

## When Donors Collide: The Implications of Contradictory Interventions in a Bangladesh Agrarian Environment

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### Abstract:

What are the implications of donor agencies pursuing contradictory approaches in the same locale? The question is interesting for two reasons. The first is that, while critical case studies of individual interventions are common, “donor collision” is not widely reported. The phenomenon poses an alternative explanation for the failure of donor interventions that challenges universalist assertions by both modernists and post-developmentalists. The second reason is that the future of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) and the interventions of a Global North-dominated donor infrastructure in the Global South are once more topical. Recent contributions have debated the implications of current trends for ODA and its associated policies and practices, collectively defined by Gillian Hart as “big D” (Hart, 2001). Such trends include rising middle classes in the Global South and economic convergence with the North, a “universal” set of Sustainable Development Goals and the now looming challenge of a changing climate.

The global problem of contested rights in “agrarian environments” is of particular relevance to these debates. The need to protect the “lungs of the earth” was assuming a higher profile due to the rising urgency of changing climate before the Covid-19 pandemic. With future pandemic risk associated with land use change in biodiversity hotspots, a global focus on conservation and biodiversity is likely to sharpen. The question of how to reconcile conservation outcomes with the land rights of forest dwelling populations is, therefore, of general and increasingly urgent importance.

The study is set in an agrarian environment in Bangladesh, where for twenty years different donor agencies have pursued contradictory approaches to this general and urgent question. On the one hand, USAID has supported Forest Department interventions, which are broadly exclusionary and are predicated on the negation of the local Indigenous Peoples’ land rights. On the other, various agencies have supported such rights, explicitly challenging Forest Department authority over the area. Through analysing why and how donors collide in this instance, the study sets out a number implications for general development theory and practice. The three most important are that, first, more work is required on inter-donor conflict as a cause of development failure. Second, the future of big D will continue to be dominated by very old questions of politics, participation and institutions. Finally, blanket endorsement of “national partnership,” particularly in more authoritarian contexts, is likely to result in significant human and environmental costs.

**Keywords:** indigenous peoples, forest, deforestation, land rights, Bangladesh.

### Introduction

The future of development remains a lively source of academic debate, with a number of recent contributions discussing the future of the Global North-dominated infrastructure of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) in a rapidly international context (Horner, 2019; Lewis, 2019; Horner and Hulme, 2017; Manuel-Navarrete and Pelling, 2015; Hart, 2001). Contested questions about the future of donor interventions in the Global South, collectively labelled as “big D” by

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Gillian Hart (2001), are rooted in an inconclusive appraisal about its past and present. Several recent case studies offered by critical development scholars continue to highlight “old” reasons for development failure. The “anti-political” nature of interventions, frequently underpinned by “tyrannical” participatory mechanisms and the creation of “empty” institutions apparently remain common flaws. Through permitting local elites to divert efforts towards their own ends, such features frustrate any empowering or emancipatory impact that programmes might have aspired to achieve.

Several of these critical studies have focused on “agrarian environments” (Agarwal and Sivaramakrishnan, 2000); environmentally significant locales that are contested between the people that live there and state conservation strategies that are often exclusionary and highly militarised. (Behn and Bakker, 2019; Marijnen and Verweijin, 2016; Fairhead et al., 2013). Such scholarship generally comprises case studies of single donor interventions (Marijnen, 2017). What are the implications, however, of two donor agencies pursuing contradictory approaches in the same geographic locale? This question arose through an inductive route. While working in a Bangladesh agrarian environment, I had the chance to observe just such a clash between donor strategies. On the one hand, USAID was supporting a conservation project closely aligned with the Forest Department’s exclusionary “Protected Area” apparatus. On the other hand, a number of other agencies were promoting the land rights of the local forest dwellers. Moreover, this inter-donor conflict was not new; the same impasse has existed in the area for at least 20 years.

