

# Elite Perceptions of Poverty: Bangladesh

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## 1 Introduction

Let us imagine that in 2000 the UN Secretary-General is to bestow on five poor countries the 'National Poverty Commitment Award' for sustained efforts to alleviate poverty. Is Bangladesh likely to be on the list? Its reputation is against it. But let us for a minute forget reputation and list some facts about Bangladesh that indicate why it might be a serious competitor:

1. Like the East Asian countries that over several decades were successful in combining economic growth with enhanced income equality (Japan, Korea, Taiwan), Bangladesh is now ethnically relatively homogenous and has a relatively equal distribution of income.<sup>2</sup> It was not always ethnically homogenous, but the struggle for independence from Pakistan and post-independence politics have moved the country strongly in that direction. The larger non-Bengali Muslim population minorities – the Biharis and the tribals – have been driven to the margins of the society and the polity. Unlike in the past, large-scale business is now dominated by Bengali Muslims. There is some basis for Bangladeshis to think as Japanese and Koreans are said to think: 'We are all in this together. I can trust the government because it represents people like me. If I make sacrifices for the good of the nation, then some of the benefits are likely to accrue to people like me.'
2. Recent history and the enduring facts of geography have imposed on rich and poor alike the kind of shared suffering that creates a sense of national identity and provides the basis for vigorous anti-poverty measures on grounds of national solidarity. There have been two successful independence struggles over the last 60 years. The second, in 1970–71, was bloody and relatively protracted. Bangladeshis live

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<sup>2</sup> According to the most recent figures, the richest 10% of the population of Bangladesh accounts for 24% of national income (or consumption). This figure is typical for South Asia – India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka each register 25% – but much lower than Brazil (48%) and South Africa (47%) (World Development Indicators 1998, Table 2.8).

under the continuous threat of floods and hurricanes. While the poor undoubtedly suffer more, the rich cannot escape entirely.

3. Bangladesh's external political relations do not compromise any commitment to anti-poverty goals. The country is neither a serious player in geo-politics nor particularly dependent on any external power or alliance. No external force supports internal political forces opposed to the poor, or holds a veto over public policies intended to support the poor. Insofar as Bangladesh can be said to be dependent in any immediate political sense, it is on aid donors and international financial institutions concerned about the poverty impact of public policy and spending.<sup>3</sup>
4. Poverty in Bangladesh is extreme and overt – especially as it manifests itself in the very high dependence on human muscle power for the most basic tasks, such as transport, breaking bricks for construction work, and lifting irrigation water. Unlike in South Africa, it is difficult for Bangladeshi elites to avoid seeing poverty by not looking for it. Even in the elite residential areas of Dhaka, the poor are on the streets by day and camping out by night. Poverty in Bangladesh would appear, from any humanitarian perspective, to be a very pressing problem for government and for the non-poor.
5. The big development NGOs in Bangladesh – the Grameen Bank, BRAC, Proshika – are world famous for their anti-poverty work, especially in micro-credit and education. One might expect this to provide a stimulus and a model for effective public anti-poverty action more generally.
6. Bangladesh is a democracy, albeit an imperfect one.

On the basis of this cursory view of history and politics, one might hope that Bangladesh would indeed be in line for the UN award. Regrettably, our information on how the Bangladeshi elite understand

poverty considerably dampens this outbreak of optimism – but not in the worst way possible. The picture of elite understandings of poverty that we have constructed does not suggest heartlessness, the denial of affinity with the poor or responsibility for their welfare, contempt or the kind of ignorant fear that can so easily turn into support for authoritarian political 'solutions' to poverty. Instead, we find an elite group that (a) believe they have a real concern for the poor but actually know little about them; (b) would like to see more public action to tackle poverty but have little faith in the capacity of government to take effective action of any kind; (c) do not see poverty and the poor as a significant threat to their own lifestyle and welfare; and therefore (d) do not in *practice* see poverty as an urgent problem for any kind of action, public or private, and especially not for political action.

