remain silent. This was what happened in PRSP consultation meetings [Asaduzzaman].

“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 are 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 had to be selective” [Choudhury Rezaul K.].

Critics observed that this was not the case that poor farmers, rickshaw pullers, fishermen, street hawkers could not speak on behalf of themselves [Barkat, Islam F., Jahangir, Arefeen] and therefore consultation meetings were reproducing ‘known views’ and costing a lot to do so. Ahamad [2006] and Akash [2006] insisted that the poor may hesitate or cannot say much in a workshop venue which is air-conditioned or at the district commissioner’s office, but they can speak and explain the causes of their miseries if one goes to their own settings – their homes, yards, workplaces and localities [Ahamad, Akash]. Yunus [2006] observed that the participatory meetings for the preparation of the PRSP were pre-designed with a standard format. If the aim is to talk to the poorest and gather their views and suggestions from their life experiences, there has to be an intention to listen to these poor. Also the organisers must have the capacity to transform those raw voices into a workable policy [Yunus].

“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 the orthodoxy and things will move forward in the format set by the elites at the centre. In an orthodox format the 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 a standard format. Participation in the PRSP was an ‘orthodoxy’ and there was plenty of speculation that it was not genuinely seeking to include ordinary people in this exercise” [Yunus].

#### **4.4 Whose participation counts?**

In this section we will explore whose participation actually matters. Who are the people whose views the organisers collected from participatory meetings? We have discussed how participation can make the poor people voiceless (see 4.3) rather than taking these voices into policy formulation. We have analysed how participation can be used as a means to validate a hierarchical approach (see 4.2.2). In this section we will assess whose participation the PRSP committee considered ‘enough’ in preparation of the PRSP of Bangladesh that would assist us to understand the underlying intention of incorporating participation in a national poverty reduction strategy.

In section 4.1 we discussed the aim of including all possible representatives from the various sections of society. The following quotation, from the Member Secretary of the National Steering Committee further clarifies the type of people who actually took part (or were mainly targeted) in the local level consultations.

“.....in the regional meetings, Union Parishad chairmen and members came in, mostly women members, and they were very vocal. Distinguished local personalities were present in those meetings along with other civil society representatives. NGO personnel, people from the local administration and of course poor men and women were also present in those meetings. A sample list has been attached in the PRSP. It is true that at the regional level, hardly

any MP was in those meetings, one or two MPs have participated in one or two local meetings but we wanted to drag more of them. In many places we found what those people were saying was very much well known, no discussion was needed, but you cannot ask people to shut up, they would discuss. In many places, we found that hardly any people gave any innovative ideas.....” [Ahmed Q. M.]

In 4.3 this has been seen from an NGO activist’s experience; how organisers in such meetings mainly listened to the ‘key people’ and how the settings offered more opportunities for local elites to talk and made the poor intimidated and silent (see 4.3). Nazrul Islam [2006] insisted that when participation follows a standard method then it is likely to be biased from the elitist perspective. They arrange these meetings, hunt for participation and make the policy. The obvious reason is that even when these policymakers want to ensure participation from the poor they cannot do so, because they can only reach to those who they or their local colleagues know. They cannot reach the level where most poor people live [Islam N.]. Yunus [2006] observed that it would be very hard to find any document or guideline in the PRSP that explains how to deal and discuss with the poorest of the poor, what would be the right attitude and language to communicate with them. The mass of people neither had access nor could they understand the language of the people at the top [Yunus]. Moreover, Akash [2006] argued that those who were in charge of preparing such documents did not actually listen to the poor. Instead they were satisfied with the voices from local elites. He asserted that this mechanism offered them a two-fold advantage. Firstly, it enabled them to claim to have incorporated local views which was a prerequisite for the approval of the document. The second was that they could still make policies according to their agenda (or according to their patrons’ agenda) [Akash]. To illustrate, critics observed that in the PRSP there are not many programmes that will change the lives of housemaids, garments workers, poor farmers, street hawkers, landless groups, snake charmers or other poorest groups. If there were any real consultations presumably the landless people would have asked for land reform, a mechanism that would ensure the poor’s right to access government’s free lands, and they possibly would also have wanted these free lands not to be grabbed by local elites. They noted that the people who make such policies are also elite and would not agree to this kind of measure towards poverty reduction because it would not serve

their interest and therefore PRSP could not include such ideas<sup>70</sup> [Barkat, Ahamad, Akash]. They argued that this is how the priorities and substantive points from local participation are ignored and pre-designed programmes find space in the policy document.

“Policy prescriptions burdened with encyclopedic wish-lists are often a problem rather than an aid in the fight against poverty” (GED 2005: 41).

Ethnic groups’ participation was also trumpeted as an example of diversified participation. This research has learned that the consultants for the IPRSP promised to include the views of ethnic groups in the annex at the last minute to avoid any criticism from the donors. Drong [2006] suggested that in the PRSP the chairman of the NSC received written comments from ethnic groups, but when the PRSP was finalised these points were simply not included. No one from the ethnic minority representatives received a final copy of the PRSP; even the chiefs. For a common ethnic person obtaining a PRSP (and getting involved) therefore seemed a very distant possibility [Drong].

At this stage we can look at a few quotations from different standpoints which disclose how the actual views from the bottom were ‘ignored’ in the PRSP. These also reject statements from the people at the top who believed that people at grass-roots level were not capable of offering ‘*innovative* ideas’ on poverty reduction. The following quotation from an NGO activist’s perspective shows what people at the bottom can offer

“...while we went to the rural level for discussion we heard people were saying that they do not want a PRSP and they will not accept a PRSP. They did not find any connection between the poor and the PRSP. They also said none of them even knew what a PRSP was. They feared the PRSP will be a just a written document that will not have any reflection of the desires of the poor people and will never be implemented” [Rahman Arifur 2006].

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<sup>70</sup> Sanchez and Cash argue that poor people’s influence over the PRSP contents appears to be extremely limited. Policies opposed by poor people such as privatisations, user fees for essential services, the removal of subsidies for basic agricultural inputs and the dismantling of government-run cooperatives are common in PRSPs, whilst policies such as land reform which poor people favour are not included (Sanchez and Cash *undated*).

This sort of view suggests rejection of an unknown policy by the rural people, that was not reflected anywhere in the PRSP. On the other hand, the PRSP appears to have been accepted smoothly and unquestioned by poor farmers to top bureaucrats, as if all of them were keen to participate in it. However, the next quotation by a BIDS researcher who was involved in preparing thematic reports reveals that donors had their stake in the process<sup>71</sup>, no matter whether poor people's interests were there or not.

“...donors had a regular ‘progress meeting’ with the thematic groups. I can tell from my group’s experience that donors tried to push their agenda to be included in the reports. The truth is they were not really bothered about other issues apart from the particular agendas by particular donors [Mahmud]”.

The exclusion of poor people's stake is confirmed by the following quotation that raises the question as to who actually took part in determining priorities and agendas in national poverty reduction. Whose participation did really matter?

“...I invited the lead consultant of the PRSP to a couple of my television programmes and asked him who they talked to in preparation of the agriculture issue in the PRSP. Fact is, in Bangladesh, eighty percent of the total population live in the villages and the largest number of their occupations is agriculture. He (lead consultant for the PRSP) acknowledged that the farmers in that sense were not consulted which probably was a mistake” [Seraj].

This confirms that the organisers went to people and levels/sections of the society that appeared to be sufficient to get approval of the PRSP, to secure the debt and other aid from donors. Critics argued that in the name of civil society, people who were already in the development circuit (such as NGOs and donors) had been consulted to some extent together with a section of the civil society (for example some selected academics and known persons in development) where the actual poor did not get any

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<sup>71</sup> An Oxfam (2004) report notes that the point here is not only about validity of particular policies but also the overwhelming influence of the donor agenda and its damaging effect on participatory discussions (Oxfam 2004).

chance to participate in these consultations. [Islam F., Akhter, Akash, Muhammad, Ahamad, Islam N.].

#### 4.5 Who's who?

This research found that the government, the committee members and consultants strongly denied donor involvement in the preparation of Bangladesh's PRSP. Some acknowledged that the process had started in order to get loans and debts but that was the bottom line. Donors did not dictate the process. Funding was provided by the government of Bangladesh, and the PRSP was prepared by local consultants (see 4.1.1). Therefore, their argument was that the PRSP of Bangladesh should be considered as a home grown document, prepared without external involvement and expertise [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M., Siddiqui Kaniz, Rahman H. Z., Choudhury A. M., Choudhury Rasheda K.]. On the other hand, our research also found that there were critics who claimed that the PRSP had been prepared to fulfil donor conditions for getting aid and loans [Rahman Atiur, Haque, Seraj, Akhter, Drong]. Such a document therefore could not be home grown while the framework had been delivered by the World Bank and IMF without any question or debate [Muhammad, Akash, Ahmed M.]. There was even no option for denial; if the government wanted to maintain debts and aid. They insisted that a so called participation in the PRSP occurred because both the donors and the government wanted to legitimise the process and were keen to safeguard against being responsible for potential failure [Majumder, Shahabuddin, Asaduzzaman, Islam N., Muhammad, Ahmed M., Ahmad]. In this section we will cross-examine who pulled whose strings during the whole process, and at the end whose purpose was being served.

Donors' concerns were obvious as they funded various development sectors and that is why they interacted with the government<sup>72</sup>. They (the donors) were more advanced

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<sup>72</sup> Donors' role has been clearly outlined in the PRSP document that suggests "development partners evinced keen interest in the process of PRSP preparation. Their valuable experiences about PRSP preparation in other countries were thought to be extremely useful to the NPPF in discharging its main task. In this regard, two formal meetings were held between the Government and the Local Consultative Groups (LCGs). In these meetings, members of the LCG were briefed about the process of PRSP preparation. The members of the LCG exchanged views with the NPPF and its National Steering Committee (NSC). Many LCG members proffered useful suggestions to enrich the process of PRSP preparation. The NPPF also exchanged views in meetings organised by different LCG sub-groups. In addition, informal discussions took place off and on between the NPPF and different development partners regarding the process of PRSP preparation" (GED 2005: 30).

(in chasing the deadline to prepare a PRSP) than the PRSP committee [Ahmed Q. M., Hossain], and it was admitted that donors gave their written comments to the committee. The people who prepared the PRSP said that the PRSP was not influenced or dictated by donors because the committee assessed the merits of their comments instead of entirely conforming to these before incorporating anything into the PRSP. At the same time, consultation with NGOs, eminent persons and the poor took place [Ahmed Q. M.]. They admitted that the process was started by the pressure from donors but between the IPRSP and PRSP they said the government took it over. In many cases the donors were '*extremely unhappy*' and the government (and the PRSP committee) felt '*very uncomfortable*' but somehow the government managed to put its own priorities into the PRSP [Rahman H. Z., Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Siddiqui Kaniz]. The following quotation is from the Member Secretary of the PRSP committee,

“...the donors had a number of queries at various stages of the PRSP. When we were busy drawing up the outline and the outline was yet to be prepared they [donors] wanted to see the whole outline. They were always a little unimpressed, when the outline was ready; they wanted to know what we were going to do about participatory discussion at the local level. When we started our regional consultations, they then wanted to know what outputs we were getting. When we showed some of the outputs they were anxious to know how these should be incorporated in the PRSP. When the draft of the PRSP was not ready they were concerned about what would be the contents of the PRSP. When the draft was ready they were concerned about how we would disseminate the draft and collect views from other stakeholders” [Ahmed Q. M.].

However, critics of the PRSP process have raised the point that to make a policy truly participatory, first of all it has to be decided whether it should be prepared for the government or for the donors. Then it has to be understood why such a document is needed in the national interest. If these two issues are sorted then the next stages can be planned [Kabir]. Atiur Rahman, a leading economist and professor of development studies and Barkat [2006] argued that the donors possibly were not in the front stage but that they were in full control behind the scene. 'Participation' was required in the PRSP because it was a donor condition. Most of the development policies in

Bangladesh were being made for the donors and the PRSP was no exception [Rahman Atiur, Barkat]. For Mozaffar Ahmed [2006], chairman of Transparency International, Bangladesh, obviously the donors had their stake in the development circuit. If they failed to promote their anticipated loans some of their personnel and consultants might lose their job and the country office might be closed. He further insisted that therefore, the donors needed a new disguise and different cover-up through soft and catchy terms such as *ownership, home-grown, participatory*. People at the ‘top’ claimed greater knowledge than those people at the ‘bottom’, and what they definitely know things that donors want them to know, and what the donors are seeking [Ahmed M.].

“...it needs careful attention, did the World Bank not know the IPRSP was prepared in a non-participatory way? Of course, they knew and this raised the question as to what they wanted as a participatory poverty reduction strategy? Whether they really wanted something to be participatory or they wanted to transfer the responsibility in case it fail to reduce poverty to ‘ourselves’ as it was prepared by ‘us’ and owned by ‘us’. The World Bank was quite happy with the nature of the participatory process of the IPRSP, which was led by two local consultants who were ideologically like-minded to the World Bank and possibly had patronage from the World Bank too. They were chosen and preferred, if they were not, they were not supposed to get jobs in the World Bank head office in the US afterwards. When this is the case, it can never be expected that they would prepare something that would not serve the interest of the World Bank” [Ahamad].

There was also a claim that Members of Parliament (in formal and informal ways), NGOs, various ethnic groups and civil society representatives were involved in the preparation of the PRSP. In addition to this it was claimed that the PRSP was prepared without any financial or expert support from donors (See 4.1 and 4.2). Nevertheless, MPs were included via a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) project [Ahmed Q. M., Rahman H. Z., Hossain] (GED 2005). Critics found that this was more like a camouflage otherwise the approval of the PRSP by the boards of the World Bank and IMF was most unlikely. The government included the ethnic groups very marginally because of the increasing pressures from donors and



critics in the press [Drong]. Asaduzzaman [2006] and Haque [2006] argue that NGO participation was there because NGOs are one of the key players in the development industry and it was not possible to by-pass the NGOs as they were already very much in the business as one of the major stake-holders in poverty reduction [Asaduzzaman, Haque]. However, also it was observed by critics that only a few NGOs took part in the PRSP preparation. Farzana Islam [2006] insists that perhaps those NGOs were working in the same areas or they had somehow managed to obtain funds to become involved in the PRSP [Islam F.]. Nevertheless, Asaduzzaman [2006] notes that NGOs indirectly represent donors as they get their funds from donors. Different NGOs work for particular groups, not for the entire population. The PRSP was prepared with consultation of groups of people who were organised by different NGOs and had specific agendas for their own survival [Asaduzzaman]. The following statement clears up whose stake had been mostly served in preparing the PRSP

“...the donors had steered the whole process from the beginning to the end. From the idea [from its original point], the necessity of preparing a document like this surely came from the donors. So it does not matter at all whether the PRSP committee discussed with the donors or not, whether the donors were in the thematic groups or not, whether the government had taken money from donors to prepare the PRSP or not. It was a donors recipe, donors felt the necessity that there had to be a PRSP for Bangladesh, not by Bangladeshi people. Donors led the process in direct and indirect ways” [Ahmad].

Our survey had also indicated that it was widely believed that the preparatory process in Bangladesh was dominated by the World Bank, IMF and other donors. Although some 40% of the respondents did not answer the question, the survey had found that 20.60% and 23.97% agreed and strongly agreed with that view. On the other hand, only 3% and 0.37% disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement.

Table – 14: Preparation of the PRSP of Bangladesh was highly dominated by the World Bank, IMF and other organisations?

<b>Response</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Strongly Agree	64	23.97
Agree	55	20.6
Neutral	32	11.99
Disagree	8	3
Strongly Disagree	1	0.37
Did not answer	107	40.07

N=267

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

The above evidence suggests that the claim of participation in the PRSP of Bangladesh was strongly discarded by critics. Although a few informants, and some evidence from newspaper and online survey data, agreed that the PRSP has opened spaces for greater participation this research data also demonstrate that this perceived opening up was more of a pretence and a disingenuous effort. ‘Participation’ has rather been adopted on an ‘ad-hoc’ basis to ‘cover up’ and validate an external framework. The following chapter looks at the role of civil society in the whole practice and asks whether a particular interest group has been formed to serve and establish this external approach.

**Chapter – 5: Is a comprador class being created?**

## **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter we will explore the idea of ownership of Bangladesh's PRSP. It is very important to understand why the government of Bangladesh was very keen on alleging ownership of its PRSP. The first part of this chapter deals with the idea of ownership and the later part discusses whether the Bangladesh government truly owns the PRSP. This chapter reveals that from the onset of the PRSP framework either the government of Bangladesh or its people did not feel the need to produce such a strategy. Instead the government was coerced to make a PRSP to continue with and for further access in lending relationships with the donors, especially with the World Bank and IMF. This research will argue that ownership of the PRSP therefore clearly belongs to the World Bank and IMF, and by conforming to the PRSP approach Bangladesh had implemented their agendas. The claim of ownership is a kind of a mask, as this was a condition for accessing loans and other funds. This chapter also discusses about the idea of the development of a comprador interest group that helps in claiming 'ownership' through a local form of 'participation'.

### **5.1.1 Ownership or rubber-stamping?**

*Ownership* of the PRSP of Bangladesh is contested. On the one hand, some claim that the PRSP of Bangladesh is solely owned by the Government of Bangladesh as it has been prepared by local consultants with financial support from local resources (see 4.1). On the other hand, this claim has been contested given the origin of the PRSP framework. Obviously the idea of preparing a PRSP in Bangladesh was not originated by the Government of Bangladesh. Critics observed that Bangladesh did not prepare the PRSP of its own accord for fulfilling its political commitment or development concerns. Rather the government accepted and adopted the approach from external organisations to meet the criteria for continuing debts and loans (Ali 2005, Observer 2005, Quader 2005, Hossain 2005 b, Murshed 2005, Independent 2005 a). The IMF supplied a guideline of around a thousand pages for preparing a PRSP as a pre-condition for the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) loan (Haque 2005 a, Observer 2005). Therefore, the PRSP was an initiative launched by donor agencies for poverty reduction, and was committed to drive development assistance within the donors' own framework (Haque 2005 a). Donors wanted a coherent strategy for their assisted programmes and therefore suggested that governments in poor countries should make a central strategic document for poverty reduction. The views our

research gleaned from critics of the PRSP process suggested that the PRSP was nothing but one further document prepared for the donors to get money from them [Akash, Yunus]. Kabir [2006] and Hossain [2006] insisted that in Bangladesh, previously, development and poverty reduction programmes were based on national Five Year Plans where *poverty reduction* was the top agenda item [Kabir, Hossain]. This clears up one issue; attempts to focus on poverty reduction were not new for Bangladesh (Rahman 2005 b). Hossain [2006] and Bhattacharya [2006] argued that the history of economic thought in the country shows that it has always lived with poverty. The objective of poverty reduction and/or alleviation and addressing the issues of poor people have always been at the forefront, all through its political economy and development thinking, particularly in the Five Year Plans and other related development programmes [Hossain, Bhattacharya]. Nevertheless, the question arises as to whether the idea of Five Year Plans was Bangladesh's own. Abdul Mueyed Choudhury, executive director of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) asserted that historically, from the very beginning when Bangladesh was formed as a nation state, it was highly dependent on donors and foreign assistance due to its war ravaged vulnerable economy. The Five Year Plans were the reference point for both the state and donors to operate lending and assistance programmes. It was well known that donors required such a document as a central point, based on what various lending and non-lending operations could take place; and that is how the Five Year Plans started [Choudhury A. M.]. The question is raised again; why was it necessary to prepare a new poverty reduction strategy and halt the progress of Five Year Plans? Critics claim that again this was demanded by donors. They wanted the country to shift from old practices to prepare a new plan and the government had to do so; and this was the rationale for the PRSP approach [Kabir]. There was nothing absolutely new in this approach [Ahmed M.] and no fundamental difference could be found between the Five Year Plans and the PRSP. It seems like the same old thing in a new cover, a new logo as provided by the donors [Islam N.].

Asaduzzaman [2006] and A. M. Choudhury [2006] emphasised that the idea of making a PRSP emanated from the World Bank and IMF. They argued that the blueprint for the PRSP was first thought out and designed by the boards of the World Bank and IMF prescribed for the poor countries at their annual general meeting in

1999. Therefore, the birth of the idea deserves very special attention [Asaduzzaman, Choudhury A. M.]. Anu Muhammad, a professor of economics, noted that the PRSP had not come from the policymakers of the government of Bangladesh. It was not even a brainchild of the donors in general. It was masterminded by those two organisations who dominate the world economy, the World Bank and the IMF [Muhammad]. For Barkat [2006] poverty reduction was apparently at the centre of this approach, but it was not the poor (or the poor countries) who had set the target of reducing extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. He asked why the United Nations had to set the Millennium Development Goals that includes poverty should be halved in twenty five years (1990 – 2015) when poor countries had been suffering from poverty for a long time. How would this initiative solve such a mammoth problem so quickly? Also, why did there have to be a central poverty reduction document to outline this target without which the World Bank and IMF (as well as other donors) would not disburse their loans and other assistance? He also insists that if such a document could be as powerful as magic each poor country should have prepared one similar document many years before [Barkat 2006]. This debate therefore, leads us to ask who actually owns the PRSP despite the firm claim from the government of Bangladesh.

A country-wide campaign report by SUPRO in 2004 documented people's perception of Bangladesh's economic future focusing on poverty reduction in the country. SUPRO convened seminars in 42 districts in the country and included views from various sectors of society in their report. The SUPRO report (2004) states that the ownership of a national policy is to be owned nationally then it should ensure participation from all relevant tiers of the society (SUPRO 2004). SUPRO published their report before regional consultations by the government took place and asked the government not to convene these consultations for a show or just to follow a standard procedure. Instead, SUPRO urged the government to utilise the opportunity of those consultations to make a poverty reduction policy that would be a matter of national pride. Ahamad [2006] argued that ownership is not conforming to someone else's idea and taking initiatives to implement that. Farzana Islam [2006] insisted that a central document and strategy on poverty reduction is suitable in a country context only if the need for such a document is felt locally; by local researchers, academics, development activists and policymakers. Clearly, the PRSP of Bangladesh had not

been prepared from such feeling. Instead it was pushed on the government by external actors [Islam F.].