Assessing the implications of such “donor collision” for development theory and practice is an interesting research question in its own right, as it offers a novel explanation for development failure. The question also directly bears on the current debate surrounding the future of big D. It is likely that development actors will accord “agrarian environments” more importance in the future. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the need to protect the “lungs of the earth” was assuming a higher profile with the rising urgency of a changing climate and its increasing domestic political salience in the Global North (Meyer, 2020). In view of the strong associations between future zoonotic disease risk and tropical forested regions subject to significant land-use change (Allen et al., 2017; Scanlan, 2020), donor focus on biodiversity and conservation is likely to sharpen more rapidly and to a greater extent in the wake of the pandemic.

Answering this research question required addressing the linked sub-questions of why and how these respective agencies came to pursue conflicting strategies. Reflexive ethnographic study revealed different approaches taken by the respective donors to the interlinked and long-standing problems of politics, participation and institutions. This is explicable theoretically through the concepts of *bricolage* and forum-shopping; donors on opposing sides of the conservation vs land rights divide have been able to assemble different configurations of interests and discourses, justified by separate concepts within current development theory and practice. This divergence is shaped primarily by respective donor approaches to “partnership” with the Forest Department, and permitted by the “fuzziness” of big D’s conceptual architecture.

In what follows, the article first develops the argument that the future of big D will continue to be dominated by long-standing problems relating to politics, participation and institutions, despite changes in the international context. The theoretical concepts of bricolage and forum shopping are introduced before a description of the field site and associated questions of methodology. I then explain research findings and discuss them in relation to present debates and theory, before offering some concluding remarks.

## **Back to the future of “big D Development”: politics, participation and institutions**

The global context has radically changed since the emergence of an international development establishment, including bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, in the 1940s and 50s. The rise of affluent middle classes in parts of Asia and Africa, the resulting convergence and increasing interconnectivity between North and South, a “universal” set of Development Goals and the

threat of a warming climate are some prominent examples. The implications for the future of international donor interventions in the Global South that collectively constitute big D has been the subject of recent debate in the literature (Lewis, 2019; Horner, 2019; Horner and Hulme, 2017; Manuel - Navarrete and Pelling, 2015; Hart, 2001).

Uncertainty concerning the future of big D interventions is rooted in an inconclusive appraisal of their past and present performance. Based on the economic data alone, development has largely failed in achieving its goals (Deaton, 2013). In explaining this general failure, both the theory of development as an “anti-politics machine” and its refinement as a process of “rendering technical” (Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007) retain explanatory power in the present day (Hickey and Seekings, 2020; Behn and Bakker, 2019). Tania Li’s concept of “rendering technical,” whereby important political tensions and power-relations are excised from a development problem in order to render it amenable to “scientific” solutions has added to our understanding of how “anti-politics” functions in practice (Li, 2007: 7). This in turn is related to problems concerning “participation” and “institutions”. Academic analysis of these issues is at least thirty years old. Regardless of the changing context, big D’s future looks set to resemble its past in several important respects.

Crudely speaking, there remain two schools of thought. The first comprises (relative) optimists, whose work explores questions of how to “get things right”. Achieving equitable outcomes for the poorest and most marginalised is possible if their “effective” participation can be ensured within institutions that allow for the reconfiguration of local power dynamics (Cleaver and de Koning, 2015; Cleaver, 2012; Sterling et al., 2017; de Vente et al., 2016; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). The second school consists of irreconcilable post-developmentalists, who argue the whole big D enterprise is unworkable. According to this view, participatory techniques and the focus on “community institutions” constitute a tyrannical complex of knowledge and practice that inevitably serves to further the interests of elites, the State, or both. Collectively this complex comprises a trojan horse, allowing the entry of the neoliberal paradigm into the governance of the individual and rendering equitable outcomes impossible (Esteva, 2014; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Rose, 1996; see also Mosse, 2004: 642-644).