## 2 The Research

This article is based primarily on information from semi-structured interviews with 95 members of the Bangladeshi elite between November 1997 and April 1998. Most of the interviews were conducted by Naomi Hossain and Abul Hossain. We define 'elite' in terms of power: the capacity to influence events and discourses. Our sample included prominent members of the political, civil service and military elites, including some retired people; editors of English and Bangla newspapers and journals; business leaders from a range of industries and associations; directors of large NGOs and prominent NGO activists; social elites involved in charity work; student leaders; and prominent Islamic figures. Seventy-five of our respondents were based in Dhaka,<sup>4</sup> five in the second city of Chittagong and 15 in the provincial towns of Comilla and Rangpur. We have mainly treated all respondents as part of a national elite, but distinguished where appropriate between national (Dhaka-based) and regional (Chittagong, Comilla and Rangpur) elites. The interview topics included the extent and nature of poverty; allocation of responsibility, if any, for tackling poverty; the effectiveness of various types of anti-poverty interventions; the impact of poverty on the elites and society generally; policy priorities for

<sup>3</sup> Aid to Bangladesh accounted for about 10% of GNP in the 1980s, but fell rapidly from 9.9% in 1990 to 6.9% in 1994 and 3.9% in 1996 (*World Development Report 1996*, Table 3; and *World Development Indicators 1998*).

<sup>4</sup> This includes members of parliament representing non-Dhaka electorates.

government; and the international image of Bangladesh. Respondents were encouraged to raise issues that concerned them and shape the agenda for the interview. As far as possible, we have summarised patterns of response in quantitative form; this necessarily involved the exercise of judgement in interpreting responses.

### 3 The Bangladeshi Elite

This article appears to assume that the Bangladeshi elite had a homogenous set of views about the nature, causes, consequences and remedies of poverty. That is because the answers presented to us were similar across different categories of the elite, which in turn reflects the fact that the (national level) Bangladeshi elite is relatively homogenous – an elite, rather than a collection of distinct elites. The former Westernised, Urdu-speaking urban-based national elite has been replaced by a Bangla-speaking group concentrated in Dhaka. Dhaka dominates urban life in Bangladesh to a far greater extent than do the metropolises of other large poor countries.<sup>5</sup> The top echelons of business, formerly dominated by various minority ethnic groups, are increasingly occupied by Bengali Muslims (Kochanek 1993: 113–15; Sobhan and Sen 1988). Members of the elite straddle different economic and social sectors, and interact a great deal. Any member is likely to have friends, relatives, and friends of friends and relatives who sit in parliament, own garment firms, direct NGOs, edit newspapers, produce TV programmes, chair state banks, command regiments, control consultancy companies, preside over government departments and manage aid offices. While divided at the interpersonal level over who will be nominated for this electorate, awarded that contract, or get that job, the Bangladeshi elite is not divided by any great political or social cleavage. In class terms it is united, unified and dominant over Bangladeshi society. In answering questions about poverty, members of the elite do not feel driven to pursue some intra-elite conflict by proxy.

<sup>5</sup> We devised an Index of Metropolitan Concentration to measure this phenomenon: the proportion of the combined populations of the four largest cities that lived in the single largest city. This figure was 64% for Bangladesh (Dhaka), with its population of 120 million, compared to 36% for South Africa (Capetown), with a

### 4 Much Poverty: No Threat

The Bangladeshi elite have no illusions about the extent of poverty: 72% of our interviewees estimated that more than half of the population lived in poverty. Yet very few perceive poverty as a *direct* threat to their own well-being and any concerns expressed were nebulous:

I don't think they are worried about the poverty issue, but I think that most elites in Bangladesh are probably worried about the future of Bangladesh, whether elites' lives will be affected directly by this grinding poverty, the breakdown of law and order, whether there will be any jobs for their children, when they come back from the United States after getting their MA. That kind of thing. Is there a future for the elite? That kind of thing [prominent NGO leader].