### **5.1.2 The PRSP of Bangladesh**

The PRSP of Bangladesh has been claimed as locally owned [Ahmed Q. M.] and home-grown [Choudhury A. M.]. It has also been asserted that the main drafting team was independent and there were no 'dictations' from any part of the government or even the ministries involved in formulating the PRSP of Bangladesh [Ahmed Q. M., Siddiqui; Kamaluddin]. Kaniz Siddiqui [2006] argued that the main drafting team comprised local experts and enjoyed the freedom of finding out problems as well as solutions for the poverty reduction strategy. Therefore she asserted that statement like 'contents of the PRSP are donor driven' would be incorrect [Siddiqui Kaniz]. People who believed the PRSP was locally owned did acknowledge donors' pressure to shift to prepare a PRSP rather than a Five Year Plan. They admitted that it was impossible to decline to prepare a PRSP as this was a technicality/condition for maintaining lending and non-lending operations with donors. But they emphasised that the distinctive transformation took place between the IPRSP and PRSP. They noted that the IPRSP was drafted by a particular section of the Ministry of Finance and it stayed close to the donors' agendas [Rahman H. Z., Ahmed Q. M.]. However, the Government accepted that a final PRSP had to be written and thereafter Bangladesh was in the driving seat and prepared the PRSP with local experts and researchers without any influence from the donors or government bureaucrats [Ahmed Q. M., Siddiqui Kaniz, Rahman H. Z.].

The basic question about the ownership of PRSP framework therefore hinges on the acknowledgement by these people that it was prepared as a *technicality* or *condition* of continuing loans and aid. When a framework is already designed outside and had to be accepted for any explicit or implicit reasons it cannot be described as owned locally. This can be seen from a statement by a BIDS researcher, when he insisted categorically that the then Finance Minister, in a meeting with BIDS researchers said that he (the Finance Minister) did not believe in the PRSP. He went on that the Finance Minister said a PRSP was needed only to get the loans [Anonymous 2006]. This view coheres with other critics where they stressed that it was unambiguous the PRSP was prepared to access the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) loan

[Rahman H. Z., Asaduzzaman, Shahabuddin, Muhammad, Majumdar, Ahmed M.]. An important observation was that in recent years dependence on donor aid had declined to a significant level. There was time when the economy of Bangladesh was severely dependent on donor funds but recently this dependence had decreased. Given this context, critics argued that it was expected that the government would have been in a stronger position to bargain with donors to discuss and debate the necessity of preparing a PRSP; nevertheless, they agreed to conform with the World Bank and IMF prescription [Shahabuddin, Choudhury A. M., Bhattacharya, Afsar]. It was understandable that poverty reduction was an ongoing top priority in the development programmes of Bangladesh and poverty reduction programmes could have been taken forward within the existing approach. Critics observed that perhaps there would have been problems and obstacles in getting loans and other assistance through the Five Year Plans and this possibly was the ultimate reason to produce a PRSP [Begum, Mahmud].

However, critics also questioned the ownership of a PRSP document from its philosophical or theoretical origins. They described the PRSP approach as a sugar-coated framework of the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which had actually increased poverty in other poor countries. Therefore, they argued that the World Bank and IMF were unlikely to achieve credibility in all the poor countries with a replica of this approach [Ahmed M., Majumder, Muhammad, Ahmad]. Hence, the Bank and Fund came up with a framework that comprised all the components of their agendas but covered those with the notion of *ownership* by the national governments [Muhammad, Ahmed M.]. Anu Muhammad [2006] observed that the implicit objective of such chicanery was to avoid any responsibility for malfunction as had occurred in the previous Structural Adjustment Programme. He suggested that this was very deceptive because poor countries had to prepare a PRSP to get loans. Also it had to be approved by the World Bank and IMF but officially it had to be *owned* by the governments regardless of whether or not they at all felt the need for such a strategy [Muhammad]. The claim of ownership of the PRSP was therefore just a technical condition for getting loans. Q. K. Ahmad [2006] insisted that the PRSP had to be prepared in such a manner that at the least the government could claim ownership and the government's loud voice in claiming the ownership was very visible in Bangladesh's PRSP. For him it was no surprise as the terms and conditions



were pre-designed, the government had to claim ownership, as per the rules, knowing that they actually did not own the process. They had to declare that *it had been prepared by local researchers and was financed by the government of Bangladesh* [Ahmad].

Our research also uncovered an in-built contradiction in the PRSP process. It was claimed that when the government agreed to make a PRSP many donors came forward to fund its preparation. But the government took a firm position not to take any grants but to do this from its own resources with local consultants (see 4.1.1) which gave the government a justification for claiming ownership. Shahabuddin [2006] observes that if the government had taken funds for its preparation the deadlines would have been tighter and inside the document many programmes and agendas would have been different [Shahabuddin]. Nevertheless, the contradiction was that the PRSP had been prepared to access loans from the donors and it was a donors' condition that the PRSP had to be *owned* by the national government. Therefore, it was argued that preparing the PRSP from local resources was not sufficient to claim that the document was truly owned by the government. The inclusion of various ministries as evidence that the PRSP was home-grown was an endeavour to gain local approval [Akhter, Ahamad, Shahabuddin]. Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] insisted that due to the hierarchical nature of the bureaucracy and politicised administration the people at various ministries were likely to express the same views that the government had adopted. Therefore, the mechanism was not favourable for multiple and alternative views to be heard and this has occurred from the very beginning and throughout the process. The PRSP was needed to get approval from the World Bank and IMF and inclusion of the line ministries was required to get approval from the local bureaucracy. As the boards of the World Bank and IMF had the *right* to reject any PRSP, this indicated that the government would prepared a document in a particular way in order to ensure its endorsement and approval [Ahmed M.]. In this highly imbalanced situation nothing could be owned by the government. Atiur Rahman [2006] and Yunus [2006] stressed that the PRSP of Bangladesh was not placed before the parliament and therefore did not have any in-house debate and approval by the parliament yet it was approved by the boards of the World Bank and IMF. They argued that if Bangladesh genuinely owned the PRSP it would have been approved in Bangladesh's Parliament and would not have required approval by the

Bank and Fund's boards. The PRSP offered the Bank and Fund a precise coordinating framework for aid and loans, and they made the government of Bangladesh put its stamp beneath the *preface* and *foreword* accepting a pseudo form of ownership [Rahman Atiur, Yunus]. Once the signature had been put on the document no one seemed to care about ownership. Instead they were more keen to see the document put into effect [Rahman Atiur]. It was obvious to the critics that the government of Bangladesh did not prepare the PRSP willingly or enthusiastically. They were obliged to make such a document. The claim of ownership was a form of rubber-stamping.

“Ownership (in the PRSP) was like someone had drafted or issued a letter and someone else had to put his/her signature below that. If this equals ownership then the PRSP of Bangladesh was owned by the government” [Yunus].

Atiur Rahman [2006] and Asaduzzaman [2006] explained that the whole process was accomplished in two ways. In the first part, the government had to claim ownership for approval. On the other hand, the Bank and Fund needed the attestation and they made the government put their stamp on the PRSP. They questioned why if the government of Bangladesh had owned this document there was a deadline and rush to prepare a PRSP within a set time limit [Rahman Atiur, Asaduzzaman]? The following quote gives another insight into the nature of ownership of the PRSP by the government of Bangladesh

“....DANIDA's focus is to promote aqua-culture in Bangladesh. It (DANIDA) funds to develop the action plan of the fisheries sector of the PRSP. Looking at the PRSP, I can clearly see it has embraced the vision of DANIDA which is to promote aqua-culture without considering how suitable this is in Bangladesh's context. In doing so, the PRSP has left behind the demand for access by poor people in open water areas. The ministry that deals with fisheries has accepted such pathway because they can feel that a massive amount of aid from DANIDA is in the pipeline. If they did not accept the approach this would not be accessed and the fund would go away. From this example, it can be perceived how truly the government really own the PRSP” [Anonymous].

## 5.2 Who's Who?

In this section we will explain who led whom, and who was coerced to accept and formulate a PRSP in Bangladesh. As we have discussed earlier, although the widespread claim of ownership by the government of Bangladesh was visible, critics found this to be phoney. In this section we go further by asking for whom the PRSP was prepared and whose missions were accomplished in this exercise.

### 5.2.1 The PRSP of Bangladesh – for whom?

*[You] may think the PRSP was a very big issue and created a massive wave across the society. But the ground reality is that very few people were informed and concerned about it. If you ask a general citizen, a poor farmer, a pedestrian most likely they would tell about their ignorance on the issue – explained the general secretary of the Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA). Although poverty reduction was always at the top of the development agendas for Bangladesh it requires careful consideration as to why the necessity of preparing a PRSP was realised only recently [Seraj]. We have explained that the government of Bangladesh had to move from the national Five Year Plans to the PRSP approach to access loans and other assistance from the donors, especially the World Bank and IMF (see 5.1.1). Architects of the PRSP approach rationalised it as more participatory and pro-poor (or pro-people) whereas they criticised the Five Year Plans as prepared without any consultation apart from with the bureaucrats [Ahmed Q. M., Rahman H. Z.]. However, although the PRSP claimed to be more participatory and pro-poor it could not address the criticisms. Bhattacharya [2006] and Yunus (2005) argued that the PRSP was supposed to be owned by the people and the government but it was not people oriented. It was a bridge to access loans and therefore it was very much of a document between the government and the donors [Bhattacharya], (Yunus 2005). To be more specific, Kabir [2006] insisted that other donors were mainly interested in MDGs, but, it was mainly the World Bank and IMF who were keen on the PRSP [Kabir]. Therefore, the PRSP gave the government and donors a framework for borrowing and lending relationships, and at the same time for monitoring and coordinating development programmes by the donors. The Chairman of the National Steering Committee described this as an effort to enable few other issues. He explained that the donors had achieved a firmer grip on loans and aid relations, but simultaneously the PRSP had offered spaces for constructive criticism that potentially*

will move things forward. Perhaps the PRSP was unbalanced but still it had offered issues to work on [Siddiqui Kamaluddin]. This statement sounds optimistic and forward thinking but what it does not unveil is that it would trap country's development on donors' terms. Shahabuddin [2006] argued that the best that could be done for the future would be only little modifications and changes within the framework; not big changes or alternative local ideas. However, it was expected that the PRSP would increase accountability about the uses of aid. But in this case one party remained unquestioned and unaccountable – the donors more specifically the World Bank and IMF. He emphasised that not only the accountability of the government needed to be increased, but also that the donors need to be accountable and responsible for their approaches and agendas [Shahabuddin].

A couple of other issues clarify how the PRSP of Bangladesh was made for the donors, neither for the poor people, nor to build up a home-grown development plan which would be owned by the government. Firstly, the language, the terminologies used, are highly specialised and with a massive number of technical phrases which are obviously beyond the understanding of most people [Anam, Haque]. The language of the PRSP is English. Nazrul Islam [2006] and Farida Akhter [2006] argued that as an international means of communication, English is not a problem but what is highly problematic, is that there was no translation of this document into the local language, Bengali. As a nation with low literacy it is very unlikely that people will understand a document in a foreign language [Akhter, Islam N.]. It was explicit that the drafting team, with the help of local consultants and researchers, were capable of representing poverty issues and preparing a document in English. But Nazrul Islam [2006] insisted that this obstructed further inclusion of people from wider sections of the society in either the post-draft or post finalised versions. He argued that English as the only language for the PRSP suggests a targeted readership. At best the elites and highly educated people would be able to understand this jargon-enriched document; not the common people of the country. The title of the PRSP also reflects an elitist poetic mentality which is distant from what ordinary people understand [Islam N.]. Other critics noted that the PRSP seems to be written in an alien language. It claims to talk about and for the poor people but the poor do not have the capacity to understand the language of the document. Even many educated people would find it extremely difficult to understand the PRSP [Haque, Ahamad, Shahabuddin]. Clearly the

document was prepared for the donors and economists, not for the people who could have provided deeper insights if it was explained in simple language [Haque, Islam N.]. Critics argued that a document to be owned by and pro-poor should have been understandable by them. Formulating a document in a cryptic manner limited the space for inclusion and excluded the general people.

The second point concerns its philosophical and absolutist framework. According to Farida Akhter [2006], an activist on gender issues, suggested that the PRSP had been defined as an absolute reference point for the country's development agenda. The government, donors, NGOs and many members of the civil society created an environment where any discussion about development and poverty must be connected with the PRSP. The PRSP seems to be the Bible of development in Bangladesh [Akhter]. Akash [2006] argued that claims about participation and faster targets for poverty reduction have been amplified through the document but arguably it has failed to understand poverty. To illustrate, the PRSP failed to define poverty in the Bangladesh context. He observed that the PRSP did not consider the various dimensions and faces of poverty that exist in society. Instead the PRSP operationalised a definition that was sufficient for the purposes of international development investment and lending programmes [Akash]. The PRSP took for granted that poverty would never be eradicated because it targeted only to reduce poverty by half. Poverty itself has become an industry in Bangladesh [Barkat, Ahmed M., Akhter]. The PRSP seems to move on with the business as a part of the industry (see chapter – 1). The donors, NGOs and experts wanted this to be so. Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] and Farida Akhter [2006] argued that if there was no poverty within society there would be no need for international lending organisations and NGOs that work on poverty, or consultants or researchers who are experts on it. The way the PRSP was prepared would retain poverty in society and achieve only a modest statistical reduction but leave enough for the industry to remain in business [Ahmed M., Akhter].

### **5.2.2 The PRSP of Bangladesh – congruent to its Masters' will**

This section supports the above discussion that the PRSP was not prepared as a document for the government and people; instead it was prepared for the government and the donors (see 5.1.2). This section will furthermore demonstrate that the PRSP

was prepared in accordance with the donors' blueprint rather than based on local needs. The people who prepared the PRSP acknowledged that it was initiated to access loans and afterwards the process attempted to include local desires (see 4.1). Critics argued that not only was the introduction of the PRSP (because of donors' demands) but also that local researchers and consultants could not go beyond the framework that was provided (see 5.1.2). Bangladesh was not among the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) and therefore it was not obliged to prepare a PRSP. But, Bangladesh felt a compulsion to prepare a PRSP, admitted the Member Secretary of the National Steering Committee for the PRSP. He explained that the International Development Association (IDA) of the World Bank was one of the largest donors to Bangladesh and preparing a PRSP was a condition for accessing its loans and grants<sup>73</sup> [Ahmed Q. M.]. There were two options at that point, either preparing a PRSP or overlooking the IDA grants. The government decided it was better to prepare a PRSP and to access the grants. He further asserted that Bangladesh had a strong track record in poverty research as well as in poverty reduction programmes. Therefore, the PRSP was prepared to get the funding initially, but at the same time it was felt that it had to be prepared in Bangladesh's own way, *unguided* and *unpersuaded* by any external actors. Perhaps, Bangladesh could have made another Five Year Plan but instead the government decided to build a PRSP as this was necessary to access loans [Ahmed Q. M.]. Phrases like *unguided* and *unpersuaded* seem to conceal agreed terms and condition. As when a government takes donor money in most cases there can be no rejection of their framework [Choudhury A. M.], (Ittefaq 2005, Daily Star 2005 c, Daily Star 2005d, Daily Star 2005 e). A. M. Choudhury [2006] argued that in Bangladesh there are many projects and programmes that could not possibly be carried out without donor assistance, but this does not mean that donors do not have their own interests in those programmes. The same is true for loans and grants. These are mainly based on lending agencies' interests and they will always try to make the most from their investments [Choudhury A. M.]. Clearly the World Bank and other

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<sup>73</sup> An ActionAid report (2004) explains that poor countries hoping to get debt-cancellation through the HIPC programme were required to produce a strategy paper describing how the saved revenue would be directed towards poverty-reduction goals. Later the requirement of producing PRSPs to all of the lower-income countries which borrow from the World Bank's low-interest loans, known as the International Development Association (IDA) countries. This report suggests that since 1999, the IMF and the World Bank began making future credits available to the low-income IDA countries only after they drafted national PRSPs and submitted them for endorsement by the boards of the two major IFIs (ActionAid 2004).

lenders to Bangladesh invest to earn profit, and they are eager to push loans and grants to poor countries otherwise their business will not continue. At the same time, if these loans are attached with conditionalities that can secure further loans (means more business) then why not? Asaduzzaman [2006] and A. M. Choudhury [2006] insisted that this happened with the PRSP. The government was in a weaker position in its lending relationships and that is why it had to accept such an external framework [Asaduzzaman, Choudhury A. M.]. However, in contrast to this lending relationship and investment in poverty, Barkat [2006] recommended an investigation as to why some people in the country were so rich and others were so poor. This proposal was made to indicate that the business of investment is not comprised only of the government and lending agencies but there are also some people in between. We need to understand how these people have become so rich, and this will possibly bring up the reason why the majority of the people are still poor [Barkat]. This view was particularly important in the understanding the sustained nature of poverty in society and role of a local group in the middle (see 5.4).

According to Atiur Rahman [2006], donors had their reasons to push such a framework as it was problematic for them to provide assistance to various projects focused on different agendas and targets. Therefore, they wanted to bring all programmes under one main frame that would enable them to coordinate aid management in a convenient and precise way [Rahman Atiur]. The PRSP therefore was a central document that was more essential for the donors than the government of Bangladesh (Prothom-Alo 2005). It seemed that the donors were receiving massive attention (in the development process) because the elites, the bureaucrats, were the major recipients of donor money. However, H. Z. Rahman [2006] and Atiur Rahman [2006] argued that civil society was also highly dependent on donors and helped to entice the government in their decision to formulate a PRSP [Rahman H. Z., Rahman Atiur]. The infatuation of the government is understandable but it requires special attention when civil society and bureaucrats also largely rely on foreign aid and donor money. A. M. Choudhury [2006] insisted that this source of finance often leads the recipients to think and act like the givers. Perhaps, he suggested, there are some opportunities to make quick money in this process [Choudhury A. M.]. When development activities are mainly driven by the external agendas because they largely run on donor money, an appropriate institutional mechanism does not exist for

thinking about and building up a country's own policies for poverty reduction. Atiur Rahman [2006] and Asaduzzaman [2006] suggested that the ministries and the bureaucrats did not think in this way as they also want their *share* from this process and appoint consultants from civil society or from other external sources who are often paid by donors [Rahman Atiur, Asaduzzaman]. Hence, to obtain and continue their job, consultants have to follow the directions of the bureaucrats, when the bureaucrats have to follow the guidelines of funding sources. Muhammad [2006] and Mahmud [2006] argued that in many cases the consultants think like the funding organisations because of their inter-relations and attachments with the same funding agencies in other development programmes. They have a similar mind-set to the donors. Their work could help in empowering others in the society but to remain in the development circle they only empower themselves [Muhammad, Mahmud]. A similar observation of 'self-help' was expressed by the chairman of the NSC for the PRSP. He pointed out that the process of poverty reduction should have been a process of empowering the poor. Understandably the powerful would not give up their positions that enabled them to continue their exploitation. They would try their best to keep hold of their positions and would enjoy the benefits. The situation would have been different if there had been a strong presence of alternative forces and platforms organising the poor and motivating them to work for their rights. Unfortunately, these were not there. Even in labour organisations there were not many labourers to speak on behalf of others. In trade unions almost all leaders were political beneficiaries. Even among leftist thinkers and politicians the majority were *sold out* to external actors. They were only found in name and could be seen as active on behalf of their own patrons [Siddiqui Kamaluddin]. These entire dependencies and interconnections led things towards one ultimate direction, namely development plans had to be in accordance with the donors' outline.

Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] asserted that such inter-dependence in bureaucracy impeded people-oriented development as it lacked the vested interests of the poor, and donors connived about this regardless of their slogans about poverty reduction, good governance and empowerment of poor as long as their own purposes were fulfilled [Ahmed M.]. The donors produced and reproduced this dependence by funding their own priorities, issues and group of organisations/people. These groups also needed such patronage and therefore conformed to donor agendas to remain in the 'power



coterie' as an influential group in the development sector. Similar patronage and fidelity can be found in research and policy making. Ahamad [2006] observed that most often consultants and researchers made similar observations to what the donors expected to be found. Appropriate policies were made according to what donors felt necessary. All this ensured further funds, consultancies and possibly even better jobs after the projects are finished [Ahamad]. In doing all this, they tried to incorporate a flavour of participation, but only to a limited extent.

“[our] consultants are scared of taking any people-oriented policy which might cost them losing the trust of the donors. This means that they are afraid of themselves, scared of if they are outside the power coterie. In such a case, they might be ignored and outcast from the development business. So they try to make their patrons happy and also try to gain some credibility for themselves. They include a sort of participation as a safeguard to protect themselves from any prospective difficulties and sell it to claim ownership as professed by their patrons” [Jahangir].

The bureaucrats and the political leaders also tend to do the same thing for similar reasons. A. M. Choudhury [2006] and Asaduzzaman [2006] noted that given the Bangladesh context, the government had to have the donors 'blessing'. Without a green signal from the government, neither the bureaucrats nor the consultants could keep supporting donors' agendas. Therefore, the fundamental hindrance lay in the clientele attitude of the government [Choudhury A. M., Asaduzzaman]. Asaduzzaman [2006] and Bhattacharya [2006] argued that there were voices against the PRSP or at least many components of the PRSP which were disregarded. Even change in the political regime would not take the critical views into account. They would accept the framework and put their rubber-stamp on it. Perhaps the cover, the preface, the foreword and introductory statement would be modified here and there but not the rest of the document. The targets and agendas were likely to be the same as the source of financing would remain same. Any opportunity for rectifying and amending would not be taken because they are just the same establishment acting as a managerial body for the donors [Asaduzzaman, Bhattacharya]. M. M. Akash [2006] and Muhammad [2006] feared that as a consequence more and more multinational companies would get the access in the market and exploit local resources in the name of foreign direct

investment and privatisation. As Banerjee and Rondinelli (2003) argue that along with programmes promoting private enterprise development, IFIs see privatisation as an important instrument, to help developing countries to 'accelerate' their economic growth (Banerjee and Rondinelli 2003) and poverty reduction. Anu Muhammad suggested -

“...The World Bank acts as a managerial body of the monopolistic global capital economy which is mainly dominated by the multinational companies. To gain access to the market they need to make some reforms and administrative transparencies. It is obvious that PRSP has offered them such entitlement to access, to invest and exploit poor countries because the principle of this capital theory is highly imbalanced and always goes against the weak (less powerful like the poor people of Bangladesh) ” [Muhammad].