This contrasts with the historical experience of European countries, where elites commonly perceived poverty as a direct threat to their own security and welfare through links to crime, disease, social and political unrest, military weakness and national inefficiency (Toye, this volume). In contemporary South Africa and Brazil (Reis and Cheibub 1994), elites view poverty as a cause of urban violence and crime.

Crime and immigration into cities do concern the Bangladeshi elite, but neither rural immigrants nor poor people generally were seen to be at the root of the crime problem (Table 1), and our national elite respondents, in particular, dismissed the idea of a link between crime and poverty:

I do not connect [the law and order situation] with poverty, because the majority of the poor people are law-abiding – you cannot generalise that we have many poor people so the law and order situation is deteriorating. No, there is no such connection [government secretary].

Organised crime is considered to be the major problem, but its perpetrators are generally identified as

total population of only 41 million; 49% for Brazil (Sao Paulo); and 34% for India (Mumbai). Among large poor countries, only Mexico has an Index of Metropolitan Concentration higher than that of Bangladesh (Mexico City, 75%) (*Times Atlas of the World 1997*: 64; Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

**Table 1: Is increasing urban migration of the poor linked to the rising crime rate?**

Responses	Number of responses
No	28 (43%)
The poor are not the main perpetrators of crime	6 (9%)
Yes, but crimes are not committed against the elite	2 (3%)
Yes	17 (26%)
No clear answer	12 (18%)
<b>All responses</b>	<b>65 (100%)</b>

'students', 'the drug addicts of the middle classes or rich men's sons', or the police themselves – in sum, not the poor. The police are believed to have little interest in protecting the children of the elite from assaults, or even to be somehow implicated in them. Elite families cannot protect themselves against organised violence or abuse of state power with the same degree of reliability that they protect their bodies, homes and offices against the ever-present poor – by installing high walls and security systems, and travelling everywhere by car. The fact that the less privileged regional and student elites perceive urban poverty as a more significant threat to their own well-being presumably reflects their inability to insulate themselves physically to the same degree.

This lack of an association between poverty and crime is consistent with the fact that our respondents tended to view the Bangladeshi poor as honest people struggling for simple respectability. In the past, European elites often viewed anti-poverty measures as part of a 'civilising mission' to the uncultured and untamed poor (Beier 1983; Himmelfarb 1991). In Bangladesh the elite talk in diametrically opposed terms: it is the poor and not the elite who are the repository of moral values. Although religious leaders were inclined to refer to a general moral decline, most respondents viewed the poor as more moral and less greedy than other people, and content with their simple lives:

Families in rural areas never think in terms of a motor car, a refrigerator, air conditioner and so on ... In Dhaka you drive, you have got all the tensions, you have got a lakh of taka in your hand; you go for another lakh, and another – it's like a craze is going on. But that fellow, the meal for the next one or two days – he doesn't bother about the rest of it; I think they are quite satisfied [former government secretary].

As one prominent newspaper editor put it: 'one does not really fear the poor people – poverty creates a sense of diffidence or dependence'. Diffidence and dependence combine with an inherent honest simplicity to provide an understanding of the poor – particularly the rural poor – as both absolutely and relatively unthreatening.

The Bangladeshi elite seemed similarly unconcerned about the public health threats from poverty and urban overcrowding which have so concerned other urban elites (Gooptu 1997; de Swaan 1988). In Bangladesh, forced evictions of *bustee* (slum) tenants appear to stem from conflicts over land, not from public health concerns (Khan 1998; Islam *et al.* 1997). The Bangladeshi elite do not link poverty with threats to their own health, perhaps because they have access to high quality private health care. They may be over-optimistic: research on poverty and health in other contemporary contexts suggests that the diseases of poverty continue to impact on the non-poor (Lipson 1998, Skold 1998, Stephens 1996, Wallace and Wallace 1997, WHO 1996).

Another threat prominent in the minds of 19th-century European elites was that of social and political unrest. Concerns that poverty might lead to social unrest rarely emerged during our interviews, and then only in the vaguest terms. One businessman claimed, typically, that revolution was 'not possible in the current world context'. One reason for the weakness of this concern seems to be the elite's sense of international mobility. Members have options to exit from Bangladesh: entry visas to the US and the UK, overseas bank accounts etc. Options are not preferences. Social status and wealth are in most cases dependent on living in Bangladesh. But the existence of the exit option contributes to psychological insulation from the worst consequences of poverty.

A second reason for this lack of concern about social unrest is that the current pattern of political conflict in Bangladesh effectively demobilises the poor and provides no grounds for the rich to fear that poverty will become politicised. The experiences of the war of Independence, and the continued presence among the present political leadership of members of families who played a leading role in that struggle, provide the current state and constitution with considerable legitimacy. Governments have been chosen democratically for some years. The alternating ruling parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh National Party, are near-identical in composition, support and policies.<sup>6</sup> Both have become dominated by businessmen and business financing (Khan *et al.* 1996). The rural population still suffers from widespread illiteracy and poor communications. Dhaka dominates the national political agenda. Unlike in, for example, India or Sri Lanka, rurality and a sense of rural deprivation have not become political issues in opposition to urban populations and interests.

The Bangladeshi elite can construct the poor as harmless and morally superior to the elite because the poor have no real political power. Rich-poor relations are viewed as relatively conflict-free. The potential for tension between rich and poor, some of the elite believe, is defused to an extent by the appearance of elite concern about the conditions of the poor, particularly through highly visible NGO and private charitable activities. As one former government member stated, 'I don't worry about it, because I believe that we are not terribly insensitive ... by and large I think we do care'.

Finally, there is absolutely no echo within the Bangladeshi elite of the kinds of concerns about the threat from poverty to national military strength that motivated so many public welfare initiatives in Britain from the late nineteenth century (especially during the Boer War). Our military respondents felt that they have a large enough pool of healthy recruits to draw on for the armed forces. The Bangladeshi government and elite are not preoccupied by potential military competition. If they were, they would focus much more on establishing and financing technologically complex air attack and

defence systems than on recruiting millions of fit young men into the armed forces.

## 5 Nebulous Poverty: Undifferentiated Poor

The weakness of any perceived threat to their own well-being because of the prevalence of poverty means that the Bangladeshi elite's attention is not drawn to the issue of poverty as a priority. However concerned members believe themselves to be about poverty, they do not view it as urgent, or as a problem distinct from the more generic problem of *national* poverty and underdevelopment. Poverty tends to be viewed as a label for these pervasive national conditions and problems. Most problems of society, economy, ecology and polity in Bangladesh can be and are talked about as poverty problems. Table 2 illustrates that issues which the elite consider to be national priorities for government to tackle are very similar to those which they consider to be causes of poverty.

The fact that the national policy priorities identified by the elite so closely parallel the causal explanations they give for poverty might imply that poverty is the issue of overriding importance. Alternatively, it may be that discussions of poverty are by default discussions of national problems. The practical implications are ambiguous. On the one hand, this implicit identification of poverty with national underdevelopment could, in principle, be used as a catalyst to a broader national development effort, as it was in the early decades of communist rule in China. On the other hand, where 'poverty' is conceptually assimilated into a standard repertoire of national development issues and lacks political priority, it becomes difficult to treat poverty as an issue in itself. That appears to be the situation in Bangladesh at present. Questions about 'poverty' easily slide into a nebulous discussion about national problems and priorities, in which the poor may feature only tangentially and indirectly.

This lack of an urgent concern with or clear focus on poverty seems closely related to the fact that most of our respondents were both unable and unwilling to make distinctions between different

<sup>6</sup> An analysis of their budgetary programmes revealed that the two major parties are not only committed to the same economic philosophy, but also share similar

development priorities even at a more detailed level' (Centre for Policy Dialogue 1997: 100).