Q. K. Ahmad [2006] argued that in the case of the PRSP of Bangladesh, undoubtedly the donors were in the drivers' seat and they led the whole process in their direction. He asserted that obviously the reason for donors pushing such an idea was to pursue an exploitative hegemonic relationship. Relevant government officials and bureaucrats who played vital roles in policy-making seemed like they did not bother about the nation's interest; instead they wanted to make quick money and be close to the power circle by accepting a hegemonic and foreign framework [Ahmad]. The whole process was accomplished very smartly both from the donors' and the government's perspectives. The donors could claim that it had been prepared by the government of Bangladesh with the assistance of local consultants. Majumder insisted that clearly these consultants were people who knew what the World Bank and IMF wanted and what needed to be in the document to get approval and further loans or grants. At the same time, the government could use its own funds and experts to give a 'local' face to claim to have made a better effort than previous practice [Majumder]. Both parties knew that at the end, they were producing exactly the same thing that had been asked for by the donors, but interestingly both sides apparently tried hard to give it all a local flavour.

### 5.3 A company of parrots

We have seen above how the organisers can use participation for authentication (see 4.2.1 and 4.2.2). In this section we will see from our research that even justificatory consultations, in the case of Bangladesh's PRSP, were convened within a known circle.

Participants who were invited to district level and national consultations were the people who were already known to the organisers. Q. K. Ahmad [2006] and Farzana Islam [2006] 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 [Ahmad, Islam F.]. There are strong suspicions as to whether anyone joined these consultation meetings who was not known to the organisers. Definitely the NGOs which took part in these meetings were certainly well-known to the organisers [Akhter]. 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.]. According to Nazrul Islam [2006], in the PRSP consultations they invited these like-minded groups. 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 [Islam N.]. An important component in the preparation of the PRSP was consultations at divisional levels, mentioned the PRSP committee. Atiur Rahman [2006] 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' [Rahman Atiur].

A similar observation can also be found in a 2006 SUPRO report. In a second round on campaigning on PRSP issues SUPRO observed that the final version of the PRSP had incorporated a few issues which were not in the draft PRSP. Those issues were urban poverty, foreign direct investment, tourism, ethnic minority issues and good governance. However, SUPRO still reported that participation was very limited and bureaucratic. The PRSP did not involve wider sections of civil society but only known

faces in the development sector. SUPRO also argued that it was more than obvious that the PRSP was prepared as a condition for getting loans from the IFIs such as the World Bank and IMF. The SUPRO report argues that while these IFIs always patronise neo-liberal agendas those offer further benefits to the multinational companies. The report suggests wider participation with the greater sections of society could give government a stronger stance in bargaining with those IFIs to make policies pro-poor than pro-multinationals. The same report also suggests that the PRSP did not include any political commitments. The report insists that, hardly any political leaders made any comment and/or reaction in favour or against this poverty reduction strategy (SUPRO 2006).

“...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 meetings possibly because the organisers knew me” [Arefeen].

Critics also questioned a deadline for preparing and submitting the PRSP. They argued in a given time it was not possible to go 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. According to Mozaffar Ahmed [2006], in one day it was only possible to consult with such groups that purported to be comprised of people from different sections of the society and who were already capable of talking on various development issues under the supervision of the NGOs they were attached to [Ahmed M.].

To fulfil a quota of participation according to a pre-designed guideline, the organisers needed a set of people<sup>74</sup> [Muhammad]. The organisers also required these people to be familiar with a different type of language including a lot of jargon which is not

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<sup>74</sup> Cornwall suggests that claims to ‘full participation’ and ‘the participation of all stakeholders’ all too often boil down to situations in which only the voices and versions of the vocal few are raised and heard (Cornwall 2003).

practised by the common people [Haque]. The set included people from various sectors and apparently was representative. Muhammad [2006] raised question as to who could offer such sets of people at short notice? Surely the ordinary people were not organised in this way. He argued the other option was to go to the NGOs. NGOs at the local level have their own sets. They have a set for farmers, a set for workers, a set for women and so on [Muhammad]. Ahamad [2006] and Muhammad [2006] explained that when NGOs organise such consultations the audience will know a few key words and phrases, depending on which NGOs they are attached to. If the NGO works on agriculture then it can find an audience already capable of talking about hybrid and genetically modified (GM) crops. If it is a gender based NGO they are able to talk about women's empowerment, domestic violence and other similar issues. If the NGO deals with micro-credit they can talk about interest rates, empowerment and accessing the market and other resources [Ahamad, Muhammad]. These people can articulate something in public forums, perhaps even from a slightly critical standpoint, but that is after accepting the dominant framework [Akash].

Muhammad [2006] doubted whether these people know more. Instead they had been offered space as they had been informed of these issues by the NGOs they are attached to. They are informed about what they need to say and what this sort of consultation is looking for. Such skilled groups of people have been formed throughout the country [Muhammad]. According to Akash [2006] and Muhammad [2006], they are skilled because they know the language of these meetings; they know the vocabularies, know the development jargon and buzzwords, so they can fill with their skills gaps left by the people at the top, especially when they need participation by people who will reflect their views. They argue that 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, Muhammad]. Using the jargon offers both parties some kind of credibility which ultimately helps formulation of a strategy that the people at the top are looking for.

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

We have explained above for whom the PRSP of Bangladesh was made and that government assistance and input by bureaucrats and consultants was minimal and designed to give the impression of greater input in this process. Critics argued that the trickle-down approach of the PRSP process has been the dominant paradigm in Bangladesh’s development which has helped in ensuring an undue share of development for the elites, political leaders, bureaucrats and others involved in the process. To put a hand on development programmes and funds, the people who hold the power in policymaking such as political leaders and elites, have to rely on bureaucrats, experts and consultants. In the Bangladesh context, these groups have taken their share which means that only minimal development assistance has gone to the bottom and actual poor (Majumder 2005) [Majumder]. Anam [2006], Q. K. 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 technical skills and knowledge they argued. As a consequence, they have to depend on bureaucrats’ and consultants’ technical skills. The latter group generally come from middle class backgrounds. Critics pointed out that these consultants are one of the major obstacles to national development as well as poverty reduction [Anam, Ahmad, Arefeen]. They insisted that this is not to say that all the bureaucrats and consultants are alike but most of them, intentionally or indirectly (as a result of the hegemonic structure of the system) have been absorbed into this process. Q. K. Ahmad [2006] observes that dependence on the bureaucrats and consultants has not prevented the elites and political leaders dictating how development programmes will be prepared. General practice in Bangladesh has been to produce development policies that serve all these parties’ interests [Ahmad]. 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 bureaucrats in a politically hierarchical society like Bangladesh. In the latter case, government and donors would find

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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’.

replacements who would follow instructions and take things forward in the elites' preferred 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 more than happy to be inside this arrangement and make their fortune from it [Arefeen]. Ideally, the middle class would act for the benefit of the society, and particularly to work for poverty reduction [Ahmad]. However, Ahmad argued that 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 seemed uninterested in any action which does not serve their interests. Siddiqui (2000) insists that one betrayal after another by all those who had power led to deep frustration in society, in general, and among the poor and the women in particular (Siddiqui 2000). According to Anam [2006], this could be seen as *middle class betrayal of society* when the middle class could have played a massive role in the interest of the greater population [Anam]. This middle class group could have played a role for the nation where they were born and brought up, but seem somehow to have been detached from the people. Arefeen [2006] argued that 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 big concern [Arefeen]. As a consequence, the policies they make are bereft of genuine intent for the best interests of the country. These policies are made to follow orders and to ensure that political leaders, their patrons and this group have been looked after in a balanced way. For Rasheda K. Choudhury [2006], some form of participation must be included to justify their stance [Choudhury Rasheda K.]. Asaduzzaman [2006] argued that this group is morally distant from the common people and far away from their reality. They are 'others' as they are not poor, their children are also 'others' and finally their interests are not the same as the common people's interests. Therefore, they love to keep a protective layer (which consists of financial and political blessings) which makes them 'other' from the poor people, and they feel the loyalty to those who provide this cover. In doing so, they are not

concerned about whether the plans they make are realistic and viable in a local context.

Selim Al-Deen [2006], a writer and professor of dramatics and Arefeen [2006] suggested that the development programmes these people organise are based on external prescription and are distant from local (and cultural) knowledge. If they prepared these for the native interest that would make a big difference to poor people's lives. Instead they feel a responsibility (as part of their fidelity) to adopt the agendas and frameworks that have been pushed from the top and outside [Al-Deen, Arefeen]. Nazrul Islam [2006] and Farida Akhter [2006] observed that this is very visible in the way they do things. 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 [Islam N., Akhter]. Booth (2005) 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 (Booth 2005: 5). According to Nazrul Islam [2006], if the purpose was to serve the nation's interest policies would be produced in the local language. He insisted that if it was required, a translated version could be made available for donors, but in most cases including the PRSP policies were written in English and the need had not yet been felt to make them available in Bengali [Islam N.]. Seraj [2006] noted that not only in terms of language, this group had also adopted vocabularies which are distant from the common people. They make their arguments all the time in terms of economics and growth that are only understandable by less than one percent of the total population. They were and still are satisfied with this [Seraj]. These people seem not to care or make any effort to explain things in a way that would made the reality easily understandable by more people and would include more people in actions against poverty. Poverty reduction in a country context would not only include the presence of the economists, funding agencies, bureaucrats, consultants and political leaders; but 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 the society [Haque, Akhter, Islam N.]. The PRSP of Bangladesh was prepared on the premise that only the government and donors would be users of this policy (Yunus 2005). Bangladesh's development policy was been prepared in the interest of a small group where the mass of people remained absolutely detached (Ahmad 2005 a, Ahmad 2005 b), for example, the budget makers never talked to the labourers, the poor, or the farmers for whom they created the budget and planned numerous poverty reduction programmes. They preferred not to talk to the migrant workers who remit massive sums of money, one of the major sources of financing for the national economy [Afsar], (Rahman 2005 a, Seraj 2005).

Kabir [2006] asserted that the PRSP of Bangladesh was prepared in a fashion that excluded the poor and common people. The government could not refuse to prepare a PRSP as India had done, possibly because the government of Bangladesh did not have the same strength and bargaining capacity [Kabir]. Instead, the government accepted the framework without any question or hesitation [Ahmad, Ahamad, Ahmed M., Muhammad] and they were capable of preparing a document without the support of those people who did not agree with the PRSP framework [Ahamad], (Ahmad 2005 c). Mozaffar Ahmed argued that

“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.].

Frameworks like the PRSP open up more such opportunities and the government cannot work as an autonomous body beyond these interest groups. Muhammad [2006]

argued that the ruling class and the elites can see their interest in such frameworks and therefore accept the policies without resistance. They did not take any critical stance against PRSP and did not add or exclude any components of it either. Although many other policies did not require participation, they this time implemented some 'bogus' participation [Muhammad]. However they did not explain why they had accepted the framework or why they were seeking participation, or what was better in this framework than previous Five Year Plans and why the shift was inevitable [Islam F., Muhammad, Ahmed M.]. They did not feel the need to explain any such issues. Critics observed a docile group from civil society, thinkers, developmentalists and researchers formed in various sectors of the society. In a Bangladesh context this was an interesting development. This group had done exactly as they were directed [Muhammad, Ahmed M., Ahamad]. Muhammad [2006] illustrated that 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 a international development business and act as a local franchise of their international counterpart. They live in Bangladesh but do not belong to Bangladesh. They have no dissimilarity in their thinking or approach to their global patrons [Muhammad]. Any announcement from the World Bank and IMF is repeated and supported by these groups. Ideologically the whole conforms to a set of hegemonic ideas and altogether the political leaders, elites, bureaucrats, consultants, researchers and NGOs sing the same tune. In the case of the PRSP, the government, NGOs and researchers could not reject the approach. Instead, they were a very enthusiastic group who were always keen and dedicated to working as the funding agencies prescribed. 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 and hierarchical 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 [Ahmed M., Muhammad]. This group is most likely to work for the best interests of their true employers; the trans-national organisations involved in the development business who provide high salaries for these groups. 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.

## **Chapter – 6: Think Local Act Local**

## **Introduction:**

In this chapter we present the argument that emerged during this research – that it is more important to implement appropriate policies than to produce comprehensive ones which may not be relevant to the extent in which they are to be applied. Furthermore, it was argued that implementation of policies requires strong political vision and commitments that are unlikely to be present in a government that is highly dependent on external sources for its development programmes. However, it does not make any difference how precisely a policy is prepared including participation from the widest possible sections of a society if the policy is not implemented<sup>75</sup>. Here we reveal arguments from our research against a one size fits all approach. Given the experience of formulating a PRSP in Bangladesh, this chapter identifies missing links in the PRSP that has adopted neo-liberal agendas from external sources instead of a home-grown local knowledge and understanding of poverty. The suggestion here is that in poverty reduction policies, local understandings need to be put ahead of any foreign ideology. At the same time, political leaders need to have strong vision and commitment to reduce poverty in the society in contrast to obtaining blessings and material rewards from external patrons.

### **6.1 Policies are not enough**

The people who formulated the PRSP of Bangladesh explained that the PRSP had outlined a broad vision for national development. They asserted that the PRSP was ‘*a fresh start*’, and ‘*one step forward*’ for poverty reduction in Bangladesh. However, they admitted that the PRSP included limited participation (from the wider sections of the society) and also that the PRSP really would not create any drastic change or lead to a new era of development. Nevertheless they argued that the PRSP could still be a new beginning, and further progress could be built on it [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M., Rahman H. Z.]. The PRSP was described as a ‘strategic document’ in contrast to a detailed comprehensive policy paper that would include everything in one strategy. Kaniz Siddiqui [2006] explains that Bangladesh has millions of problems in terms of development and poverty reduction but what the PRSP had done

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<sup>75</sup> According to Hossain Zilluar Rahman (who later was the lead consultant for the PRSP of Bangladesh) (1995), the solution to poverty is not a matter of good intentions only. He argued that a particular weakness of the poverty debate in Bangladesh is the inadequate attention given to problems of implementation. Policy and programme formulation has routinely grown out of declarative intentions which lack adequate cognition of the machinery of implementation actually available. The consequence has been a succession of paper policies and paper programmes (Rahman 1995).

was prioritise five strategic foci. She argued that reasonable progress in these areas would lead to other related problems being solved [Siddiqui Kaniz]. One further advantage was observed in this strategic document; that this was not a one-time use document but rather a rolling plan which contained the spaces for lessons to be learned from previous exercises [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Ahmed Q. M.] and which would help in developing better policies afterwards [Siddiqui Kaniz]. The lead consultant for the PRSP argued that despite the PRSP being made from the top, maybe with a marginal participation, it was necessary to start from somewhere. As a consequence, a few ministries had started aligning their works with the PRSP which signaled that the policy would be continued. He further argued that there might be a few concerns as to whether this document would be discontinued or refuted if the political regime changed, but he felt that seemed unlikely to happen<sup>76</sup>. He predicted that possibly there would be a few *zigzags* or amendments; but these would not stop further progression of the PRSP approach [Rahman H. Z.].

“...in any case, if any new framework is introduced or takes the place of the PRSP; I can guarantee that policy will not be substantially different from this one. Surely, some new and specific strategies probably need to be incorporated but not necessarily to replace this one. If that happens, that will be disappointing and frustrating” [Rahman H. Z.].

Moreover, it was mentioned in the PRSP that

“The challenge is also one of a far sharper engagement with issues of implementation and the political viability of policy packages. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that implementation problems have proved to be the bane of policy and programme initiatives on poverty reduction. Indeed, implementation failures have become so generic that improving on implementation is now more correctly seen as a core strategic challenge rather than a mere matter of ‘administration’” (GED 2005: 41 – 42).

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<sup>76</sup> Driscoll with Evans (2005) note that the political nature of the PRS approach (in the emerging second generation PRSPs) is making itself tangibly felt at moments when there is a change of political leadership midway through the PRS cycle. These moments are characterised by a tendency on the part of political leaders to seek changes to the PRS, giving it some of the characteristics of a political manifesto (Driscoll with Evans 2005).

The chairman of the National Steering Committee for the PRSP described the PRSP only as a three year document and he observed that the programmes laid out would proceed and lessons be learned. He further explained that the choice of issues and programmes incorporated into the PRSP were the result of pressure from the different sectors of civil society, experts and donors. He accepted that certainly there were many gaps and loopholes in the PRSP and that these needed to be amended in a future review. What would be most useful was utilising and reflecting on the experience of the first exercise for developing better policies in the future [Siddiqui Kamaluddin]. However, other informants were sceptical about as to whether this would happen and whether other people's views would be incorporated in future reviews of the PRSP. We found in our survey that only 14.22% of the total respondents (N=464) believed that government and/or PRSP committee would include views from general people in a future review of the PRSP.

Table – 15: Do you believe the Government or the PRSP Committee will be keen to incorporate the views of the general public in the future reviews of the PRSP?

<b>Response</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
YES	66	14.22
NO	115	24.78
Do not know	99	21.34
Did not answer	184	39.66

N=464

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

Critics argued that the claim that '*the gaps and shortcomings in the existing PRSP would therefore be rectified and amended in later polices*' was deceptive. They argued that *rectifying the limitations* would lead to an impasse with no alternative framework available for the nation's development and poverty reduction. National development had been pushed into a framework that was chosen solely by external actors [Ahmed M., Majumder, Muhammad]. Also there was widespread scepticism about the *strategic priorities* in the PRSP. Questions were raised about whose interests these strategies had prioritised. Critics asserted that those priorities did not explain who would mostly benefit from these priorities and how truly these would accelerate poverty reduction. Nevertheless, there was little doubt that these priorities would help in opening up local markets for multinational companies which would

serve the purpose of achieving the neo-liberal agendas of some donors [Muhammad], (Ittefaq 2005 a, Rahman 2005 b, Ahmad 2005 d).

Critics also argued that the idea of participation was appeared to be a key in a national poverty reduction policy, participation should not only be limited in the preparation of a policy but also enough spaces need to be ensured for people to participate in its implementation phase. Editorials in the daily Ittefaq stressed implementation of appropriate policies and people’s role in implementation in order to achieve poverty reduction. It was argued that implementation of a national policy is likely to be possible only when there is scope for spontaneous participation both in the formulation and implementation stages of the policy (Ittefaq 2005 b, Ittefaq 2005 c). Our online survey invited people to give their opinion on whether the PRSP of Bangladesh would be implemented and help in reducing poverty. The survey revealed a mixture of scepticism and optimism. Although only 9% of the respondents believed that the PRSP would be implemented accordingly 31.5% felt at least it would be implemented partially. Almost 11% and 8% of the respondents said that the PRSP would be unimplemented or impossible to implement, while 40% did not answer the question.

Table – 16: What do you think about the implementability of the PRSP?

<b>In current socio-political situation the PRSP will be</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Unimplemented	51	10.99
Impossible to implement	37	7.97
Partially implemented	146	31.47
Implemented accordingly	42	9.05
Did not answer	188	40.52

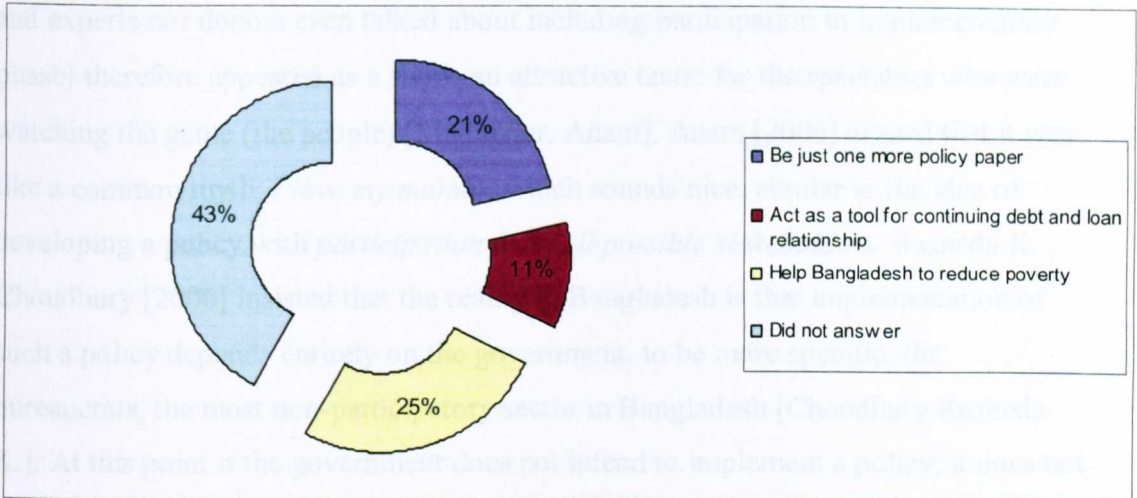
N=464

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

Of the total 464 people who took part in the online survey, one quarter felt that the PRSP would help Bangladesh to reduce poverty. In contrast to this, 32% thought that the PRSP would either be just one more policy paper or it would become merely a tool for continuing loan and debt relationships.



Figure – 2: The usage of PRSP



N= 464

Source: Online survey (5 May 2006 – 30 October 2006)

The above group strongly suggested that shifting to a new framework or formulating a new strategy for poverty reduction is not enough to eradicate poverty. However, Barkat argued that nowhere in this world has poverty been reduced by the suggestions and prescriptions of external actors. It is thoroughly misleading if any government takes it for granted that poverty will be eradicated or reduced to a significant extent by external sources, through their aid and attached conditionalities [Barkat]. The Chairman of the National Steering Committee for the PRSP reflected on the likelihood of the PRSP being implemented and its success in involving the poor and others in the society

“I do admit, at this stage the PRSP seems just like ‘the document’. The thing is that preparing a document is not that important; rather it is more important to implement it. The document would never be implemented unless the poor are involved in it and empowered; both in access to resources and in political terms. We tried our best to go to people, to listen to them and not to impose anything but the sad thing is that they are not present at the implementing level. They are just nowhere of the latter phase and that is the fact” [Siddiqui Kamaluddin].