**Table 2: Elite perceptions of national priorities and the causes of poverty**

Aggregated categories of responses	National priorities (number of times the response was given)	Causes of poverty (number of times the response was given)
Motivational factors among the poor themselves (awareness, religious orthodoxy, fatalism)	7 (4%)	16 (9%)
Education/skills/human resources	39 (22%)	34 (19%)
Political factors	22 (13%)	23 (13%)
Economic management	42 (24%)	47 (26%)
Structural inequalities in access to resources	30 (17%)	24 (13%)
Overpopulation and pressure on the land	14 (8%)	22 (12%)
Natural disasters, land erosion	3 (2%)	6 (3%)
Women's rights	2 (1%)	0 (0%)
Law and order	17 (10%)	0 (0%)
Donor dependence, colonialism	0 (0%)	10 (6%)
Total	(100%)	(100%)

categories of poor people, even for the hypothetical purposes of targeting anti-poverty activities. They tended to present the poor as an undifferentiated mass, and justified this partly on moral grounds: that it was not right to make what might be read as moral distinctions among a class of people who were generally viewed as inherently worthy. This is a great contrast to other situations, where moral distinctions – e.g. between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor – have helped mobilise support for anti-poverty measures, as well as punitive social reform (Squires 1990). Any distinctions made were usually on grounds of gender, and clearly intended as non-judgmental. Professional beggars were not generally seen as ‘genuinely’ poor, as they were believed to have a good income from begging. This reluctance to make distinctions within the poor accords with a high implicit value placed on the image of national ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. The existence of disadvantaged minority ethnic groups, such as the Biharis and *adivasis* (tribals), for example, was consistently underplayed by an insistence on national cultural uniformity.

Both the generalised quality of discussions of poverty and the stress on the homogeneity of the poor – and of Bangladeshi society as a whole – may reflect the elite’s limited contact with and experience of the poor. The language and concepts of poverty that they employ imply an undefined, remote ‘social movement’ against poverty, rather than pressure for direct, targeted and measurable

efforts by government. While South African elites tend to reduce the problem of poverty to an issue of race, the Bangladeshi elite extend the problem of poverty to encompass other national priorities.

## 6 Diffuse Solutions

Given that elite conceptions of the causes of poverty overlapped with their conceptions of national socio-economic priorities, it is no surprise that the solutions offered for poverty were often ‘developmental’ in nature, not involving a direct attack on poverty *per se*. Business leaders and civil bureaucrats were relatively optimistic that the ‘trickle-down’ mechanism would come into operation, i.e. that economic growth would itself make a major contribution to alleviating poverty. The more widespread view was that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient, and that the crucial path for poverty reduction is human resource development. Almost no support could be found for publicly funded safety nets for the poor, partly on grounds of cost, but mostly, it seemed, because the elite felt that this kind of social protection would not enhance productivity, and could not be seen as the responsibility of the state. This relates to the tendency of the elite to view direct assistance to individuals in need as the responsibility of other individuals or ‘society’, not of the state (see section 8). Those closest to ‘official’ government and donor discourses of poverty were better informed about direct poverty alleviation interventions such as public works, micro-enterprise and

feeding programmes, but in general, questions about solutions to poverty elicited very similar responses from all sections of the elite.

One belief that emerged clearly was that the poor should be helped, but helped to help themselves. Despite the wide range of factors identified as causes of poverty (see Table 2), education was the single most popular means of tackling poverty directly. Education served as a catch-all concept: intellectuals interpreted it in terms of improving political participation or empowerment, while business leaders viewed it as a means of improving practical skills. However, there was considerable agreement that education would make the poor 'conscious', and that this in turn would impact positively on their behaviour. The priority was universal primary education, which was felt to be achievable, given the recent increases in enrolment rates.

The Bangladeshi elite, highly educated themselves, undoubtedly value education. But claiming education to be the best solution to poverty effectively diverts attention away from inequality, and onto less political issues, like the mentality of the poor. Implicitly, if education is the best solution to poverty, the causes of poverty – although not the fault of the poor – must be inherent within the poor, rather than in socioeconomic relations or patterns of inequality. Interpretations of developmental success elsewhere also shape perceptions of what constitutes desirable poverty alleviation. Reference was frequently made to Asian success stories as models for Bangladesh, including Kerala and Sri Lanka as well as the 'Asian Tigers'. It is not clear that these successes have been analysed closely as the lessons drawn were restricted to the contribution of education. Asset redistribution and state-sponsored social security were not options which the Bangladeshi elite has seriously considered.