The idea of participation in formulating such policy (while neither the government and experts nor donors even talked about including participation in implementation phase) therefore appeared as a show, an attractive tactic for the spectators who were watching the game (the people) [Majumder, Anam]. Anam [2006] argued that it was like a common myth, *I love my mother*, which sounds nice, similar to the idea of developing a policy with *participation from all possible stakeholders*. Rasheda K. Choudhury [2006] insisted that the reality in Bangladesh is that implementation of such a policy depends entirely on the government, to be more specific, the bureaucrats, the most non-participatory sector in Bangladesh [Choudhury Rasheda K.]. At this point if the government does not intend to implement a policy; it does not matter how participatory the preparation had been. Yunus [2006] suggested that the priority therefore, should be to establish a culture of implementing policies targeted at poverty reduction. Along with the genuine intention to implement pro-poor programmes an effective monitoring mechanism should also be in place to make sure that everything is on-track and checked regularly. Such a mechanism is important for understanding what the previous condition was, what the present condition is, and where things should be in a certain period of time [Yunus]. According to Yunus (2005) and Haq (2005), it is important to establish a reliable and usable village-wide data base of actual poor people. They noted that it is crucial to know the ups and downs of temperature in the treatment of fever, likewise people need a poverty monitoring barometer that creates a consciousness among the poor at the very local level who will work on it and help in poverty reduction (Yunus 2005, Haq 2005). Furthermore, Farzana Islam [2006] and Q. K. Ahmad [2006] insisted that due to limited resources, a fine tracking system is also required to watch the utilisation of funds. For example, it would be difficult to find any village in Bangladesh where an active NGO is not present. Indeed they have been working there for some years but one is unlikely to find a village in Bangladesh which is free from poverty. They suggested it is time to evaluate how much money has been spent, how much has flown to different programmes or NGOs, and what was the output from that money [Islam F., Ahmad]?

As we mentioned earlier (see 4.1.2), although some informants were critical about the PRSP they argued that complete rejection of the PRSP would then be denial of the good issues in it [Anam, Choudhury Rezaul K., Islam N.]. For example, a campaigner

for popular participation in the country focusing on the PRSP observed that the PRSP suggested that instead of subsidising fertiliser production and distribution the government should focus on training and influencing farmers to cultivate in an environment friendly way without using chemical fertilisers and pesticides and produce more organic products. However, the government seemed reluctant and the ministries not really bothered about the issue. He believed this was something people would really appreciate – it was preferred at local level meetings in almost every district in the country, but no one seemed really interested in implementing it. He further pointed out that the PRSP suggested establishing a foundation for small and medium enterprises (SME). The time schedule for implementing the PRSP was nearly over but there had been no step towards introducing a SME foundation that would have helped a lot of poor and lower middle-class people. In addition, The PRSP had outlined a programme to promote solar energy but the government was not acting to implement this indeed their policies on energy were going against this [Choudhury Rezaul K.].

According to Mozaffar Ahmed [2006], poverty reduction policies require more than theories and policy exercises. Rather policies have to be people oriented and need to be implemented accordingly [Ahmed M.]. In Bangladesh, the main problem has not been making a document, he argued that the problem has been its implementation. This was a strong view expressed in our research by other civil society representatives. They suggested, not only that the PRSP had been prepared with insufficient participation, but also that there were serious doubts as to whether the strategy would be implemented. They felt that previous experience suggested that this was very unlikely to happen. Anam [2006] and Rezaul Karim Choudhury [2006] argued that the policymakers would prepare something like the PRSP for the sake of preparing a new document but it was likely that the PRSP would be merely another document that would not make a huge difference. They indicated that in Bangladesh policies were prepared without much concern about implementation. They added that the PRSP might not have been very participatory; but it contained some good points and if these were implemented undoubtedly significant progress would be made [Anam, Choudhury Rezaul K., Islam N.].

In the following parts of this chapter from our research data we look at suggestions and recommendations for appropriate poverty reduction policy. In doing so, we also present some missing links of the PRSP of Bangladesh which were observed by the informants.

## **6.2 Local in contrast to universal**

In this section we discuss the proposal that development policies should be local and context specific. The idea of the PRSP was a global prescription; a prescription for almost all poor countries (initially the HIPC's and latter for all lower income countries) who wished to pursue lending and other aid relationships with the World Bank and IMF (mainly) and also with other donors. Critics argued that in conforming to a universalistic framework, multiple faces, contexts and dimensions had been overlooked and this was a problematic and probably ineffective approach. Critics argued that in development thought and policies one size may not fit all. To illustrate, the PRSP had been identified as a framework proposing a growth oriented neo-liberal economic approach to poverty reduction that might not be appropriate for many countries based on their local political economies. A country might not be capable of adopting such an approach thereby risking an economic disaster. They argued that in contrast to this, our research has learned that national policies on poverty reduction need to be embedded in local perspectives<sup>77</sup>. Policies based on local political and economic practices and congenial to the specific cultural context are most likely to be effective in reducing poverty in a particular society. Critics stressed the local government issue in Bangladesh to support their argument for developing context specific poverty reduction strategies.

### **6.2.1 One size does not fit all**

In this part of this chapter we will see that informants argued that a universal approach does not fit many local contexts. We will explain this initially from the derivative standpoint of the PRSP and later we will focus on the operational context

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<sup>77</sup> Atiur Rahman (2003) cites from Rabindranath Tagore, which suggests that local thoughts and agency be put forward in poverty. According to Tagore, if we cannot escape from the curse of poverty, then we will suffer from all sorts of miseries. There is some potential in each of us – if we understand this simple perception and can apply this in our work then we will certainly be able to overcome poverty. Whatever are the causes of our poverty, it cannot be removed from outside, our problems need to be solved from inside (Tagore *cited in* Rahman 2003).

of participation that had been cleverly applied in the PRSP to deal with local and specific circumstance.

We have discussed earlier in Chapter Five how the idea of a PRSP had been transferred to the government of Bangladesh (see 5.1.2). The idea of making a PRSP had been strongly contested and many of the civil society members and academics had rejected the idea that a PRSP was home grown. Muhammad [2006] and Kabir [2006] argued that the PRSP was a brainchild of the donors, more specifically the World Bank and IMF and that it had neither been assessed nor even recognised from within Bangladesh's socio-economic and political context [Muhammad, Kabir]. Farzana Islam [2006] insisted that a PRSP may be an outstanding framework to fight against poverty in a particular society or country, it might appear as an extremely workable and effective strategy through the looking glasses of the experts in the World Bank and IMF, but at the same time it should have been realised that in different dynamics, local contexts, and socio-economic panoramas it might not work properly or might utterly fail [Islam F.]. In Bangladesh ideas on poverty reduction always came from the non-poor, who in most instances, had been isolated and out of touch from the reality [Arefeen, Barkat]. Bangladesh has always been obliged to use frameworks in development which had always been foreign [Barkat]. Ideas on poverty had failed to understand its reality due to definitions and philosophical standpoints that were detached from local-cultural perceptions of poverty [Al-Deen, Islam N.]. Policy makers in Bangladesh had failed to define context-specific poverty as their policies did not consider various dimensions of poverty. Instead policies had always accepted definitions as well as patronage from external origins; mainly sources of loans and debts [Akash, Barkat]. A. M. Choudhury [2006] argued that obviously the econometric part of the definition of poverty is of massive importance but so are the social and cultural dynamics of a particular country's poverty [Choudhury A. M.] and these should have been operationalised in the policies for poverty reduction. Akash [2006] insisted that most of the time policymakers conformed to the definitions of those for whom the strategies were prepared. The policymakers could not produce a home-grown strategy for poverty reduction [Akash] as any native thoughts on poverty had not been accepted and therefore did not flourish. Seraj [2006] observed that instead policymakers were 'fizzed-up' with statistical data on poverty and their success most of the time [Seraj]. Others argued

that poverty reduction in Bangladesh during 1990-2005 had occurred at the rate of 1.67 per cent per annum (Ahmad 2005 d, Majumdar 2005, Hossain 2005). This was praised by development partners and donor organisations. Nevertheless, it was pointed out that although the percentage of poor people had declined the actual number had increased quite significantly. It was estimated that by 2005, there were around 60 million poor people in Bangladesh (Ahmad 2005 a, Ahmad 2005 b, Nath 2005, Ahmad 2005 c). To illustrate, in 1991-92, about 60% of total population was poor and by 2000 this had declined to around 50% (with an average of 5% GDP growth along with a rate of 1% in poverty reduction). It was estimated by 2005, presumably 45% of the total population were poor which means that the actual number was about 60 million people. A large number in this population were ultra-poor<sup>78</sup>. It had been estimated that this number could be 25 million (Haider 2005) or 30 million (Nath 2005) or 40 million (Ahmad 2005a, Ahmad 2005 b). Therefore, in spite of 'statistical pace' in poverty reduction, it was observed that only a few poor people had actually climbed out of poverty and the overall situation had not improved much (Ittefaq 2005, Ahmad 2005 e). The number of poor people did not decrease but the rich had grown richer while the poor became poorer and more vulnerable.

It was generally observed that the poor in Bangladesh are mainly landless with no other resources, and a very high rate of unemployment [Barkat, Afsar, Begum, Ahamad, Seraj]. Due to population growth and the ever increasing demand for housing each year the total land for agricultural farming has decreased swiftly. According to Barkat [2006], and Kader (2005), there was still a lot of fallow and unused land (usually chars<sup>79</sup> and Khas-land<sup>80</sup>). They argued that perhaps it might not be possible to satisfy all landless families (comprising 57.5% of the total population) but at least a significant portion of these landless families might be given public land that can help them to get out of poverty [Barkat], (Kader 2005). Bangladesh would then be able to increase its food production, whereas starvation is a real problem for many poor citizens (Murshed 2004). The next quotation suggests how this could be immensely influential in poverty reduction if the local idea had been taken forward.

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<sup>78</sup> The poorest of the poor, literally destitute with no means to fight against poverty. In addition, one definite identity of the ultra-poor that has emerged is that they are completely assetless and a good number of them even live under the open sky.

<sup>79</sup> Small islands inside the rivers mainly

<sup>80</sup> Lands whose ownership is not decided and therefore counted as government owned and public lands

“...thoughts on poverty reduction in our country are self-deceiving. Policymakers have always backtracked while drastic and radical actions were required. For example, there is a myth that land reform is not possible in Bangladesh because of the paucity of land, especially while the population is about 140 million for this small country. Many renowned economists also firmly believe in this presumption. They do not agree even if calculation shows it is very possible within all our limitations and scarcities. They ask [me] to propose something else instead of land reform but I am very confident of the possibility of land reform. My argument is *Khash lands* are owned by the government and these must be distributed to the poor who are landless. Now the question is how much *khash lands* do we have in contrast to the number of poor households. The Standing Committee of Parliament on Land observes the country has twenty five million *bigha*<sup>81</sup> of *khash land* while the number of poor household is ten million. Now if we divide this 25 million by ten million that equals 2.5 *bigha* for each household; that is more than enough for each household to fight against poverty, which rejects the myth of the impossibility of land reform in our country. This is the simple mathematics, but the government does not follow simple maths – on whose calculation it [the government] moves forward is a different story” [Barkat].

#### The problems of using PPP value of U.S. dollar

This section looks at what critics have identified about the definition of poverty based on the purchasing power parity value (PPP) of U.S. dollar and its usage in defining local poverty (also in poverty reduction policy). It was observed that the first and most important target the PRSP intended to achieve was to halve poverty by 2015 with reference to 1990 as the base year (Independent 2005 b, Ahmad 2005 f, Ahmad 2005 g, Ittefaq 2005 d, Ittefaq 2005 e). The measurement and target both seemed unsuitable in Bangladesh. The standard of the measurement of the number of poor in this case was people whose daily income was below one US dollar per day. The PRSP also indicated a target of reducing another measure of poverty, labelled extreme poverty which may be considered a measure of hunger, to be reduced from 19 per

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<sup>81</sup> 1 *bigha* = 33 decimal of land

cent in 2000 to 5 per cent in 2015 at an annual average rate of 4.9 per cent during 2000-2015. This was measured in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP). According to Ahmad (2005 c), for Bangladesh, the PPP of US\$1 was equivalent to US\$0.21 (21 US cents). Given the exchange rate between the US dollar and the Bangladesh Taka at about Taka 65 to one dollar in 2005, the PPP value of US\$1 was Taka 13.5.

Therefore, the poverty reduction target of halving the proportion of people whose income was less than PPP US\$1 a day implies that this proportion was on less than Tk. 13.5 a day (Ahmad 2005 c). Let us now see in Bangladesh what a per day income of Tk. 13.5 means for a person in concrete terms. This amount had to cover one person's food, shelter, cooking facilities, clothing, healthcare, transportation, and other absolute minimum basic necessities. Barkat [2006] and Ahmad [2006] explained that the price of the ordinary variety of rice, the staple food in Bangladesh, was then about Taka 18 per kg<sup>82</sup>. Assuming that an average person needs, as a basic minimum, 400 grams of rice a day, the cost of rice would be Tk. 7 per day. Then, the person would also require such items as salt, cooking oil, onions, lentils, and at least some vegetables if not fish or any kind of meat or poultry. Fuel-wood or kerosene was needed to cook the food. The remaining Tk. 6.5 could not be sufficient for those items. Obviously, no money would be left for any other basic minimum needs. Therefore, one PPP US\$1 fixes the income per person per day for poverty reduction purposes at an ignominiously low level and is inappropriate [Barkat, Ahmad]. Yet over forty million people in Bangladesh (about a third of the total population) were then in that category of poor. The target was to raise half of them to a per person/day income of above PPP US\$1 or above Tk.13.5 by 2015, assuming that Tk.13.5 remains valid in real terms for the period to 2015 (Ahmad 2005 c). Neither does the measurement define local poverty correctly nor target help to all those who need help to get out of poverty. Poverty reduction policies in Bangladesh seem all about a game of numbers [Seraj, Haque, Iqbal]. How many people were poor and how many of them were able to get rid of poverty using an inappropriate definition and depicting the 'success stories' were more important than the actual local reality.

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<sup>82</sup> In June 2008 price for one kg of rice is about 35 Taka. While prices for other essential commodities have gone further up too. Nevertheless, for most people income have not increased and also a new PPP based poverty line is yet to be determined. Question arises as to how the dollarisation of poverty (definition of poverty based on dollar per day income based on PPP exchange rate) would be appropriate in a transitional and changing society?



### Empowering the poor and the glossy nature of participation

Critics observed that in order to achieve the target of poverty reduction empowerment of the poor is very important. They pointed out that the glossy nature of participation may appear as an empowering component in the production of a national poverty reduction strategy but in formulation of the PRSP of Bangladesh participation was rather used as a smoke-screen. We look at this point as to the idea of participation (from all relevant stakeholders) was attempted to cover-up a universal approach to be locally owned and also as a tool to empower the people at the bottom through counting their participation.

Jahangir, Farzana Islam and Muhammad argued that poverty reduction in a local context, for example in Bangladesh, needs a strong form of empowerment of the poor [Jahangir, Islam F., Muhammad]. A similar line of thought was also expressed by the Chairman of the National Steering Committee (cited in his quotation in 6.1) that confirmed both the non-existence of poor in the implementing stage of the PRSP, and the importance of empowering the poor to achieve poverty reduction. Nevertheless, empowerment of the poor will not be very easy as the elites will not give up their position [Akash, Siddiqui Kamaluddin]. Sobhan argued that at the end of the day, when one talks of empowerment, it needs to be recognised that this also implies someone else's disempowerment. Somehow the process of empowerment is thought to be a positive sum game, but that is not the way the game is played in South Asia. There are some very dangerous and tough people who control the various South Asian states and anyone who is engaged in trying to disempower them in order to re-empower the poor is going to face some quite serious problems, Sobhan (2002) argued.

Poverty reduction without empowerment of the poor is unlikely in a society where the poor are the largest section of the society, while the structure is very hierarchical and the gulf between the rich and poor is massive. Considerations of ways forward should therefore be context specific and look to change the structure of society [Ahmed M., Rahman Atiur, Shahabuddin]. For Farzana Islam [2006], Kabir [2006] and Jahangir [2006], any strategy that does not intend to change the imbalanced and exploitative structure of society will not be adequate for poverty reduction. Instead it will help further to increase poverty [Islam F., Kabir, Jahangir]. The PRSP approach clearly did

not recommend the empowerment of poor [Siddiqui Kamaluddin, Jahangir, Ahmed M.]. Jahangir [2006] and Akash [2006] argued that poverty elimination policies have to be local and aimed at empowering the poor. Such policies and programmes would resist the exploitative socio-economic structure. In contrast to a uniform and universal strategy, they would reject the structure and reform where necessary [Jahangir, Akash].

At this point the notion of participation appears to be a smoke-screen that was cleverly staged for the PRSP with a well rehearsed script. Through the glossy coating of participation it attempted to cover up the World Bank and IMF's prescription and purported to be a local strategy. We will see below how the idea of participation attempted to give the PRSP of Bangladesh a local face, and in parallel we will consider the criticisms of those who saw loopholes in such chicanery, and pointed out how the endeavour could not work in a Bangladesh context. The quote below from the lead consultant of the PRSP of Bangladesh claims the PRSP as a participatory document but still points out few limitations which suggest the unsuitability of participation within the policy process of Bangladesh.

“Given the limitations, this PRSP is obviously participatory. If we really want to ensure genuine participation that requires a fundamental transformation of political vision and commitment and that is a different agenda. We are nowhere there. In preparation of a document the reality has to be taken into consideration. If the political environment is in favour of ensuring true participation not only the document would be prepared in a participatory way but also the necessity of preparing such a document is least likely to be felt. In that case the aim will not be preparing only a participatory document; instead it will be targeted to achieve some specific socio-political goals. We are in an unfavourable political environment where the institutional lapses are quite severe; so it would not be of any help to think about the ideal type of participation. In the given context, we have to find a way whereby we can ensure the some features of participation [in listening, distillation and validation] instead of only listening the to poor. However, in the future, for participation we will have to get going without the repetition of this time's exercise” [Rahman H. Z.].

We will now explore other views which argued not only that the idea of a PRSP was an external prescription but also that the notion of participation (to add a native flavour) was also unsuitable in Bangladesh's socio-economic, cultural and political context. No doubt the PRSP had convened a few consultation meetings but there were strong suspicions as to how thoroughly these had been concluded. Inclusion of people from the widest possible sectors of the society into policymaking is a practice which has no such track record in Bangladesh's history. One major concern was that participation would not be ensured all of a sudden regardless of being claimed. Anam [2006] argued that it was necessary to consider whether the people were comfortable being allowed to speak and in the habit of speaking [Anam]. Farzana Islam [2006], Haque [2006] and Ahamad [2006] asserted that one further issue was cultural aptitude. This might end up in non-participation even after all institutional support, resource mobilisation and technical skills if the citizens did not have the culture of speaking up and expressing views for building policies. A critical observation was that there was a dominant clientele attitude in people's mindsets. According to Rezaul Karim Choudhury [2006], many believed that voting was the last word in 'democracy' and therefore, policies were for policymakers and political leaders only, not for the general public [Choudhury Rezaul K.]. Asaduzzaman [2006] noted that presumably, there were lots of arguments and counter-arguments about the priorities and targets at the local level. A true consultation would have synthesised all these but there was no indication of this in the PRSP. All seemed very smooth. Hardly anything from the local consultations was reflected in the main text of the PRSP [Asaduzzaman]. Nazrul Islam [2006] suggested that such smoothness and non-contestation indicated a controlled and manipulative form of consultation [Islam N.].

Bhattacharya argued that the idea of participation and the claim of including consultative and/or participatory meetings in the PRSP therefore led to a three-way situation. Firstly, perhaps there were discussions, consultations and participation which were not reflected in the PRSP. Secondly, possibly there were participatory features but a mechanism was unavailable to reflect this participation in the PRSP. Finally maybe there was no participation [Bhattacharya]. Translating local participation into a policy requires special skills. Merely going to the poor and listening to them will not ensure participation in a policy. A deeper intention (mind-

set) of feeding their (the poor's) views into policy, and skills is a must that can hardly be found in Bangladesh's policy formulation practices and the PRSP was no exception<sup>83</sup>. So far, only the listening part had been done and views from the poor are yet to be inserted into the policies [Mahmud, Afsar, Choudhury A. M.].

Critics insisted that empowerment of people in poverty was inhibited by the nature of the hierarchical administrative system in Bangladesh. They argued that without decentralisation it is not possible to participate in policy development because this is dealt with at the top of the administration and therefore beyond the reach of most people including the poor. They explained that a general citizen can at best take part in a given policy by writing a column or a letter to a newspaper which is most likely to be unheard and/or unread by the policymakers, but it would be much easier for a citizen to express views, comments and concerns to the local government and other local institutions [Majumder, Ahmed M., Afsar]. Farida Akhter [2006] noted that without establishing a favourable environment, arranging millions of meetings will not bring forward the views and opinions of the actual poor. By organising meetings a long list of participants can be obtained. Even it is possible to record the amplified voice required for authentication of a policy that is made at the top but the spontaneous and active involvement of people cannot be ensured. Atiur Rahman [2006] observed that the institutional and social structures that are needed for participation to be fed into policy making in Bangladesh are yet to be developed [Rahman Atiur]. Bangladesh does not have an institutional structure to generate participation and feed it into the policies and strategies. Bhattacharya [2006] argued

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<sup>83</sup> Simin Mahmud observes that "understanding local situations is very important, otherwise the target of participation might go the other way. For example, in a rural community, to monitor the health programmes it is always a good idea to include the poor in the process. But it also needs to bear in mind that poor people can only do a very minimum if the whole set-up is not poor friendly. To illustrate, in such a case, the poor might complain about the negligence or irregularities of doctors to the local authorities. If the local authority does not take appropriate action and instead ignores these observations due to having good relations with the doctors or for any other reasons then the ultimate outcome will be a large number of those poor people will be left out from health services as a result of those negative observations and complains about the system. Such a case is not uncommon in Bangladeshi rural communities. An institutional support for participation is therefore highly necessary. A matter of the fact is that Bangladesh does not have such an institutional background. Instead it is very visible that institutional structure, cultural practice and administration are more favourable to the elites and dominantly hierarchical. A culture of social mobilisation is also very essential. The community should realise that the problem is a collective one, not only affecting the poor. So participation requires a process, not only some meetings. It should consist of resources, institutional and structural support, a forward thinking mind-set which are the major gaps in Bangladesh for ensuring participation" [Mahmud].

that existing practice produces ad-hoc outcomes that mainly confirm the absence of a mechanism that could integrate people's thoughts into a policy document, or to convert those views into a public policy agenda [Bhattacharya]. This clearly suggests that without a supportive mechanism for participation within the existing social structure and institutional set-up, poor people's participation can never be ensured and will remain as rhetoric. The purpose of participation to give a universal approach a native look did not work in Bangladesh. Rather it was a camouflage to authenticate the framework of two globally powerful institutions which have a very significant influence over policy making processes in all poor countries.

### **6.2.2 Think Local**

The conceptual framework of the PRSP was not new or innovative. Jahangir [2006] and Ahmad [2006] noted that the emphasis, focus and vocabularies had been used earlier by the World Bank and its associated organisations. A submissive attitude by the Bangladesh government made these organisations happy. They argued a genuine national poverty reduction strategy had to reflect the interest of the state but this was non-existent in the PRSP [Jahangir, Ahmad]. Critics asked that if the process overlooks actual problems, then who would ultimately use the strategy and benefit from it. They felt that there had been an abundance of policy strategies for poverty reduction for many years, but the lives of poor people were unchanged. In the PRSP there was no significant vision and endeavour in that regard [Ahmed M., Majumder, Ahmad]. Iqbal [2006] argued that policy makers and consultants feel some sort of pride in coming up with some new ideas and frameworks, but they forget that generating new ideas and cutting poverty are not the same things [Iqbal]. We have explained earlier in chapter 4, how these strategies then sought validation with a pseudo form of participation that did not reflect people's actual views, opinions and desires. In fact this was not possible in a superficial form of participation that often comprised the beneficiaries, relatives and clients of the organisers. Neither were they the empowered section of the society nor did they truly represent the poor. This increased concern that a document without the desires and hopes of the people (especially the poor) would not be effective. The most frequent suggestion we received was that development ideas, thoughts and policies needed to be home-grown. These should not be compromised by a foreign framework with the latest

development vocabularies that are unknown and strange to the society<sup>84</sup> [Barkat, Ahmed M., Iqbal, Arefeen, Ahamad, Islam F.].

Moreover, a number of informants felt that not only should the policies be local and home-grown but also that local people should participate in the entire process from the beginning to the end. They argued that to do so, the country's local government should be strengthened. Strong local government was a requisite to ensure participation in policy making and at the same time in its implementation. It was also observed that weak and/or inactive local government would be a major constraint on the successful implementation of a good public policy. In the Bangladesh context, undoubtedly the only institution to which common people had some access was the local government. Whereas the national government is extremely hierarchical and highly bureaucratic [Shahabuddin, Afsar, Choudhury Rasheda K., Majumder].

According to Mozaffar Ahmed [2006], previous experience suggested that local administration was capable of doing 'miracles'. They could come up with amazing successes with limited resources. That just needed proper guidance and some technical assistance [Ahmed M.]. In Bangladesh, institutions were not in a strong position to favour participation (see 6.1 and 6.2.1). Ahmad [2006] and Jahangir [2006] noted that local government was very weak with almost no role in national policy making. Local government had to follow the directions from the centre and in general public policies were not discussed in the parliament. If local government and local administrations were stronger, if local government could play a role in influencing national policies based on local targets and issues, then it was likely that these policies would be more pro-people and pro-poor. Furthermore, these policies were likely to yield better outputs [Ahmad, Jahangir]. However, Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] and Q. K. Ahmad [2006] insisted that the bureaucrats and the donors were obliterating those institutions. The bureaucrats always wanted to bypass local administration or engaged the local administration in such ways that control always remained ultimately with the central administration [Ahmed M., Ahmad]. Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] observed that donors also were not keen to fund local government

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<sup>84</sup> Moreover, Krishna argues that without first knowing what poor people are doing by themselves to overcome poverty or to cope with it, programmes of assistance can be hardly well designed. It is important to know more about poor peoples' strategies and to inquire more closely into the correlates of poverty and its opposite in particular parts of the world (Krishna 2004).

although they had projects on strengthening the local government. He argued that wherever and whenever the donors funded local government this yielded improved results, but in most cases the donors' priority was not local government; their priority was NGOs (that helped create a local form of comprador class) [Ahmed M.] yet local thoughts and institutions can be of great importance as seen in the following quotation from the Chairman of the National Steering Committee where he acknowledged that had not happened in the PRSP.

“...poverty is very likely to go down in our society if the poor are organised and get access to participate in local institutions. Furthermore, this (poverty reduction) will not take a long time in our country if local government can function to its fullest potential, which means they would be in a position to determine as well as implement their targets and priorities. If the people become empowered and hence own the local government then it is possible to carry out land reform, to patronise small and medium enterprises and create employment which will be definitely very significant in poverty reduction. But sadly local government is nowhere in the PRSP and the poor are not organised and do not own local government” [Siddiqui Kamaluddin].

Nazrul Islam [2006] argued that development approaches should not be primarily urban focused but rather decentralised to rural areas (not only in rhetoric) [Islam N.]. According to Rahman (2004) and Ahmed (2005), in rural areas there are far more workers available in comparison with the required labour for agriculture and for other kind of employment. If there were enough jobs in villages, better infrastructure and technical facilities, improved investment and financial resources, vibrant local economies based on local farm, fisheries and poultry then the flow of migration to urban areas would stop or drop. It is likely that poverty would be reduced in these areas given the new employment opportunities. They suggested that this could be done by diffusing development approaches and programmes through empowering local government that will administer local development processes (Rahman 2004, Ahmed 2005). Selim Al-Deen [2006] observed that if the PRSP was owned by the government of Bangladesh; local contexts would have been reflected in the PRSP, as it was not, the local context was not in the PRSP [Al-Deen].

### 6.3 Missing Links in the PRSP

Although the PRSP was primarily delineated as a three year budgetary framework, at the same time efforts were made to draw up a larger framework, explained the lead consultant for the PRSP. He admitted that there were few limitations but the priority now should be to take it forward and that the relevant authorities should undertake initiatives to fill in the limitations [Rahman H. Z.]. This section will depict some of the major gaps in the PRSP of Bangladesh as observed by civil society representatives.

#### Values and social stratification

Barkat [2006] argued that a national strategy for poverty reduction would identify the root causes of poverty and in regard to these, options should be considered as widely and shrewdly as possible. According to him, the constitution of Bangladesh suggests equal opportunity in education and health. If educational rights are ensured people will be able to identify the reasons they are in poverty and will try to find a way to overcome it [Barkat]. However, Jahangir [2006] insisted that in a society like Bangladesh education is intertwined with religious values and beliefs, especially education for girls. If these two (education and religion) were not integrated and harmonised the idea of empowerment would be impeded and hence poverty reduction programmes (through education) would be inhibited [Jahangir]. The PRSP seemed to fail to understand and explore these interconnections. Jahangir [2006] and Ahmad [2006] observed that the PRSP outlined programmes about education but was absolutely alienated from its religious and socio-cultural context [Jahangir, Ahmad]. For example, in education, girls were getting stipends and other support to continue schooling in secondary and higher secondary levels, but boys were not. Issues like this could have been dealt with in the PRSP. These kinds of issues would increase divisions and stratifications in the society and could have negative impacts on poverty reduction.

“...one girl was telling her experience that she would possibly become educated and more likely to obtain a better life than her brother. Their family cannot afford schooling for her brother without any support from the government. That girl was assuming that due to this support girls may have attain a better career in future but boys’ future were uncertain and in a great



mist. These will create divisions within the family and within the society -- the PRSP does not have any directions to deal with such important social issues” [Ahmed M.].

This was one example of how religion was drained out while at the same time it was believed that the institutionalisation of a few social and religious practices could play significant roles in reducing poverty. Hossain (2005 a) explains that there were thousands of people in the country eligible to pay *Zakat*<sup>85</sup>. The Ministry of Religious Affairs might come up with workable strategy along with the Islamic Foundation for launching a campaign with a view to putting moral pressure on those who were eligible. Those funds could be collected by local *Imams*<sup>86</sup> and then distributed among the poor or utilised for poverty reduction at community levels (Hossain 2005 a).

Critics pointed out that poverty is a class struggle and the PRSP did not acknowledge this. They insisted that the major hindrance in poverty reduction in Bangladesh was massive inequality. It was believed if people had access to resources they themselves would have found solutions to poverty [Akash, Akhter, Ahamad]. For example, Drong [2006] argued that not only had the PRSP not suggested access to the resources by the poor, but also it did not describe how people were deprived of resources. He illustrated that ethnic minorities were not resource-poor as they had a rich natural sources from which they could live well. He explained that the ethnic minorities are being deprived from access to these resources and the PRSP did not understand what made these people refrained from the access to the resources and forced them into poverty [Drong].

### Employment

Unemployment as well as underemployment had left millions of people in the grip of poverty (Prothom-alo 2005 a, Ittefaq 2005 a). Unequal distribution of wealth had been identified as another reason for poverty within the society (Rashid 2005). Critics argued that the trickle down approach of economics had not only had failed to

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<sup>85</sup> In Islam a certain amount of money has been suggested for distribution among the poor for charity based on the surplus possessions of an individual.

<sup>86</sup> A person who leads prayer in the mosque and is a religious leader at the community level.

accelerate the rate of poverty reduction but also had increased income inequality in the society. They illustrate, in most cases wealth was shipped to metropolitan cities from peripheral villages (Quader 2005, Masud 2005, Rahman 2004). According to Majumder (2005), during 1991-2000 the income share of the richest 5 percent of families increased from 18.85 percent to 30.66 percent. Thus, the rich-poor income disparity increased from 18 times to 46 times between 1991-2000 (Majumdar 2005). Haque (2005 a) noted that per capita income had increased in the last few years but it did not mean the same for rich and poor. Unequal distribution of wealth and the formation of a new rich class (which had worsened the poverty scenario) was due to the large scale of corruption. There was no denying that corruption was a major impediment to economic growth and poverty reduction (Haque 2005 a). Although the PRSP had set a seven point strategic agenda with employment at the top of the list (other agendas included nutrition, maternal health, quality education, sanitation and safe water, criminal justice and local governance) it did not explain precisely how widening inequality would be dealt with (Majumdar 2005, Haque 2005 a, Jugantor 2005). Many felt strongly that the creation of more employment options would reduce country's poverty (Prothom Alo 2005 b, Prothom Alo 2005 d, Ittefaq 2005 d, Ittefaq 2005 e, Ittefaq 2005 f, Jugantor 2005, Ahmad 2005 e, Ahmad 2005 f). The PRSP also had emphasised employment as a top priority, but it seemed rather a glossy cover as no concrete employment generation programmes were outlined in the PRSP (Ahmad 2005 d). Critics maintained that an atmosphere should be created where investment would be encouraged to generate agro-based, rural, small and medium sized labour intensive industries instead of opening up local markets in a growth oriented, privatisation focused and neo-liberal economic approach (Ittefaq 2005 g, Jugantor 2005). The PRSP did not envisage the negative impacts which might arise as a consequence.

### Culture

A recurrent observation was that the PRSP had not taken cultural aspects into understanding. Instead there was a fundamental knowledge gap about the linkage between culture and poverty [Islam F., Al-Deen, Akhter, Islam N.]. A number of consultants anonymously acknowledged that they could not identify the connection between culture and poverty. It was not clear to them how culture - entertainment, a play or a drama - could help in reducing poverty. An interesting twist can be found in

the following quotation by the Chairman of the National Steering Committee. He said that, he had suggested to consultants that they relate the programmes (outlined in the PRSP) to cultural aspects, but the consultants had failed to make the connections.

“...I have suggested to the drafting team members and the consultants to look at the cultural and religious issues quite a few times. But they could not do so. Perhaps there was no discussion of these issues, nobody discussed it, or possibly they could not find the link between culture and poverty. I am the only one who told them that religion and culture should be in the PRSP. Because in our country, most people value their culture and religious beliefs. Life after death is very crucial too and a poverty reduction strategy simply cannot overlook these aspects” [Siddiqui Kamaluddin].

However, it was felt by the research informants that development should happen through cultural values, norms and practices. Informants expressed strong criticism that the cultural dimension of poverty reduction could not be found in the PRSP. They felt that one reason could be that the people who prepared it looked at everything through the lens of the market economy. Hence they argued, the contents and programmes outlined there were entirely focused on growth and expansion of the market [Al-Deen, Akhter]. There were strong concerns that the consultants had failed to realise how culture can feed into economic development and public policy. According to Selim Al-Deen [2006], cultural knowledge could equip someone to understand local demands, desires, hopes, dynamics and expectations which ultimately would guide someone in preparing a policy. The people who are targeted are more likely to accept policies those are related to their culture. An understanding based on cultural knowledge would be more realistic than an understanding which lacked cultural acquaintance [Al-Deen]. Policymakers either lack these cultural values or have adopted their patron's culture and see development through the lens of outsiders [Arefeen]. According to Kamaluddin Siddiqui [2006], economic targets should have been addressed through cultural interpretation. People can be organised by this process. He noted that unless this happens, ordinary people will not be empowered. If the people are not empowered both poverty reduction and participation by poor people will remain just talk [Siddiqui Kamaluddin]. Selim Al-Deen [2006] illustrated that people will not accept any change if it is not suitable given their

culture. Cultural elements can assist in introducing a new technology, a new health practice or a social message. If it can be explained (through a drama or in local plays) the disadvantages of having many children or a large family then this will create a major impact on people's minds and they may be influenced to have smaller families. Outlining the advantages of a small family in local songs, plays and in other festivals and rituals can make a massive impact on population control that would help to cut poverty [Al-Deen]. A few more examples can be cited of successful impacts through dramas and other cultural programmes. These include pre and post natal care, sanitation and basic hygiene, drinking clean water, primary healthcare and mass primary education. It needs to be understood that people are highly motivated by culture, religion and other traditional practices. Programmes in rural communities have to be consistent with these practices. Policies alien to the culture are more likely to be alien to the people too.

“Perhaps the most important part of the poverty story is something that one can not find in the statistics at all. The poor of Bangladesh have undergone something of a personality revolution and become more assertive, pro-active towards opportunities, clearer on life-goals. The social reality may not have lost its oppressive features but the poor men and women of rural and urban Bangladesh are new protagonists on the scene and societal outcomes are very much open. With perseverance and determination, they are forging a new ground reality of initiatives and signalling an escalating refusal to remain content with the vagaries of a poverty-laden fate” (GED 2005: xvii).

### Human agency

Critics observed that the PRSP did not offer enough spaces for the human agency that can drive someone to get out of poverty. Fighting poverty obviously needs uplifting one's capability especially the poor. They argue that nurturing one's capability needs a favourable socio-political culture, environment and structure. Unless the social structure and political environment favour creating opportunities for everyone, it is unlikely that a programme will be successful [Mahmud, Arefeen, Ahmad]. Ahmad [2006] and Seraj [2006] felt that the progress in agriculture offers an insight. They explained that farmland is scarce in Bangladesh relative to the massive population. In recent years the government has withdrawn various subsidies from agriculture.

Cultivable land has declined rapidly due to faster urbanisation. Natural disasters are seen very often but the farmers of Bangladesh have taken the country closer to being self-sufficient in food production. They stressed that the motivation, the agency, behind this should be understood and needs to be utilised in other poverty reduction activities [Ahmad, Seraj]. A socio-economic atmosphere needs to be established where an individual has chances and is encouraged to become self-employed and self-sufficient. This might inspire other unemployed people within the society to fight against poverty (Ittefaq 2005 e, Rono 2005).

Farida Akhter [2006] observed that the PRSP had adopted micro-credit as a solution. She notes that micro-credit creates a process for remaining in debt. Therefore, this can be a temporary tool but not a sustainable solution. Ways to ensure access to the resources by the poor were expected in the PRSP, but in the event no such programme could be found in the PRSP. Instead it patronised a mechanism where people would remain in a vicious circle, contradictory to the slogan of poverty reduction [Akhter]. Arefeen [2006] observed that the motivation for working hard and to step out of poverty among the poor cannot be found in the PRSP. He argued that what drives poor people to work hard is absent. Instead the PRSP was entirely based on a western market economy model. The programmes and suggestions in the PRSP constantly insist on the opening up the market; apparently the only way to overcome poverty. No consideration was given to how a traditional system would cope with the market economy when the economy of Bangladesh is more of a household based economy [Arefeen]. Muhammad [2006] insisted that by solely relying on neo-liberal principles the PRSP prevented diverse thinking. It squeezed thoughts on national development into one central framework that denied the creativity and endless possibilities of the agency of diverse sections of the society [Muhammad].

### Religion

Earlier in this section we have seen that the chairman of NSC insisted that the consultants for the PRSP could not make the interconnection among poverty, culture and religion. However, in his (2000) longitudinal study in a Bangladeshi village *Jagatpur* he shows that Sports and cultural activities should be strengthened with special emphasis so that people can develop 'social capital' and at the same time fight the vulgarity that creates further poverty. More sports and cultural activities are also

likely to improve the collectiveness and neighbourhood, and local religious leaders can play a significant role in this regard. He underscores that poverty reduction programmes should be designed with 'acceptable' ideological weapons and through building alliances with a section of the religious community. For him, this should be elaborated and explained to people with concrete examples. This movement should be built upon from below (and not imposed from above) through painstaking and sustained efforts and involving the common-man at every stage and at no point should it appear to be a foreign or donor inspired project (Siddiqui 2000). Moreover, Arefeen [2006] suggested that people in Bangladesh are religious and there are a very large number of madrasa, mosques and religious leaders who could play a significant role in poverty reduction. There were no programmes in the PRSP to utilise these religious leaders and institutions [Arfeen].

Nazrul Islam [2006] argued that this can be explained in two ways. Firstly, if the PRSP offered enough space for participation by all the ministries then these important sectors would have not been missed. Secondly, only ministries who were granted various development programmes were involved in the PRSP. Other ministries which did not offer any programmes were missed from the PRSP. Consultants who prepared the document did not feel any responsibility to bring them in [Islam N.].

#### Other issues

A. M. Choudhury [2006] argued that the PRSP had not cleared up how issues of transparency and accountability were to be ensured in development programmes. He illustrated, in rural areas only a few people enjoy the benefits of different projects, and are familiar with the development activities which go on within their region. He suggested that the local government should have a list of programmes including targets and budgets. This will make people aware of ongoing activities and assist them in taking part in local developments. This process would also provide a clear picture about targets, achievements and expenditures. Unfortunately, no such recommendations can be found in the PRSP [Choudhury A. M.].

According to Nazrul Islam [2006], urban poverty was completely missing in the draft phase, but the final version incorporated some programmes as a result of criticism from civil society representatives. He pointed out that although 10 percent of GDP

comes from the urban sector and the number of urban poor is increasing, the PRSP did not contain any plan of action to tackle the growing demand for shelter of the homeless in urban areas. He further explained that there were not enough programmes in the PRSP on industry and sport. Just as the consultants had failed to understand the connections between culture and poverty; they had also failed to perceive how sports can help people out of poverty. In many poor countries many people get out from poverty through sport activities and industry. The PRSP of Bangladesh did not offer any vision of how sport could help people fight against poverty [Islam N.]. Afsar argued that there were no visible initiatives in the PRSP for migrant workers who were remitting large amounts of foreign money that was playing a very crucial role in the national economy [Afsar].

Usage of English as the only operational language was understood as another major concern (for more details please see 5.2.1). Critics observed that if it was intended to include the widest possible participation from different sectors of society then this should have been prepared in an understandable native language instead of in English as the only language with full of jargon and technical terms that even many educated people would find very difficult to understand<sup>87</sup> [Islam N., Akhter, Haque].

Moreover, the PRSP lacked clear and concise targets of poverty alleviation such as revitalising the rural banking sector to enhance the role of micro-credit, to reduce rural unemployment, to mitigate against natural disasters (Hossain 2005). Originally envisaged as having a three-year timeframe, the PRSP had made its appearance eighteen months late and was racing against time to implement the time-bound programmes (Daily Star 2005 d). It was quite clear that the government could not raise enough internal funds for timely PRSP implementation and therefore, it would be dependent on substantial foreign assistance (Independent 2005 a, Hossain 2005 b). The PRSP of Bangladesh seemed to incorporate all possible contexts and dimensions of poverty reduction (Yunus 2005, Ittefaq 2005 f), however, bringing all the problems under one big umbrella was not the solution for everything, especially in the case of

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<sup>87</sup> Sanchez and Cash observe that in countries like Nicaragua and Cambodia, the PRSPs were first produced in English despite English not being the language of government. As a result, in Cambodia the plans were analysed and discussed by foreigners while most Cambodians (including government officials) were not able to access them at all and only began to be included when Khmer was made the main language of discourse. The lack of translation into local languages, for example in Bolivia and Mozambique, limited the participation of important communities (Sanchez and Cash *undated*).

poverty reduction. It was observed that the PRSP of Bangladesh had missed the issue of good governance and a mechanism for fighting against corruption (Rahman 2005, Daily Star 2005 b, Majumdar 2005, Quader 2005). Although the PRSP put a high priority on setting up the office of ombudsman to deal with irregularities and corruption in public expenditure (Hossain 2005), it did not contain any clarification of how this was to be done. Haque (2005 a) argues that this fundamental shortcoming turned the PRSP into an ineffective strategy as it had no clear understanding of how to deal with unabated corruption in the country (Haque 2005 a). In view of the growing income disparity between the rich and poor in recent years the PRSP seemed to adopt the rhetoric of pro-poor growth (Majumdar 2005, Bayes 2005) without explaining how this would be achieved, and how the poor will enjoy the benefits of growth. Ahmad (2005 d) noted that the construction of an environment conducive to substantial progress, let alone achieving the targets, would call for huge investments, improvements in efficiency in the utilisation of resources, and ensuring equitable shares of benefit to the disadvantaged and downtrodden people. The PRSP provided precious little guidance in these regards (Ahmad 2005 d). Furthermore, it was found the PRSP did not offer adequate space for women in terms of employment, access to resources and social security (Daily Star 2005 a). The education sector was beset with problems, making for very poor outcomes in terms of quality of education at all levels. According to Ahmad (2005 d), no purposeful analysis or concrete remedies for these problems were in the PRSP, although investment projections (up to 2015) had been shown for primary education and sanitation. He also insisted that the role of agro-based industries including fisheries had been recognised, but strategies to promote those economic activities had not been spelt out. The PRSP also failed to outline how a desirable balance between the roles of the state and the private sector was to be achieved (Ahmad 2005 d). If this objective was to be translated into practice, appropriate strategies needed to be outlined, delineating which actions were the responsibility of the state and which the private sector, and how inter-linkages between them should be shaped and implemented.