We were struck by this virtual consensus that education is *the* solution to poverty, and probed for the exact mechanisms through which education might be expected to have this effect. There was strong agreement that the poor were generally 'unaware' or 'unconscious', and that this was an important determinant of their behaviour. The most concrete responses included the suggestions that education would enable the poor 'to take advantage of the opportunities available to them'; to plan for the

future and their families; and to learn income-generating skills. Many interviewees argued for a pragmatic focus on the next generation, accepting that this would not help those currently destitute. Although landlessness and lack of access to resources were identified as causes of poverty (Table 2), the priority accorded to education as the fundamental solution implies a belief that redistribution of resources would not in itself be an effective remedy. This interpretation derives from our interviews, not from abstract logic: our respondents repeatedly suggested that the poor currently do not have the *mental* resources to make use of any material resources directed their way.

## 7 Limited Faith in the State

When asked about the record and performance of state agencies in anti-poverty programmes, many of our respondents cited specific cases, notably in education, fertility control, and the activities of the Local Government Engineering Department. But the overall image of state performance was poor: only a fifth of respondents believed that government is in practice effective at reducing poverty (Table 3).

There were, however, significant differences among sections of the elite in both their knowledge and their evaluation of public action. With few exceptions, those not directly involved in anti-poverty programmes were poorly informed, and had even less information about successes. Many respondents described such programmes as 'an eyewash', and the outcome of governments leaping on successive donor-driven bandwagons: 'These are all just fads, first poverty alleviation, then environment, then violence against women' (Jatiya Party MP). 'State elites' – i.e. politicians, public servants and military officers – had greater faith in the actual and potential for effective state anti-poverty action than other elites (Table 3). Public servants, in particular, displayed more detailed knowledge of existing programmes and policy.

Table 4 provides an even clearer indication of weak faith in the capacity of the Bangladeshi state. If the state were to play a role in poverty alleviation, it would have to raise more financial resources. Because aid inflows are fast declining, this implies additional taxation. The performance of Bangladeshi governments in raising revenue

**Table 3: Is government effective at reducing poverty?**

Responses	State elites (politicians, public servants, military officers)	Other elites	All responses
No	9 (36%)	23 (53%)	32 (47%)
Ambivalent	1 (4%)	4 (9%)	5 (7%)
Less effective than NGOs	0 (0%)	3 (7%)	3 (4%)
Potentially	8 (32%)	8 (19%)	16 (24%)
Yes	7 (28%)	5 (12%)	12 (18%)
<b>All responses</b>	<b>25 (100%)</b>	<b>43 (100%)</b>	<b>68 (100%)</b>

through taxation is dismal, even allowing for the overall poverty of the nation.<sup>7</sup> Our elite respondents recognised this in responding to our question about their willingness to pay for more and better poverty alleviation programmes through additional taxation. Half of them felt unable to answer, on the grounds that it was simply unrealistic to assume that government could actually collect more revenue or use it for any specified purpose.

## 8 Action Outside the State

The relative invisibility of state anti-poverty programmes contrasts with the detailed information displayed about the activities of development NGOs. Many NGOs received warm praise for their perceived successes and Grameen Bank, in particular, was credited with having improved the international image of Bangladesh. Some concerns were raised, usually that NGOs were 'becoming more like businesses', and not functioning as private voluntary or charitable organisations. That in turn raises

a question about norms relating to responsibility for anti-poverty measures that we can only touch on here. Many respondents alluded to ideas of personal religious, moral and social responsibility for assisting the poor that have strong roots in elite Bengali Muslim culture. But it is not clear how far this personal responsibility would be discharged by supporting development NGOs, which are after all large, bureaucratic, relatively impersonal and in many respects like state agencies. The character and scale of the large NGOs means they straddle simple public-private conceptual boundaries. In the same way, 'public' officials – politicians, civil servants and so on – often conceptualise their responsibilities to poor citizens in personalised and charitable terms.