The data presented above demonstrates that the PRSP approach has merely adopted a naturalistic/trickle-down approach of economic growth. This approach has also included offering/suggesting some ostensible cash incentive through 'safety net programmes' to some underprivileged groups to keep them silent and to undercut any



resistance/revolt, as organisers try to keep the audience quiet in ‘consultation’ meetings - asking some poor to tell their views ‘briefly’ (see 4.3). Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson argue that a naturalistic economic approach was historically unsuccessful. They state that such an approach cannot explain the mechanics of livelihood under a market system and attempts to replace the economic analysis [of livelihood mechanism] by a naturalistic scheme which has been discredited (Polanyi, Arensberg and Pearson 1957: 241). Joseph Stiglitz (2001) explains that Polanyi’s analysis makes it clear that popular doctrines of trickle-down economics – that all, including the poor, benefit from growth – have little historical support. Stiglitz also clarifies the interplay between ideologies and particular interests: how free market ideology was the handmaiden for new industrial interests, and how those interests used that ideology selectively, calling upon government intervention when needed to pursue their own interests (Stiglitz 2001: viii). He further asserts that there is ample evidence that economic liberalisation could impose enormous risks on a country, and that those risks were borne disproportionately by the poor, while the evidence that such liberalisation promoted growth was scanty at best. ‘Free international trade’ allows a country to take advantage of its comparative benefits, increasing incomes on average, though it may result in high levels of employment, the job destruction that results from trade liberalisation may be more evident than the job creation, and this is especially the case with the World Bank and IMF’s ‘reform’ packages that combine trade liberalisation with high interest rates, making job and enterprise creation virtually impossible. No one should have claimed that moving workers from low-productivity jobs to unemployment would either reduce poverty or increase national incomes (*ibid*: ix – x).

After demonstrating the disingenuousness of the philosophy of PRSP approach and its practice in the Bangladesh case, the data presented in the next section outlines participants’ suggestions based on their view that efforts to solve poverty according to its local context along with a genuine political vision to do so could be a way forward in this regard [locally].

#### **6.4 Act local – political will and vision are musts for national poverty reduction**

Continuing with the emphasis on implementation rather than only formulating policy papers, and with a further stress on thinking locally, this section argues that political

will and vision are perceived to be necessary for poverty reduction strategies to work properly. There was a widespread consensus on this point by the people who prepared the PRSP and their critics. According to Piron and Evans, poverty reduction is a fundamentally political objective and the original principles of the approach have political implications (Piron with Evans, 2004). Pritchett and Woolcock (2004) insist that if the incessant quest for the solution is, in fact, the problem, development professionals need to help create the conditions under which genuine experiments to discern the most appropriate local solutions to local problems can be nurtured and sustained, while also seeing them as a necessary part of a broader and more holistic country development strategy (Pritchett and Woolcock 2004). According to Alam (1996), developing a national policy is not merely an economic aspect; rather it is a political process too. No policies can be successful without a political vision. Therefore, programmes for poverty reduction or developing participatory policies require strong political commitment. Poverty reduction is not feasible by borrowing concepts from external sources, neither it is possible by foreign experts. He argues that how far a participative policy will influence national and local development is highly dependant on the extent to which political leaderships have belief, confidence and commitment. Otherwise, participative policies will be merely an orthodoxy, a superficial paper document (Alam 1996).

The major obstacle to poverty reduction and participation in public policies by the poor was the local constraints on initiatives. For H. Z. Rahman [2006], the lead consultant for the PRSP, only a political transformation would overcome this impediment [Rahman H. Z.]. The chairman of the National Steering Committee for the PRSP believed that it was believed political will would build up awareness in creating institutions and mechanisms to ensure participation by the poor and that eventually would accelerate poverty reduction [Siddiqui Kamaluddin]. Kaniz Siddiqui [2006] argued that two points were explicit. Firstly, in Bangladesh previously there was no scope for participation in policy making and secondly, there was no compulsion to implement a policy. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that it was known what the problems were and what needed to be done to solve them. But the major obstacle was that the government just did not do these things [Siddiqui Kaniz N].

Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] and Mahfuz Anam [2006] also stressed that planning and development require an approach that mingles vision and interest in people [Ahmed M., Anam]. Policies focusing on poverty reduction should be coordinated and integrated which requires conceptual clarity and a large vision. In Bangladesh, poor people were beleaguered by different ideologies and interest groups. Either they were entangled in political interests or they had been absorbed by the interests of NGOs. Farida Akhter [2006] asserted that a true intention to empower poor people cannot be found in Bangladesh's socio-political context [Akhter]. Development plans generally go from ministry to local level. Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] explained that sometimes local implementation committees are created comprised of those who are preferred and blessed by local MPs and other influential political and bureaucratic figures. The whole process is fettered by a hierarchical bureaucracy while the bureaucracy itself is highly politicised too. He then insisted that within this social and political structure (politicised, hierarchical and bureaucratic) development activities are adopted by political interests [Ahmed M.]. Huq (2005) insisted that influential policy makers allocate development funds based on their political interests (Huq 2005). Barkat [2006] and Akhter [2006] illustrated that a list for Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme generally include people who are likely to matter in local political contexts and who are connected to particular political ideologies. This group is visible at local level participatory meetings (as they come to support their sponsors) when required. They argued that both government policies and NGO activities lack the actual intention of poverty reduction and participation by the poor. On the one hand, government policies are not favourable to the poor. Instead these policies are either designed to secure a share from different programme funds or to gain political benefits. In many cases, efforts are evident to gain both material and political benefits. On the other hand, NGOs need funds to run their programmes and therefore have to depend on donors. The donors have their targets, agendas and emphases [Barkat, Akhter]. However, Mozaffar Ahmed [2006] and Farida Akhter [2006] noted that NGOs have to act on these targets to get funds and so NGO activities serve the purposes determined by donors. Hence, development programmes as well as the idea of participation at the community level are based on either political interests or donors' interests; not on the actual intent to reduce poverty [Ahmed M., Akhter]. Such an approach might repress areas that really need attention to fight poverty. If adequate opportunities were provided in rural areas a large number

of people would have a better life instead of remaining in a poverty trap (Rahman 2004).

However, participation can only help a national policy when it is through an intensive and ongoing process. According to Farzana Islam [2006], making participation meaningful needs willingness from policymakers and should come through intensive research work in people's own settings [Islam F.]. The word participation and the process that took place to ensure it in the PRSP of Bangladesh were just to gain some credibility and to give a face that looks nice [Majumdar, Anam]. Rezaul Karim Choudhury [2006] argued that it was very clear that participation did not influence the PRSP. Policymakers were not really bothered about the outcome of participation [Choudhury Rezaul K.]. Jahangir [2006] observed that, from IPRSP to PRSP, the PRSP was prepared under two different political regimes and were detached from each other. One might have expected congruence and continuity between these documents. He asserted that the practice of discarding previous plans (based on political ideologies) jeopardises the implementation of policies and obstructs development. There should have been a political consensus on poverty reduction and on the national interest [Jahangir]. If the government under which the PRSP was prepared failed to remain in the power, then what will happen to the PRSP, asked some civil society representatives and this was thought to be a perennial problem in the political culture of development in Bangladesh.

There were massive doubts about the involvement of political parties and parliament in the PRSP process. There were also questions about the capacities and intentions of political leaders. Rasheda K. Choudhury [2006] observed that clearly there was no participation by the political parties that had a negative impact on the PRSP. She insists that at the end of the day implementation of any development policy is a political task that relies on political leaders and parties [Choudhury Rasheda K.].

“...I am sure the minister who has thrown up the PRSP has not read the PRSP. I am also sure the Finance Minister did not read the document either. He *thrift* a few lines of the PRSP in his budget talk without acknowledging it”  
[Anonymous 2006, emphasis added].

According to Atiur Rahman, Arefeen and Akhter, the politicians seemed not to care about poverty reduction [Rahman Atiur, Arefeen, Akhter]. The leaders did not have the vision and quality that were required [Iqbal, Haque]. Also, possibly the leaders did not have the confidence to set their own agendas, targets and programmes in poverty reduction as they were doing whatever the donors recommended. This was not the first time; it had been happening for a long time [Rahman Atiur]. According to Iqbal [2006], political leaders were concerned to secure their seats in parliament and they acted accordingly. They purported to be worried about national poverty reduction but actually they are not [Iqbal 2006]. Political leaders seemed more concerned about increasing their own wealth [Arefeen, Rahman Atiur, Iqbal].

“The majority of the MPs were like businessmen and they cared only about their own interest. They seemed to feel no moral and ethical responsibility that they should make more efforts for the country’s development and poverty reduction. Political leaders needed to realise that personal interest is not everything. Instead they should feel and give their utmost priority in the national interest and to poor people” [Anonymous].

A culture should also be developed in political development that ‘*we will formulate our own policies based on our interests, priorities and targets*’ [Rahman Atiur]. Given the Bangladesh context, political leaders talked about many big-things to get votes. Once they are elected they forget everything and all their promises become rhetoric [Anam].

“...the parliament as a formal institution and as a politically representative body should have played a crucial role in the formulation of a national poverty reduction policy. There was no discussion about the PRSP in the parliament. However neither were most of the parliamentarians interested in it nor were they capable of being so. The reason is that the PRSP was not attached to political benefits (as perceived in our country). Political leaders are not interested in issues that are not attached to their politics [of getting votes in elections]. Anything unrelated to voting and political or personal interest is not a matter of concern for them. Their slogan tells us that they will reduce poverty in the country if they are voted to the power. Not only they do not

explain how they will do it but also they are not bothered whatever has been adopted in any development policy or the PRSP” [Yunus].

The way of looking forward should not be a fashionable development approach; rather it should be a combination of political and contextual agendas, explained the lead consultant for the PRSP. He insisted that a fundamental crisis lies at the heart of politics and limitations in institutionalisation. If these two issues could be addressed a significant progress would be possible in poverty reduction and Bangladesh would not need to take MDGs as the benchmark [Rahman H. Z.]. Lofty policies written in beautiful words and synthesised in one umbrella document is one thing, its implementation on the hard ground is another (Rahman 2005). Yunus [2006] argued that a PRSP requires participation for its formulation but implementation depends on will from the government, available options and possibilities of implementation [Yunus]. Here, involvement of local government, people’s representatives, ward members, the Union Council chairmen and members of parliament need to be deeply and seriously involved. For Majumder (2005), the implementation of the PRSP was problematic as it adopted the same trickle-down approach which had been operationalised rather unsuccessfully within the structural adjustment policies prescribed by the World Bank and IMF since the 1970s (Majumdar 2005). Moreover, it was observed that if the political as well as law and order situations were not improved, the goals envisaged in the PRSP would be very difficult to achieve. If widespread corruption and administrative inefficiency persist there is little hope for success in the implantation of the PRSP (Daily Star 2005 e, Hossain 2005 b). Quader (2005) argued that it was clear in Bangladesh that the ruling class and policy makers were not representing the poor and most of them were not pro-poor. He predicted that it was quite possible that the PRSP would be implemented in a way to benefit the ruling class and elite sectors of the society regardless of how nicely pro-poor growth had been spelled out in the PRSP (Quader 2005). According to M. M. Akash [2006], poverty is a consequence of an unequal distribution of wealth and the policy makers and government who represented the elite class seemed least likely to be interested in reducing poverty [Akash]. Barkat [2006] argued that if the intention is to favour existing exploitations and neo-imperialist institutions then such seriousness would never be found among the policymakers and political leaders. He noted that it was obvious that a true intention of poverty reduction would require ensuring access to the

resources by the poor. Perhaps that is why nothing can be found in the PRSP that ensures poor people will be empowered and enjoy access to resources to make their living [Barkat].

Therefore, critics observed that poverty reduction is more of a political issue rather than an academic and/or development issue [Barkat, Drong, Haque, Bhattacharya, Iqbal]. It is a matter of political will, commitment, concern and promises. Iqbal [2006] insisted that a PRSP document can be enough for getting loans and aid. Some form of participation might provide credibility in preparing a PRSP, but if there is no seriousness from the government and political leaders about poverty reduction then such a policy is just of no use [Iqbal]. It was expected that the PRSP should prescribe a mechanism for pro-poor policy where all concerned will win the best deal from growth and market resources. Therefore, the mindsets and vision of political parties in Bangladesh needs to change if the PRSP is to be implemented effectively (Haq 2005, Daily Star 2005 c, Prothom Alo 2005, Ahmad 2005 e, Ahmad 2005 f). This new mind set should not be focused on only to serve neo-liberal market interests rather to establish a pro-poor vision along with a strong will to ensure participation in the social, political and economic processes from the bottom of the society, curbing irregularities and corruption by establishing good governance, and making the best use of local and external sources of funds (Daily Star 2005 e, Haq 2005, Rahman 2005, Majumdar 2005, Ahmad 2005 f, Chowdhury 2005). It was argued that these should not be in the PRSP just for the sake of mentioning them rather it should be clearly spelled out how to achieve it.

“...poverty reduction needs a very strong political will, a genuine feeling for the poor people. Let us take the PRSP as an example. I can guarantee that no one from the ethnic groups has received a copy of the PRSP. Not even the minister for ethnic groups and hills affairs. This is a question of genuine intention and sincerity which is not there. I participated in various consultation meetings and have talked several times with the people who prepared the PRSP. They did not feel the responsibility to send a final copy of the PRSP to me. Such an attitude shows that the government did not have genuine feelings for farmers, ethnic minorities and poor groups which is a must for poverty reduction” [Anonymous].

Critics argued that poverty reduction also requires a larger vision, a dream to work on tirelessly. The question arises as to whether the political leaders have that vision and where to take the country [Haque, Anam]. Haque [2006] notes that if the entire nation is determined and motivated then poverty will be alleviated. If the national leaders can outline a vision that contains people's hopes, desires and aspirations then the people will give their best to work on it and that it should have been discussed in much larger forums. Newspapers and television could have given more coverage and generated widespread debate and discussion [Haque]. Farzana Islam [2006] argued that there are public and private universities that have been researching poverty reduction and development studies. The PRSP could glean information from the universities, could encourage or request wide and critical discussions. There could have been research seminars and debates if it was genuinely meant to incorporate participation [Islam F.]. The PRSP had the potential to include people across the country for their thoughts on poverty reduction if it was to contain a larger vision in contrast to following donors' prescriptions [Choudhury Rezaul K.]. However, Iqbal [2006] observed that there was a crucial lack in the mindset of the political leaders. He insisted that political leaders failed to realise the nation's interest. If someone does not have concern about their own interest and betterment what could others (donors) do for him/her and why would they do it [Iqbal], he asked. According to Majumder [2006], any thoughts on poverty reduction will not be effective unless there is a political will to become independent and identify Bangladesh's own problems and solutions [Majumder]. Muhammad [2006] argued that the most fundamental constraint was the fear of the powerful groups. He explained that they were afraid of being displaced from their existing position which enabled them to enjoy undue benefits. In contrast to thinking about actual poverty reduction and taking political measures towards it they had chosen to accept a framework that would keep inequality in the society and leave them at the top of this hegemonic and hierarchical structure [Muhammad].

These recommendations and loopholes as discussed above may not suggest one unique voice rather represent diverse standpoints. This is one of the major findings of this research – the PRSP of Bangladesh has overlooked these diversities. Critics suggested that the PRSP could have been prepared by considering all these dimensions in Bangladesh's local contexts and that would have helped to develop an



appropriate policy for poverty reduction. Instead, it was prepared according to the neo-liberal agendas of the World Bank and IMF (see 1.2.2 and 2.1.2). Critics also observed that although the PRSP was claimed to be locally owned through participation but this was done only to legitimate its hierarchical nature. It was argued that the PRSP has ignored various important issues which are perceived to be very crucial for poverty reduction and different alternative ways could have been incorporated into the PRSP in contrast to a growth-based approach.

## **Chapter – 7: Conclusion**

## Conclusion

This research has engaged with on the ground reality (through fieldwork) and the theoretical and philosophical understanding of poverty reduction in Bangladesh's context. We have seen that poverty is a contested notion and it is extremely difficult to embrace a simple definition that would explain diverse dynamics and dimensions of poverty in different societies and contexts. Nonetheless, *a dollar a day* (or two dollars a day) is a method in use for measuring poverty in many countries by directions of a couple of IFIs such as the World Bank and IMF. This research argues that it is hardly possible to plausibly define poverty by one universal definition due to its multifaceted forms in different societies. Hence, the *dollar a day* method may misguide poverty reduction endeavours in those countries in which it is applied. To illustrate, if diagnoses for any illness are wrong, consequently the medication and healing process will be unlikely to be effective. In terms of Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) based measurement which was discussed earlier (see 2.1.2.1) an easy way to reduce poverty would be to devalue the US dollar. This argument may not sound very ingenuous but it emphasises the problem of adopting a universal benchmark for all societies. The underlying argument for using a uniform standard to understand the extent of poverty in a given society is that this is required to assess how much assistance that society needs. This suggests that the actual intention is not to understand the indigenous form of poverty and eliminate it, rather to continue international assistance which currently takes the form of debts and loans. A poverty reduction strategy, based on such a uniform standard, fails to provide any leeway for unusual situations such as that which the world is facing at this time – the so-called credit crisis. This has been predicted by some research organisations and humanitarian agencies that millions more people have been plunged below the poverty despite the decline in the exchange value of the US dollar. Bayes (2008) cites from a BRAC study that it is estimated in Bangladesh, an additional 10 million people have become poor due to pricier food and living costs. Globally the aggregated number of new poor by the dollar-per-day standard will be certainly very alarming. This work argues that rather than trying to understand poverty by one unique benchmark all over the world, poverty and poverty elimination policies should be based on local standards and local perspectives. Such an effort will offer spaces to think about local forms of potential risks and unprecedented situations and what could be done in these cases. When the value of US dollar and other western currencies are falling, when the aid-givers are

struggling with their own economies, should the battle against poverty be paused or halted? This study argues that as long as anti-poverty policies remain aid dependant this will be the case. Any attempt to reduce poverty based on a universal definition that does not consider diverse circumstances of the nations, their histories and economic pasts, cultural and political contexts, will be misleading. This might even increase poverty and inequality within the societies as happened in the case of structural adjustment programmes (see 1.1, 1.2, 1.2.1 and 1.2.3).

Roberts (2005) argues that past exercises in global development targeting have been unsuccessful. He also suggests that the MDGs, the key targets adopted in the PRSP approach, mean relatively little to politicians and administrators at the country level (Roberts 2005). *The PRSP approach has been accepted by a large number of countries* (World Bank 2002 a, World Bank 2002 b); such a statement from the architects of the PRSP framework hides the underlying politics of its widespread 'acceptance'. Why have states agreed to prepare a PRSP? We have seen in Bangladesh that the PRSP has been largely a presentational device required for the purposes of gaining access to donor 'assistance'. According to Knoke and Morazan (2002), the strong focus in the PRSP on economic growth suggests that lack of growth is one of the main causes of poverty in poor countries. They insist that growth might be an important component of a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy, but the unquestioning acceptance of a one-dimensional concept of growth might be misleading (Knoke and Morazan 2002). Hammer *et al.* (2000) note that high levels of income inequality limit the poverty reducing effects of growth. They argue that higher growth and pro-poor policies will improve poverty reduction prospects in both high and low inequality countries, but high inequality countries will need to grow twice as fast as low inequality countries to halve poverty by 2015, the set timeline for achieving the MDGs. They insist that this is not feasible (Hammer *et al.* 2000). Our research reveals the hegemonic nature of the aid relationship between trans-national organisations like the World Bank and IMF and the poor countries. With the example of Bangladesh this research also discloses how states adopt and conform to such frameworks for their own financial and political interests. This study has also taken from its informants, the process of creating a new interest group that assists in taking forward such approaches.

'Civil society', 'ownership' and 'participation' are probably some of the most up-to-date catchphrases in contemporary development discourse. Quite often the latest trends or newest models help to disguise the hegemonic nature of anti-poverty policies in poor countries. But according to Krishna (2004), such policies quite often fall on infertile ground. Instead of assisting people's pursuits, these policies send them off in other directions, replacing and displacing the local effort (Krishna 2004). Harriss-White (2005) argues that these anti-poverty policies are irrelevant for poor and destitute people, and that the financial resources directed toward challenging destitution are grossly inadequate. We have seen that these latest catchphrases have been pushed by the *West* to the *non-West* and poor countries (see chapter 1 and 2). The West has recommended that poorer societies take fire from the candle that it holds. The core argument of this suggestion is that poor countries should be like the *West*. The PRSP approach, a framework for poverty reduction, professed by the two leading organisations that dominate the world economy, is the latest example of western hegemony in which poverty and poverty reduction have been looked at through *western* glasses. Sachs' argument can be used to illustrate this point. According to Sachs (1984), through the hegemonic knowledge development process, western knowledge has been presented as distinctly superior to the third world's 'indigenous knowledge'. He further insists that, consequently, the whole development agenda, according to the Western advocates, is centred around science, excluding 'indigenous knowledge' which is simply treated as 'traditional', 'superstitious' or 'general ignorance' (Sachs 1984).

In the PRSP approach it is believed that neo-liberal economics, growth and expansion of markets will suit all poor countries and ensure poverty reduction in these societies. Although it attempts to introduce a form of 'ownership' through relevant 'stakeholder participation', it does not consider how neo-liberal economics might not be appropriate in all countries due to various geographical, social, political, historical and cultural contexts. It does not take into account that growth can be very unequal and might increase poverty. It does not acknowledge that poor countries are under the strong grip of hegemonic relationships with developed countries and IFIs through international aid assistance and other debt relationships (see chapter 1). It also fails to see that poor countries do not have fair and balanced trade relationships with their developed counterparts. This research, with the assistance of its informants'

perceptions, argues that adopting the neo-liberal economy and opening up local markets do not always work in favour of the poor. Instead the main beneficiaries can be trans and/or multinational agencies and small groups of local elites, policymakers and politicians. Above all, such an approach discards the possibility that people in other parts of the world, living in other conditions, may perceive poverty and poverty reduction in other ways (see 5.2.2, 6.1 and 6.3). The PRSP of Bangladesh clearly states

“...in the prevailing development paradigm the private sector is the driving force behind growth and hence *the role of government is to provide an environment which promotes private investment...* given its overriding importance the issue of promoting private investment has been addressed wherever it has appeared in this document...

...a free market is believed to provide the environment for competitive practices under certain circumstances. Competition policy is generally defined as those government measures that directly affect the competitive behaviour of enterprises and the structure of industry. The first involves putting in place a set of policies that enhances competition in the market, *and includes such policies as privatisation, trade and foreign exchange liberalisation, and deregulation*” (GED 2005: 51 – 59, emphasis added).