What does emerge clearly is that Bangladeshi elites not only have limited faith in the capacity of the state to tackle poverty, but they believe, in a normative sense, that poverty is not the responsibility of the state alone. Minorities among our respondents have been classified as believing that tackling poverty is (a)

**Table 4: Would you support increasing taxation for more and better poverty alleviation programmes?**

Response	Number of responses
No	15 (25%)
Ambivalent	5 (8%)
Collection is the problem	28 (47%)
Yes	12 (20%)
<b>All responses</b>	<b>60 (100%)</b>

<sup>7</sup> It is an indication of the poor management of public finances in Bangladesh that the most recent – and then only provisional – figures on government revenue that are sufficiently reliable to be included in the IMF's

*International Financial Statistics Yearbook* refer to 1985. At that point, government revenue accounted for 10% of GNP – little more than half of the typical figure for countries at similar income levels (IMF 1997).



**Table 5: Who is ultimately responsible for poverty alleviation?**

Responses	National elites		Regional elites		State elites		Non-state elites		All elites	
Government alone	20	38%	0	0%	7	35%	13	30%	20	31%
Government, NGOs, individuals, society	23	43%	10	91%	11	55%	22	50%	33	52%
NGOs, individuals, society	10	19%	1	9%	2	10%	9	20%	11	17%
<b>All responses</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100%</b>

solely the state's responsibility or (b) not the business of the state at all (Table 5). These are gross classifications of what are often quite nuanced views. For example, one business leader argued:

In fact it is not *whether* [the government] should engage in anti-poverty work, their entire mission should be to combat poverty, but there is a difference. Government should go in for attacking poverty – a good government should do it on a macro-level, by putting an enabling environment in place which attacks poverty. But one doesn't expect the government to go in and do the fieldwork, direct anti-poverty work – that should be left to the NGOs or the private sector or the charities or whatever.

That conception of the relative roles of government and NGOs is broadly typical of most of our respondents, who believe that responsibility for alleviating poverty should be shared between the state and various non-state actors (Table 5). There were few clear differences among sections of the elite in this respect. Only the regional elites – i.e. people living in the smaller towns rather than in Dhaka – stand out as having little faith in the state acting alone. This presumably reflects their relative distance from state power and corresponding reluctance to sanction any purely 'statist' project.

## 9 Conclusions: Potential for Action?

Why is Bangladesh unlikely to win the UN's 'National Poverty Commitment Award' in 2000, despite the supportive conditions listed in section 1? We have given several answers here. The elite do not see the poor as a threat or poverty as an urgent problem. In class terms they are united and dominant over their society. No significant section of the elite is driven to mobilise the poor around concerns

about poverty in pursuit of some intra-elite conflict. The anti-poverty agenda is not pressing, and is easily assimilated into a national development agenda. Insofar as poverty is understood to have a specific solution, that lies in education, and therefore in the long term. And the Bangladeshi state is not believed to be effective.

But the long-term situation is not necessarily so bleak. Bangladesh might just be a serious competitor for the National Poverty Commitment Award in 2005 or 2010. Our reasons for thinking so? Some, of a long-term nature, are given in section 1. We demonstrated in later sections that the Bangladeshi elite do have a relatively benign attitude and sense of responsibility towards the poor. They do not display that sense of fear or contempt that can lead to punitive and authoritarian measures to exclude the poor from politics or from the public spaces that the elites wish to enjoy. They see in their development NGOs a mechanism through which poverty can be tackled effectively. Their views about the causes of and solutions to poverty are relatively consensual: there is little radical disagreement. There is *some* material – cultural, ideological, institutional and practical – which could be used to ignite, if not a raging conflagration against poverty, then at least a steady flame. What will it take to set the flame alight? Perversely, in the light of the title of this bulletin, the answer may lie not in any discovery of a distinctive set of Bengali Muslim elite conceptions of poverty, but in the high degree of implied convergence about the potential *solutions* to poverty between (a) our elite respondents and (b) much of the conventional wisdom of the international development community. Let us look first at this convergence.

The views of the Bangladeshi elite on poverty are influenced by the 'aid business'. The country was until recently heavily aid-dependent. Many of

Bangladesh's aid donors have focused on poverty. The influence of aid is most immediately evident in the terms that many of our respondents used to talk of poverty. Aid-speak terms – 'enabling environment', 'two-pronged attack on poverty', 'human resource development', 'intra-household distribution' – cropped up frequently and unbidden. The influence of the aid business may extend beyond the purely verbal to shape elite perceptions of poverty in a more profound sense. We cannot prove this in any strict sense. We were, however, struck by the high degree of overlap between our respondents' preferred anti-poverty strategies and the so-called 'new poverty agenda' – the World Bank-based 'orthodoxy' articulated in the 1990 *World Development Report on Poverty* (Lipton *et al.*, 1992). The major elements common to the two 'strategies' are: emphasis on human resource development and alleviating poverty by making the poor more productive; implicit agreement on giving priority to economic growth, but with a bias toward the poor ('pro-poor growth' in aid-speak); scepticism about asset redistribution, state action and direct transfer of resources to the poor; a favourable view of NGO and non-state initiatives generally; and a willingness to recognise that poverty might have a gender dimension. The only component of the 'new poverty agenda' rejected by our respondents is 'safety nets', i.e. publicly funded programmes to transfer resources to the most vulnerable as a last resort, where other means of supporting them fail.

It is not really important to our story how far the views of the Bangladeshi elite on solutions to poverty are shaped by contact with the international aid community or merely convergent with them. For that convergence provides intellectual, moral and practical leverage to Bangladeshi politicians and social activists, who might feel inspired to construct a more pressing 'anti-poverty agenda' for Bangladesh than the one that currently exists. Local elite and international views converge particularly strongly over the priority to be given to education, especially to primary education, with a window open to the importance of girls' education. A number of other factors provide the basis for a relatively united front between the Bangladeshi state, the elite, the NGOs and aid donors to tackle poverty through an emphasis on (female, primary) education. They include: high economic returns to primary education in poor countries (Psacharopoulos

1994; World Bank 1995); the contribution to reduced fertility of female education (World Bank 1995); the rapid growth of female employment in the Bangladeshi garment industry, which can be used to argue for female education on grounds of national economic efficiency; and the fact that BRAC and other NGOs have demonstrated that highly cost-effective elementary (non-formal) education programmes can be run on a massive scale (Jain 1996).

One important potential role for concerned politicians and social activists is ideological entrepreneurship: constructing and disseminating arguments about the urgency of anti-poverty interventions that will command wide support and lead to interventions that are financially and organisationally feasible. The aid donors and the NGOs need little convincing about the potential value of (female) primary education. This needs first to be presented to the elites, in convincing local idioms linking the success of the project to the welfare of elites, whether in terms of international prestige, a more reliable workforce, or some other terms. Second, the same kind of ideological creativity needs to be employed to try to ensure that getting more poor girls into school is only the thin end of the wedge. What is the use of these efforts to get girls into school if they are too malnourished to study well? Something needs to be done about their diet. But they are also missing too much school because of illness. Then, are they getting the very best out of school when they go home to illiterate mothers? We will put a stop to the speculation here by pointing out that it is speculation, not fantasy. For example, substantial elements of a 'welfare state' for mothers and children were created in the United States in the nineteenth century on the basis of similar arguments about the centrality of healthy, educated youngsters to the future of the nation, and the importance of looking after the health and income of mothers as a means of providing for youth (Skocpol 1992). These may not be quite the right arguments for Bangladesh today. And it is not enough simply to translate them into Bangla. But there are arguments already floating around Dhaka that, appropriately shaped, refined and welded together, could become powerful levers on behalf of the poor by encouraging the elite to see active anti-poverty measures as more urgent and more in their own long-term interests.

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