Cammack (2002) argues that the PRSP framework provides a comprehensive tool for the IFIs to see ‘what is going on in the developing country’ and to monitor macroeconomic and structural policies of government across the board, against objectives and programmes ‘agreed upon’ with the IFIs. With the PRSP approach, the IFIs continue to impose their thinking and their macro-economic policies onto developing countries. Contrary to IFI rhetoric, the governments of developing countries are not the ‘owners’ of the policy process; they are just obedient followers. For Sanchez and Cash (*undated*), the contents of the PRSP reflect the dominance of IFI policy prescriptions instead of the priorities of the poor. Policies opposed by the poor are common, whilst policies the poor want are not included. They argue that a combination of PRSP guidelines and the authority of approval, gave the IFIs

inordinate power over the contents of national PRSPs. Hence the policy matrices attached to the many national PRSPs differ little from one another.

This research has synthesised existing knowledge on poverty, civil society and participation from a range of data using a multi-method approach (see chapter 2 and 3). Inter-connections of poverty reduction, civil society and participation need to be stressed at this point. It has been explained earlier that a universal definition of poverty is hardly practical. It is not realistic to entangle multiple contexts under one frame that rejects the possibility of diversity and difference. This thesis, therefore, stands against the *one size fits all* approach. In contrast to this, one central argument of this thesis is that the impact of poverty should be perceived in local contexts, and subsequently these local understandings should be positioned to lay out what needs to be done to reduce poverty in the particular perspectives. There will be different ways and options, suitable in specific circumstances. However, it needs to be noted here that this does not mean that existing economic knowledge is of no use in understanding poverty. Rather, this research evinces the need to realise that poverty is not entirely an economic matter but also includes social, cultural, political, geographical and other aspects of the societies.

In Bangladesh the literacy rate is very low (nevertheless, a literate person does not of course mean an educated person in Bangladesh), the economy is predominantly based on agriculture (unlike many *western* societies where the economies are based on industries and/or services). Bangladesh is a small land with a large population, a young nation with a long past of colonial intervention (nearly two and half centuries), a war ravaged fragile economy when it started as an independent nation, an unstable and unsettled democracy with very weak and docile (to the centre) local government – all dissimilar to *western* societies. The government, political leaders and policy-makers are not really accountable to the people (see 5.2.2, 5.4 and 6.4). The people generally do not have access to government and other institutions, and voices from common people are hardly heard in the policy making processes. There are, of course, exceptions but it is not an exaggeration to say that these are some general features in Bangladesh. On the other hand, Bangladesh has a history of a vibrant civil society (before the idea of civil society was pushed and became more visible in development programmes in the nineties) that played a crucial role in Bangladesh's language

movement in 1952 and in the liberation war in 1971. Civil society in Bangladesh also played a major role in changing the military regime and can be seen with its interventions during floods, natural disasters and other crises. Therefore, it is argued that civil society can and should influence the government in formulating pro-poor and people-oriented policies (see chapter 2). At this stage the idea of participation fits in. Participation can be pseudo, a chicanery, a means for validation and authentication, but if it is truly intended to integrate people into policies and their implementation, then locally owned policies built with participation by the people from below are likely to be more effective than external prescriptions simply because participation will involve a large section of the population in adopted programmes. Unless efforts are made to enable marginal voices to be raised and heard, claims of inclusiveness made on behalf of participatory development appear rather empty (Cornwall 2003) and empowerment of the poor will not be achieved (Chambers 1983, 1997).

This research reveals that although one size cannot be suitable for everyone, a universal framework for poverty reduction is now in place for poor countries. There are several reasons why the national governments have to accept such an approach. In Bangladesh it is primarily because of the hegemonic relationship of the government with two leading global monetary agencies, the World Bank and IMF. A clientele government that wants to prove its fidelity to obtain material and political benefits, with the help of a comprador interest group, has played a pivotal role in this process. Evidence from this research suggests that in the PRSP of Bangladesh, understandings of poverty and tentative ways forward to overcome it have been looked at mainly through the lenses of external actors. Such a framework has been accepted without adequate consideration of the circumstances in Bangladesh which are not similar to those from where the PRSP approach was prescribed as an 'effective strategy'. Nevertheless, an attempt to justify this approach with a superficial form of participation has been highly visible.

We have seen that participation can be useful for including people, their hopes and desires, but at the same time participation can be a contrivance, a means of validating an external agenda. We understand that something which is unsuitable and unrealistic needs this sort of justification and validation. In drafting the PRSP of Bangladesh



such attempts were explicit. This research has shown from its data that participation was disingenuous, as consultation meetings and requests for participation from the top could not ensure genuine participation when those really sought rubber-stamping rather than inclusion and empowerment. A genuine form of participation would secure true ownership of a document containing the hopes and demands of local people, and would create an atmosphere where people could spontaneously get involved and work together on eradicating poverty. Participation should therefore be perceived as a process instead of a vogue or means for obtaining credibility. It was acknowledged by a number of informants and also in the newspaper data that hardly any other public policies in Bangladesh have been developed with participation by the people, which indicates that traditional practice is not to include people in policy-making (see 4.1). Hence, we ask, why all of a sudden participation was felt to be very important even though precedents and structural set-ups were not in favour of participation. Although there was no supportive and established mechanism in Bangladesh where one could participate within the structure and institutions of the state (see 6.2.1, 6.2.2 and 6.4), throughout the formulation of the PRSP there was a 'need' for participation.

Carley and Smith (2001) argue that sustainable development is about empowerment – unless people participate through institutions in shaping solutions to the challenges of development they are not committed to these challenges. They emphasise that to achieve empowerment, it is necessary to overcome what is often called the democratic deficit, which describes citizens' alienation from the decision making processes (Carley and Smith 2001). Our data suggests that a pseudo form of participation was adopted and that this was perceived as 'enough' by the people who prepared the PRSP (see 4.2.2). This research reveals that even such an endeavour of including participation for legitimation was extremely hierarchical and was only a cover to claim that efforts were made to take account of the views of the people at the bottom. Moreover, it was claimed that special attention was given to include participation by women (see 4.1). However, Zuckerman argues that participatory processes (in the development of PRSPs) have hardly been either participatory or gender sensitive. Input from civil society was often organised on an *ad hoc* basis, with information about opportunities for input circulated either late or not at all (Zuckerman 2002). Derbyshire (2002) and Zuckerman (2001) insist that women face particular problems

in participating. With little or short notice, women not only had little or no time to prepare for meetings, but they faced additional problems of having to arrange home care and safe transport (Derbyshire 2002, Zuckerman 2001). However, Cornwall (2003) argues that the ways in which the terms 'gender' and 'participation' are used in practice cannot be taken for granted. She asserts that the questions of who participates and who benefits raise further awkward questions for participatory development. The means by which women are excluded, equally, may echo and reinforce hegemonic gender norms, as well as replicate patterns of gendered exclusion that have wider resonance (Cornwall 2003).

This research has illustrated that participants in local meetings were primarily the beneficiaries of ongoing development programmes rather than representatives of the poor sections of the society. A list of criteria about targeted audiences/participants was provided from the top to the local organisers of these meetings and the set-up was hierarchical. Our research observes that the environment was unfamiliar to any poor people who were present, who could hardly speak freely in a rather intimidating environment.

“To make the participation broad-based and inclusive, a comprehensive list of potential stakeholders was prepared by the NFPF” (GED 2005: 22).

The PRSP of Bangladesh offers a 'sample list' of 261 participants (GED 2005: 24) in divisional consultations. However, the PRSP of Bangladesh, a document of over 350 pages contains a long annex but does not contain a list of actual participants in either national or divisional level consultations. Furthermore, the sample list does not seem to have space for ordinary people and the poor who were not 'organised'. According to the provided list, people primarily affiliated to various umbrella organisations were present in those meetings. This again points to the custom-made feature of participation in the PRSP of Bangladesh. We argue that instead of a standard list of participants, actual lists for the divisional and national level consultations could have been provided. A mere 'sample list' only increases scepticism about the participants as well as the nature and content of consultations. Nevertheless, there are claims to have achieved consultations with unorganised poor groups through face-to-face consultations (GED 2005: 25), but again, it seems a mere effort at avoiding the charge

to have missed the actual poor. The PRSP explains that one of the objectives of regional consultations was to strive to understand the regional dimension of poverty (GED 2005: 25) but we have observed strong scepticism concerning how these strivings were perceived and what they actually were (see 6.2.1). We have also found in the PRSP as it is stated that outputs of consultations worked as general guidelines for preparing the thematic group reports and the PRSP (GED 2005: 25). As the participants were mainly from beneficiary groups (of ongoing development programmes), they were therefore informed and capable of articulating views and vocabularies which the organisers were looking for. Nevertheless, only the listening part of participation was accomplished. There is no clarification in the PRSP about how the views from local and national level consultations and meetings were analysed and incorporated into the PRSP. Furthermore, in the case of thematic reports, the story is very similar. We have learnt that no thematic reports were based on or influenced by these consultations, and in any case the final PRSP did not reflect those regional consultations (see 4.1.2, 4.3). Researchers and authors of the thematic reports were not in the main drafting team for the PRSP. Therefore, undoubtedly, the form of participation adopted in the PRSP of Bangladesh was to cover up and conceal an unrealistic foreign approach.

Our research has learned that civil society has the potential to play a larger role in the development of a national strategy for poverty reduction. But due to the absence of an appropriate mechanism and in a weak institutional set up its role in the PRSP was limited. A deadline for preparing the PRSP was pre-set by the World Bank and IMF. In terms of chasing a deadline for submission it was observed that development of the PRSP was too rigid and rushed, undermining deeper forms of participation. This reveals a lack of understanding of the need for civil society to consult its base and to prepare an effective anti-poverty policy in order for participation to be of real value. Rushed processes may also have impaired the production of thorough poverty analyses, the identification of policy alternatives and the evaluation of policy options. Sanchez and Cash (*undated*) argue that this rigidity was in part caused by the linkage of the PRSP to debt relief via the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative, which governments have understandably wished to obtain as soon as possible.

A key determinant of the failure to facilitate broad based participation was the language used for participatory processes in the PRSP. Language has been an important barrier in ensuring genuine participation as it was observed that the PRSP of Bangladesh had adopted a language that was distant from the common people (see 6.3). According to Booth (2003), for the PRSP approach to work on the expected scale, it needed to be widely disseminated and understood across central and local government as well as within the research/advocacy community working outside government. He argues that disseminating information is a first step, translating the PRSP document into local languages is another, and both of these things have been done only in a few countries. In any case, sharing information is not the same as creating understanding (Booth 2003). The act of advocacy to empower weaker sectors of society is not limited to help people to access information or giving them tools to reach out to decision-makers (Cornwall 2003). This requires a more systematic approach that engages relevant stakeholders in a continuous process of learning about the PRSP and its relationships to other policy and aid processes that are explained in a simple local language. In Bangladesh the choice of a foreign language, enriched with jargon and technical terminologies, excluded important decision-makers, limited civil society participation, and excluded rural and minority populations. On the other hand, this has helped to impose foreign ways of thinking, and has given donors an inordinate amount of power to influence the final outcome.

When a policy is being prepared cognate to an external framework to fulfil a condition of a lending and borrowing relationship, then the borrower tries to produce the strategy exactly in a way that will ensure the deal. This study has unpacked how this leads to the production of a policy that is distant from local and cultural contexts and closer to the lenders' prescriptions. In this process, people who comply with the external framework, ignore or bypass many associated issues that demands enormous attention in the process of eradicating poverty. Poverty reduction requires a holistic approach. Culture, religion, social norms and values, and human agency can all play their roles in this regard. In Bangladesh population growth is a constant concern and this is weakening the progress that the country has achieved so far. Society is operating with a combination of religious and cultural values. The national economy is more of a household economy rather than a market economy, and is predominantly dependent on small-scale agriculture. Given these specific domestic features, religious

and/or ideological motivations and cultural elements such as stage-drama, television soap, rural theatres and songs can contribute in mobilising people (for example to have smaller families) and can inspire people to act on issues that help reducing poverty in the society (directly or indirectly). To illustrate, religions are widely practised in Bangladesh and organised form of religious charities can help to reduce poverty at the community level (see 6.3). A growth-based global framework for poverty reduction does not place a proper focus on these issues. As a consequence consultants of Bangladesh's PRSP did not include these dimensions as potential building blocks for poverty reduction. In recent times it has been widely acknowledged by economists and researchers that remittances from migrant workers are making a major contribution to the national economy of Bangladesh. The agricultural sector has made some landmark achievements to take the country towards a self-sufficient state. These have identified as some resilient features of human agency of the Bangladeshi people, despite donor prescriptions to reduce subsidies on agriculture, and issues of migrant workers never receiving proper attention either by the government or the donors. This leads to the question that what sectors should been given more focus in Bangladesh's poverty reduction strategy? Structural adjustments and privatisation, or sectors like agriculture, remittance of migrant workers and the ready-made garment industry that are already moving the wheels of the economy and creating employment, and thereby helping the battle against poverty. Quite simply, if these sectors were not generating the amount of income and employment, the scenario of Bangladesh's poverty would much more daunting. On the one hand, lack of attention towards promising sectors like these, and on the other hand, the incessant focus on privatisation and liberalisation of trade that have failed to deliver what they promise, raise questions about the actual purpose of anti-poverty policies. Therefore, it appears that either people who prepare these policies do not understand what should actually be done and prioritise in terms of national poverty reduction, or they do not care enough or are coerced to act in accordance with external prescriptions. Our research agrees that overall the latter was the case within a hegemonic and clientele aid and debt relationship. The idea of participation was a cajole in this exercise. Participation was needed for several reasons. First, to pass on the responsibility to the government and people of Bangladesh for any foreseeable damage. Second, to validate this exercise. Third to spread one false message that IFIs have changed their

stance as they are now more interested in listening to the people at the bottom instead of imposing everything from the top.

Now the questions arise, should there be genuine participation, would the PRSP of Bangladesh be any different? Based on the observations of this research we believe if the PRSP of Bangladesh was made truly in a participatory manner, then cultural issues would have been in this policy, religion would have found a role to play in poverty reduction, it would have adopted the local language to ensure that a greater proportion of the population could understand the proposed policies and take part in their implementation, and concern about population growth and measures to deal with it would have been identified, in contrast to solely growth-based policy agendas. If there was genuine participation the contents and ways forward in the PRSP would have been different from previous donor imposed policies. But the evidence of this study firmly suggests that there is no fundamental difference between the contents and programmes of the PRSP and previous anti-poverty policies of Bangladesh.

Moreover, the PRSP experiences of other countries also demonstrate that most PRSPs sing the same song. This research, therefore, strongly claims that participation did not influence and/or enhance the PRSP of Bangladesh. Participation was a glossy cover to justify a hierarchal and hegemonic approach. This grand approach has so far made 59 countries prepare policies according to this, pretending to be participatory as part of the shadow play to create a false perception that IFIs have started to listen to their critics and adopted a participatory approach in contrast to previous top-down policies. This has provided another spin-off for the IFIs, to avoid any potential failure, as happened with other policy prescriptions, so that they can come up with a new framework in the future to continue this hegemonic practice.

What therefore is the purpose of such an exercise of producing disingenuous anti-poverty policies? Is it just to produce a comprehensive poverty reduction/eliminating strategy paper or to act on the issues that create and/or increase inequality and thereby reduce/eliminate poverty. This brings forward the issue as to what extent, if Bangladesh had a comprehensive anti-poverty policy, based on 'meaningful' participation from broader sections of the society and focused on its local context would Bangladesh have been successful in reducing/eliminating poverty? Is participation a magic bullet? If participation in policy production can ensure

ownership and help to achieve poverty reduction, something that many countries have dreamt of for a long time, then probably it is now time to critically take this concept forward from its vogue and vague practice. Participation has emerged as a new cult. Without participation no policy is credible now. Even if we accept this participation remains as a vague concept as evidence suggests this practice, in its current form, does not require participation to be ensured in the implementation stages of these 'participatory policies'. This can be understood either as an incomplete cycle or a disingenuous effort. This is an incomplete process because it acknowledges the 'potential' of participation to significantly influence policy production but at the same time it buries the prospect by not including this magic bullet in implementation phases. Should participation be a key issue, as it is described in theory, that includes everyone and thereby enhances a policy process, then it should also be able to enhance the process of implementation by involving/engaging same participants. As this cannot be found in practice this apparent inclusion of 'all possible stakeholders' is deceitful because it maintains that the actual authority of implementation will remain with the powerful. Such practice of participation is therefore contradictory, and discards the rationale of participation (as envisaged in theory).

However, to make things happen according to the intentions of the architects of the PRSP framework, a certain group from the civil society has to emerge or be created. This group has in fact been assimilated into the hegemonic structure either by the temptation of material interests or pressures from the hierarchical structure. It has been argued in this thesis that this group sees, thinks and acts as they are required or asked. The patrons of the PRSP (who are at the top of the hegemonic structure) need to use this group to ensure that their framework is 'accepted', and strategies are put in the document in accordance with their agenda and neo-liberal principles. In contrast to this unbalanced structure, this research argues that nowhere in this world has poverty been reduced by external prescriptions. Nations that have successfully triumphed over poverty have used their own agency to identify problems and solutions.

There are grounds for scepticism about the motives of those IFIs where the idea of the PRSP was manufactured and imposed on poor countries as a condition of lending programmes. Bird (2001) argues that IMF conditionality has been a subject of debate

ever since it was introduced in the early 1950s. He points out that the Meltzer Commission concluded that IMF programmes were unwieldy, highly conflictive, time consuming to negotiate and often ineffectual (Bird 2001). Goldstein and Montiel (1986) found IMF programmes to have a significant negative effect. Furthermore, Przeworski and Vreeland (2000) claim that IMF programmes have an enduring adverse effect on economic growth. In the case of Bangladesh, the PRSP replaced the previous practice of Five Year Plans as part of the new conditionality imposed by the World Bank and IMF. Central to the debate and its implications for policy is the question of whether conditionality and the programmes actually ‘work’. If they do, why change things? Previous Five Year Plans also provided donors with a coordinating tool and were developed as per their conditions. If they had not failed, then should the conditionality have been changed and/or replaced into preparing a locally ‘owned’ ‘participatory’ policy? Booth (2005) insists that it is already clear that PRSPs have not delivered what was hoped for (Booth 2005). However, Driscoll with Evans (2005) argue that country ownership, for instance, implies some form of consensus between national actors and involvement beyond the state elite, but leaves open the questions about which actors should be paramount, how consensus is to be achieved, and how to deal with unforeseen and complex outcomes. They note that the PRSP process was not only designed to validate an external approach but also to avoid responsibility for potential malfunctions and/or silence the government and/or people (Driscoll with Evans 2005). An attempt of passing on responsibilities to the people of Bangladesh can also be found in its PRSP. The following quotation eloquently mentions *innovative engagement from all*, but we have argued above that this was not achieved. Also, in the quotation the challenges and responsibilities belong to everyone, and more importantly to *the people of Bangladesh* although the PRSP was produced only by the people at the top.

“Bangladesh is already embarked on a journey of transformation. Translating this into a journey of hope for a poverty-free and egalitarian society is the key contemporary challenge. It is a challenge which demands active, intelligent and innovative engagement from all: governments, development agencies, private sector, NGOs, community organizations, media, academia, and above all, from *the people of Bangladesh themselves*. The engagement is not just for policy planning. It is as importantly an engagement for results, for inclusion,



for imaginative solutions, and ultimately an engagement to unlock the potentials of the nation” (GED 2005: xxii, emphasis added).

This research advocates the idea of thinking local as well as acting local. It is not an antithesis of the idea of ‘think global act local’. Rather this research argues that on issues like poverty reduction it is more likely that desired results will be obtained if the policies and programmes are developed primarily from and in local contexts instead of through the influence of external recommendation. Obviously there are issues such as climate change and/or global warming to be dealt with by global thinking and local actions. Nevertheless, on the issue of poverty reduction such an approach can hinder the actual progress. First, poverty is a perennial problem for underdeveloped and developing countries. Historically, these countries are following and conforming to some global ideas (as conditions of aid and debts). Apart from some statistical progress an actual success (of a nation) can hardly be cited. Second, on the one hand, to comply with global thinking national policies may overlook some real issues relevant to the country context and, on the other hand, may overstate some issues that are not actually of real concerns for a particular country (to keep up with international targets). Third, as the poor countries are often obliged to agree on global ideas to perpetrate loans and aid, this hegemonic process may then lead the framework to become dogmatic (which has to be followed by poor countries to obtain aid) rather than to become effective. Were these global frameworks successful some examples would surely be visible. To illustrate, for the PRSP approach, the target is to halve poverty in 25 years (from 1990 to 2015). Although the PRSP approach was introduced in 1999, the timeline suggests that in next 7 years (less than one-third of the total time frame) this target has to be achieved. Among the countries that have produced PRSPs, none have cut down poverty in a rate that suggests that at least some countries are on the right track after adopting the PRSP approach. Perhaps some ‘experts’ will come up with a few example of ‘statistical’ markers of progress but hardly any true success is out there. Countries like China, Malaysia, and Singapore have made decisive economic progress, cut down poverty and improved overall living standards for substantial proportion of their populations. These countries did not follow any global frameworks: instead they set their targets based on local priorities and acted on these. Therefore, it is realistic to suggest that on the issue of poverty reduction thinking locally (that would include local context, texture, and constraints

which will guide and set local priorities, targets, desires and aspirations to overcome the problems) and also acting locally seems more likely to be effective than one universal approach. A synergy of contemporary knowledge and information (maybe of western knowledge and/or understandings in any other part of the world) can be shrewdly intertwined to enhance the process.

This thesis, therefore, recommends that if Bangladesh truly wants to cut poverty it has to think as well as act for itself. Local problems should be understood context specifically and the viable solutions as well as the motivations of the people should be identified and harnessed into policies and their implementation to eradicate poverty. This research has identified some crucial shortcomings in the PRSP. Most notably, the PRSP ignores some very important social dimensions which are of great significance for poverty reduction in a given society. For example, the PRSP of Bangladesh talks about growth, privatisation and liberalisation but it does not emphasise on cultural and religious aspects. It has been observed that the PRSP also ignores human agency and wellbeing (such as people's hopes, aspirations, motivations, leisure, sports). Poverty reduction is not all about creating opportunities. It has to be properly considered how far the poor can access these opportunities and, therefore, poor people's capacities need to be increased. This thesis has also revealed that policies are not enough. Implementation of people-oriented policies matters most in poverty reduction. For successful implementation genuine participation must be ensured both in formulating and in implementing the policies. The formulation and implementation of a strategy are two different sides of a coin. It is of no use having a perfect strategy unless it is properly implemented. It is very important to keep the focus on implementing policies designed to eliminate poverty, which has not happened although poverty reduction policies have floated around from deep in the past, as was observed in our research data. Moreover, statements like *throughout the implementation process the space for including the poor will be broadened if there is any tiny scope for it, and should be created if there is no such option* [Siddiqui Kamaluddin] appeared to be the sole effort to kick-off the policy that had already been prepared. To ensure participation, a favourable environment must be created. This means strengthening institutions, especially local institutions where most people have more access than at the national level. Finally, the research shows that poverty reduction will become just a slogan if there is no political commitment. Our research has observed that in the case of

Bangladesh's PRSP, political parties and parliament were not involved in its preparation which raises concern about its implementation by the political leaders (see 4.1.2, 5.1.2 and 6.4). According to Booth (2003), the more general case is that the political dimension of ownership does not match technocratic commitment, and this is a potential source of real difficulty, because PRSP implementation will call for accelerated progress with other reforms to which the major obstacles are political (Booth 2003). Political leaders therefore must understand the dynamics and consequences of poverty. They should also have the vision to take the nation forward. At the end of the day implementation of any policy relies on political intent. Unless the political leaders have that commitment, poverty reduction will remain a slogan regardless of whether poverty reduction strategy is 'participatory' and 'owned' by the people/government.

It is probably safe to say that 'poverty reduction' is an issue that will remain at the top among the research topics. Governments, the international community, IFIs, civil society, academics, consultants, researchers and NGOs are perpetually coming up with different ideas and frameworks for poverty reduction. Various targets are set and re-set, aid and other assistance are pledged for poor countries, but poverty still persists in the poor countries and even in pockets of many so called developed countries. It seems as though poverty reduction is an insurmountable task regardless of all national and international efforts. But is this really the case? Is poverty actually mightier than human-kind and its aspirations and dreams of a better world? Or is it that nationally and internationally 'poverty reduction' is gobbledygook in contrast to a genuine intent. A true intention should comprise national and international concerted political commitment from the local and global political leaders. To illustrate, in the present time of 'credit crunch' (2008), global leaders and IFIs are too busy trying to save the 'global economy' (the economies of rich nations) in the first instance. The philanthropy of 'poverty reduction' seems to be forgotten or shelved for the time being while a large proportion of poor people's sufferings have intensified worldwide due to this global crisis that has made food and the cost of everyday commodities pricier. The slogan of 'poverty reduction' for poor billions seems not to be an issue at the moment. So-called international targets are even less possible to achieve in this current scenario although global leaders have recently paid lipservice to the continuation of aid.

As a criticism of growth based approach when it is suggested that growth is not equal (to indicate that the growth rate can increase but at the same time, in this process, the rich become richer and the poor turn into poorer), this may appear to be oversimplified but may be indicative of the vagueness of conventional thoughts on poverty reduction which only advocates growth. Bangladesh, on paper, has made significant progress in terms of poverty reduction due to its recent moderate growth compared with 20 years ago. But by 2015 there will be approximately 10 million more poor than was the case in 1990. Income disparity between poor and rich is so wide that poverty reduction may require strong action such as land reform. The question remains as to whether the political leaders are ready to do this and would it be 'endorsed' by their international patrons (donors)? This research reveals the concern that political leaders in Bangladesh are more focused to work for their own material interests rather than reducing poverty. Rich nations are not offering their support to the extent they promised (0.7 percent of their GDP). IFIs are fettering the poor countries with conditions attached to aid within a hegemonic relationship. If poverty reduction is the agenda then conditions should not be included. If the purpose is to serve the interest of a global elite and multinationals, and promote plutocracy, then this exploitative aid and debt relationship should not take place in the name of 'poverty reduction'. The question is, are the national and international political leaders not aware of all these? The answer is a definite yes, as critics are constantly suggesting so. But it seems that political leaders are playing possum and happy with the 'slogan' of poverty reduction rather than committing resolute efforts to reduce poverty.

According to Rahman (2004), in Bangladesh, in recent years, poverty has been used as a means of obtaining foreign aid. She insists that, not only for the poor, but also for the betterment of the whole nation, such a trend needs to be abandoned. Poverty reduction is not all about increasing resources and consumption; rather it is about the elimination of inequality and the social injustice that causes poverty (Rahman 2004). We argue that statistics may suffice to influence the donors, but it is important to inter-mix the existing wisdom with what other people in the society are thinking about development, especially people at the bottom who are living with poverty. If perceptions of the poor are understood deeply and genuinely, then their struggle and

ingenious efforts to overcome poverty may throw new light on poverty reduction policies. We propose that future research should be carried out to explore the politics of international aid and its attached conditionalities taking Bangladesh as a case study to understand whether aid and conditionalities have accelerated social development or obstructed and manipulated local aspirations towards poverty reduction. Some theorists have argued that although aid has sometimes failed, it has supported poverty reduction in some countries and prevented worse performances in others (Radelet 2006). It has also been asserted that aid has played a very important role in improving national development through economic growth as well as the livelihoods of poor people in Bangladesh. According to Sachs (2005) and Green and Curtis (2005), it is not the aid rather Bangladesh's own ready-made garment industry is acting as a major source of recent progress.

In so far as a PRSP is a requirement for continuing future loans and debts, we propose a review of aid policies. This study would investigate the consequences of aid dependence in relation to the problem of political leverage exercised by various donors. This study should also look at the implications of such practice in fostering pro-poor development and ownership in a national policy-making process taking Bangladesh as a case. Aid givers claim that 'aid is essential for the survival (of the poor)', but if the statement 'aid works' is true then the poor would have been in much better shape than when the poor countries first began to receive it nearly half a century ago and aid's task should now be almost over (Hancock 1989). The proposed study would analyse donor conditionalities and Bangladesh's past and present aid utilisation to understand the actual impact of aid on national development. At the same time, this study would attempt to explore perceptions of conditionalities of aid and political leverage practised by the donors (if any) and whether these have really accelerated Bangladesh's development or impaired its progress. In contrast to aid (its conditionalities and political authority) this research would use the ready-made garment industry and foreign remittances as parallels. Such a study might provide further evidence, focusing on Bangladesh, of the need to rethink aid policies and conditionalities towards social development in poor countries.

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## Appendix – 1: Underlying principles of PRSP approach

### **Principles Underlying the PRSP Approach**

#### ***Country-driven***

- Country-ownership of a poverty reduction strategy is paramount. Broad-based participation of civil society in the adoption and monitoring of the poverty reduction strategy tailored to country circumstances will enhance its sustained implementation.

#### ***Results-oriented***

- An understanding of the nature and determinants of poverty, and the public actions that can help reduce it, is required for the formulation of an effective strategy.

- Medium- and long-term goals for poverty reduction, including key outcome and intermediate indicators, are needed to ensure that policies are well designed, effectively implemented and carefully monitored.

#### ***Comprehensive***

- Sustained poverty reduction will not be possible without rapid economic growth; macroeconomic stability, structural reforms and social stability are required to move countries to a higher path of sustainable growth.

- Poverty is multidimensional; specific actions are needed to enable the poor to share in the benefits from growth, increase their capabilities and well being, and reduce their vulnerabilities to risks.

- A poverty reduction strategy should integrate institutional, structural and sectoral interventions into a consistent macroeconomic framework.

#### ***Partnerships***

- Government development of a strategy can provide the context for improved coordination of the work of the Bank and the Fund, as well as that of regional development banks and other multilaterals, bilateral assistance agencies, NGOs, academia, think tanks, and private sector organizations.

#### ***Long-term Perspective***

- A medium- and long-term perspective is needed, recognizing that poverty reduction will require institutional changes and capacity building—including efforts to strengthen governance and accountability—and is therefore a long-term process.

- National and international partners' willingness to make medium-term commitments will enhance the effectiveness of their support for a poverty reduction strategy.

Source: IMF and IDA (1999 a), *Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers – Operational Issues*

Appendix – 2: List of the interviewees

No	Name of the interviewee	Occupation
1.	Dr Farzana Islam	Anthropologist, Professor, Dept. of Anthropology Jahangirnagar University
2.	Anisul Huq	Writer and Columinst, Deputy Editor The Daily Prothom Alo
3.	Shykh Seraj	Media Personnel, Head of News, Channel - I (a private television channel)
4.	Dr Quazi Mesbahuddin Ahmed	Member, NPPF, Secretary, General Economic Divisions, Govt. of Bangladesh
5.	Professor Nazrul Islam	Urban Poverty Researcher, Retired Professor, university of Dhaka
6.	Dr Muhammad Yunus	Chairman Grameen Bank, Noble Prize Winner
7.	Dr Badiul Alam Majumdar	Country Director, Hunger Project
8.	Dr Simeen Mahmud	Resaercher, Bangladesh Institute for Development Studies
9.	Shihab Uddin Ahamad	Head, Livelihood Security & Risk Reduction, ActionAid Bangladesh
10.	Borhanuddin Khan Jahangir	Social Scientist, Retired Professor University of Dhaka, Editor, Journal of Social Studies
11.	Abdul Muyeed Choudhuri	Former Adviser for the caretaker government and Executive Director, BRAC
12.	Mahfuz Anam	Editor, The Daily Star
13.	Anu Muhammad	Professor of Economics, Jahangirnagar University and Activist
14.	Sanjeeb Drong	Columnist, Journalist and Representative of ethnic minorities
15.	Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad	Chairman Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad and President, Bangladesh Economic Association
16.	Dr Atiur Rahman	Chairman, Unnayan Samunnay, Professor, Development Studies, DU
17.	Muhammad Jafar Iqbal	Writer, Professor; Computer and Electronics, Sylhet University of Science and Technology
18.	Abul Barkat	Professor of Economics Dhaka University, General Secretary, Bangladesh Economic Association
19.	Anwara Begum	BIDS, Thematic group leader for Gender and Children
20.	Rita Afsar	BIDS, Thematic group leader for Governance
21.	Arifur Rahman	Programme managaer, Manusher Jonno and campaigner on PRSP
22.	Rasheda K Choudhuri	Chairman, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE)
23.	Dr Kazi Shahabuddin	Director General, BIDS and Member for Independent monitoring committee for PRSP
24.	Dr M Asaduzzaman	Research Director, BIDS
25.	Rezaul Karim Choudhuri	Executive Director, SUPRO, Campaigner for

		popular participation on the PRSP
26.	Farida Akhter	Chairman UBINIG and Leader for Women Movement
27.	Muhammad Ismail Hossain	Professor, Economics Jahangirnagar University, Consultant for PRSP
28.	Hossain Zillur Rahman	Executive Chairman, PPRC, Lead Consultant for PRSP
29.	Khushi Kabir	Coordinator, Nijera Kori
30.	Professor Mozaffar Ahmed	Chairman, Transparency International, Bangladesh
31.	Helal Uddin Khan Arefeen	Professor of Anthropology, Dhaka University
32.	M M Akash	Professor of Economics, Dhaka University
33.	Dr Kaniz N. Siddique	Professor North South University, Member Core Drafting team of PRSP
34.	Kamaluddin Siddiqui	Head, NPFP, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister
35.	Selim Al-Deen	Writer, Professor of Drama and Dramtics, Jahangirnagar University
36.	Debapriya Bhattacharya	Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)



### Appendix – 3: Interview Schedule

#### Preamble:

I have been researching about civil society participation in development of the PRSP of Bangladesh since two years at University of Liverpool. This research would like to understand in what extent participation has been ensured from civil society (on behalf of poor) in Bangladesh's PRSP.

Initially in this interview, we would like to know from your experience about participation from people of different class and from various socio-political organisations. Later on, we would like to know your views about various dimensions of the idea of participation and its relation in formulating a national PRS in light of the case of Bangladesh's PRSP.

(First six questions should be delivered as this research wants to know the answers from respondent's experience. First question is the question and the others are supporting questions and will be only asked when necessary).

1. Would you please explain how the PRSP has included (or ensured) participation from poor people such as farmers, day labourers, fishermen, boatmen, rickshaw pullers, small shopkeepers, hawkers?

Or

Would you please tell us whether you think PRSP has incorporated participation from poor people such as farmers, day labourers, fishermen, boatmen, rickshaw pullers, small shopkeepers, hawkers?

2. Would you please explain how the PRSP has included (or ensured) participation from civil society, women groups, trade unions and other business groups?

Or

What will be your views if it is said that the PRSP has incorporated participation from civil society, women groups, trade unions and other business groups?

3. Please explain how the PRSP has included (or ensured) participation from NGOs, Social work groups and voluntary organisations?

Or

How do you feel whether PRSP has incorporated participation from NGOs, social work groups and voluntary organisations?

4. Please explain us in what extent the PRSP has been adopted participation for political parties, political organisations and the parliament?

Or

How would you explain whether the PRSP has ensured participation from political parties, political organisations and the parliament?

5. Please explain us whether the donors were involved and participated in the preparation of the PRSP? What was their role in the whole process? Whether all donors played similar role and participated equally?
6. Could you please tell us whether and how newspapers and mass media had played any role in the preparation of the PRSP? Can newspapers and mass media play any significant role in such important issue like poverty reduction in a national context?

At this stage of interview (what we have just discussed about various types of participation in Bangladesh's PRSP) we would like to know your views about various dimensions of the idea of participation and its connection to developing a national PRSP in light of Bangladesh's PRSP.

7. Based on these various aspects of 'participation' – how do you see the issue of 'participation'? Why such idea is important in preparation of formulating national poverty reduction strategy? When and how the necessity of participation has been felt?
8. Do you think it is possible to ensure actual participation from civil society and especially the poor by inviting or arranging meetings? People who usually come to these meetings say what the organisers want to listen – how would you comment on this statement? Organisers control the degree and level of participation in such meetings – would you please explain it from the PRSP consultation and participatory meeting?
9. To what extent the government and PRSP committee(s) was committed to ensure participation from civil society and poor you believe? What was the approach of them? What should be the approach in this regard?
10. After discussing various perspective of 'participation' how would you explain about the participatory nature of the PRSP? How participatory it was in your view?
11. In what extent do you think the views from civil society, poor people have been reflected in the PRSP?
12. What should be the nature of participation from the poor and civil society in a poverty reduction strategy paper? Mere participation in the meetings? Will these participation will be just for discussion or can play any role in decision making and policy formulation? How can participation from civil society and poor enrich developing a national poverty reduction strategy?
13. Why it is necessary to have a national poverty reduction strategy paper or is it at all important to have such a document? Before 2002/03 there was no (I)PRSP for Bangladesh and before 1999/2000 even there was no such concept – was not the government committed for alleviating poverty? Was not there few good progress in poverty reduction? How the necessity of a national PRSP can be analysed or conceptualised?

14. The PRSP has mentioned about regional and national level meeting - do you think participation from the people of grass-root levels or remote areas has been excluded? However do you believe the number (6) of 'face to face meeting with poor' is enough in Bangladesh's context? How do you feel whether people from other areas especially where the forms of poverty is much more worse and fierce would have been provided chance to participate - this could create more dimensions and impacts in the process of formulating PRSP?
15. In a case like developing a national PRSP - what are the constraints of ensuring and including participation from civil society, poor and general citizens? Please explain from your experiences?
16. How would you analyse for extending the scope of participation from poor, civil society and general citizens in formulating a national poverty reduction strategy? What will be your suggestions and recommendations in this regard?
17. Please tell us if you would like to let us know any other issue(s) regarding Poverty reduction, PRSP and participation poor and civil society in such process.

Thank you.

**Appendix – 4: Questionnaire used for online survey**

This survey will take only a few minutes and it is part of an ongoing research on Bangladesh’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) and civil society participation in its development. The research would like to explore in what extent the PRSP incorporated the ideas and views of civil society in Bangladesh and how these views enhanced the national poverty reduction strategy. The research will be greatly benefited from your participation and we highly appreciate if you kindly inform other Bangladeshi friends and colleagues about this survey. We ensure all the information will be kept confidential and only be used for research purpose.

Thanks in anticipation.

- Q1. Have you heard of Bangladesh’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)?
- Yes (Go to Q 2)   
 No (Go to Q19)
- Q2 When did you hear about it
- Very recently   
 In last 6 months   
 In between 6 months to 1 year   
 In between 1 to 2 years   
 In between 2 to 3 years
- Q3 Where did you here about it?
- Newspaper   
 Seminar/conference   
 Friends   
 Television or any other mass media   
 As Part of your occupation   
 Web site or research report of Government Organisation   
 Web site or research report of International/Non-Government Organisation   
 Others
- Q4 Have you read the PRSP?
- Yes (Go to Q5)   
 No (Go to Q16)
- Q5 Have you participated in any stage of its preparation?
- Yes (Go to Q 6)   
 No (Go to Q 7)
- Q6 In what capacity did you participate?
- As a consultant   
 As a professional   
 As an activist

As an ordinary citizen   
 Others

Q7 Do you think targets and indicators will be monitored regularly?  
 Yes   
 No

Q8 Did you give your opinion or views to the PRSP committee?  
 Yes (Go to Q 9)   
 No (Go to Q10)

Q9 How did you do that?  
 Attended any meeting   
 Emailed your views to the committee   
 Gave your views by telephoning the committee   
 Wrote column or letter in the newspaper   
 Wrote directly to the committee   
 Others (Please specify).....

Q10 Do you think the preparation of PRSP was participatory and included the views of general citizen?  
 Yes   
 No   
 Don't know

Q11 Do you think the proposed PRSP will be useful in reducing poverty in Bangladesh?  
 Yes   
 No   
 Not Sure

The survey will now include a number of statements below. Please let us know how strongly you agree or disagree with these.

Q12 The PRSP of Bangladesh represents the actual poverty situation in Bangladesh  
 Strongly agree   
 Agree   
 Neither agree nor disagrees   
 Disagree   
 Strongly disagree

Q13 The targets set in the PRSP are rational, appropriate and achievable  
 Strongly agree   
 Agree   
 Neither agree nor disagrees   
 Disagree   
 Strongly disagree

Q14 The success indicators in the PRSP will achieve genuine poverty reduction in Bangladesh

Strongly agree   
 Agree   
 Neither agree nor disagrees   
 Disagree   
 Strongly disagree

Q15 The preparatory process was highly dominated by the World Bank, the IMF and other donor organisations

Strongly agree   
 Agree   
 Neither agree nor disagrees   
 Disagree   
 Strongly disagree

Q16 Do you know that the PRSP is supposed to include the views of general citizen especially poor, civil society representative, women groups, local representatives, farmers and many others?

Yes   
 No

Q17 Do you think the process of formulating the PRSP offered adequate options to include the views of all relevant sections of society?

Yes   
 No   
 Don't Know

Q18 How would you rank the government and PRSP committee's commitment to ensure participation from general citizens (Please rank from 1 to 10 when 1 indicates the least and 10 reflects the highest level of commitment)?

Please rank here

Q19 Poverty Reduction Strategy at the country level should include the views from people in every possible way

Strongly agree   
 Agree   
 Neither agree nor disagrees   
 Disagree   
 Strongly disagree

Q20 In your view what steps or initiatives would ensure greater participation (Tick all that apply)?

Local (district/village) level consultation   
 National level consultation including

political leaders, civil society members,  
donors and others

Discussion in the Parliament

Wider publicity in newspaper, TV and  
other media

Others (Please specify)

Q21 Do you believe the government or the PRSP committee will be keen to incorporate the views of the general public in the next review of the PRSP?

Yes

No

Don't Know

Q22 What steps should be taken to ensure participation of the general public and other stakeholders in next review of PRSP?

Local (district/village) level consultation

National level consultation including  
political leaders, civil society members,  
donors and others

Discussion in the Parliament

Wider publicity in newspaper, TV and  
other media

Others (Please specify)

Q23 The idea of developing a National Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper is

Very useful

Somehow useful

Not at all useful

Q24 In the current socio-political situation of Bangladesh the PRSP would be

Implemented accordingly

Partially implemented

Unimplemented

Impossible to implement

Q25 Do you think the PRSP of Bangladesh will be reviewed regularly?

Yes (Go to Q26)

No (Go to Q27)

Q26 Will these reviews include wider participation and the committee will learn from mistakes?

Yes

No

Don't Know

Q27 The PRSP will serve the purpose of

The World Bank and the IMF

The World Bank, the IMF and other donors

Government of Bangladesh
Poor people of Bangladesh
All of them

Q28 The idea of preparing a national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper originated from

The World Bank
Government of Bangladesh
People of Bangladesh
NGOs
Donor agencies

Q29 In your view PRSP is

Important
Very important
Not at all important

Q30 In your view PRSP will

Help Bangladesh to reduce poverty
Be just one more policy paper
Act as a tool for continuing debt and loan relationship

Q31 At present where are you living?

Bangladesh
Abroad (Button for specification)

Q32 What is your home district? (Button for specification)

Q33 What is your age (Button for specification)

Q34 What is your occupation (Button for specification)

Q35 What is your sex

Male
Female

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR TIME

If you have any other comments to make concerning the PRSP and civil society participation in Bangladesh Please email us at [Kamruzzaman.md@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:Kamruzzaman.md@liverpool.ac.uk)



Or you can also send your comment in the following address:

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## **Appendix – 5: Sample coding framework used for qualitative data**

### **Poverty**

Definitions – whose definitions? Who defines?

Indicators

Bangladesh's status

Forms of poverty

Reasons (?)

Proposed policy or existing policy

Suggested policy from civil society

### **Civil Society**

What is civil society? Whose civil society?

Its role (i.e. role on poverty reduction)

Why civil society?

Pushed idea (pre-set) or already exist in the society? Recent changes and dimensions in the understanding.

### **Participation**

What is participation?

Whose definitions? Who defines?

Forms of participation. Mechanisms of participation.

Why participation

Who participates?

Impact of participation

Participation and poverty (assessment)

### **PRSP**

What is it?

Why is it?

Whose idea?

What's its participatory nature?

Who participated? When and How?

How 'participation' fed into the document?

What it contains?

Identifies poverty as

What it wants to achieve – why? Who set these targets? Poor people or civil society?

Agendas for poverty reduction – whose agenda are these?

Civil society and PRSP (participation into the PRS preparation)

Suggestion for PRSP (civil society recommendation, suggestion for PRSP)

*\*\*\*And other free categories as per reading*