Beyond critiques focused on development practice at the intervention level lie broader debates, where “governance” is counterposed as the apolitical and, therefore, more acceptable counterpart to “politics”, and “redistribution” as a sanitised alternative to “justice” as an intermediate objective for securing equitable outcomes (Myers et al., 2018: 315). These stem from the diversity of what big D does and questions about what it should be doing, “where it has been argued that [NGOs] should work politically to build alliances for structural change /.../ mobilising against injustice [rather than] delivering contracted services on behalf of states and donors” (Lewis, 2019: 2, 6; Bebbington et al., 2007). The role of states is crucial here: “national” ownership of development efforts by recipient Governments and “inclusive development partnerships” between donors and States are core principles of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation, established by the 2011 Busan Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD, 2011; GPEDC, 2016; GPEDC, 2019). But then how is it possible to reconcile GPEDC with “mobilising against injustice”, particularly in authoritarian contexts?

It is important to avoid romanticising either the concept of “local community” employed by mainstream institutionalism (Ostrom, 1990; North, 1991) or social movements. It has long been recognised that “communities” are internally and inequitably differentiated along gender, class and often ethno-religious lines (Chambers, 1983). More recently, “critical institutionalism” emphasises how local community institutions like water-sharing groups, village councils, resource management committees, etc., often simultaneously command great local legitimacy while entrenching inequitable distribution (Cleaver, 2012; see also Ishihara et al. 2017). Social movements can similarly embody various exclusionary or “reactionary” practices even as they work towards progressive aims (Merriman, 2019).

At the same time, NGOs have nonetheless historically played a role “holding government to account”, which sits in obvious tension with “national ownership” (Lister and Nyamugasira, 2003).

In more extreme cases, donors' support for the "boomerang" tactics of social movements, doing an "end run" around sovereign governments to bring international pressure to bear on those same governments, seems to be at odds with "inclusive partnerships" according to the GDEC definition (Temper, 2018; Borrás et al., 2008; Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Moreover, these concrete examples suggest at least a degree of variation in how big D works in different contexts and what it does, grounded in varying approaches to the three questions of politics, participation and institutions. Whatever faults one could point to in the functioning of *La Via Campesina* as an organisation, it could hardly be accused of erasing politics through a process of rendering technical, and therefore neither in this instance could Oxfam-Novib, which funded LVC at least as recently as 2008 (Borrás et al., 2008). If programmes and policies depend on the active "enrolment" of a range of different actors and interests (Mosse, 2004: 646 – 647), theoretically there should be alternative potential coalitions of such actors and interests to enroll, in pursuit of different policies.

To the extent that such different coalitions might be mobilised by different interventions operating concurrently in the same locale, the potential for "collision" is clear and offers a novel explanation for the failure, or at least partial failure, of both interventions. This draws attention to how such coalitions are assembled in practice, and why and how *opposing* coalitions of interests and actors might be marshalled by different donor agencies. In engaging with differences in these processes of enrolling actors and interests, the study draws on the concepts of *bricolage* and forum shopping.

The first iteration of *bricolage* as a sociological theory was its use to describe the tendency of individuals to use and combine existing thoughts and concepts in a "DIY" fashion to create something new (Levi-Strauss, 1966). Cleaver (2012) expanded the concept to explain how local institutions are complex amalgams that borrow certain aspects of what development planners intend, and combine them with other, pre-existing customs, practices and ideas. This is in distinction to the dominant view that such institutions can be rationally "designed" by development planners and imposed in a top down fashion.

"Forum Shopping" is a concept used in developing contexts where conditions of legal pluralism permit several options when pursuing dispute resolution, and "individuals and groups /.../ appeal to the authority they perceive to be most supportive to their interests or claims" (German et al., 2016: 8; von Benda-Beckmann, 1981). On the other side of the "counter", these divergent sources of authority are themselves "engaged in trying to acquire and manipulate disputes from which they expect to gain political advantage," (von Benda-Beckmann, 1981: 117) and this theoretical lens articulates well with other scholarship on institutions involved in natural resource governance (German et al. 2016).

## **Studying sensitive issues in an agrarian environment: Research context and methodology**

All of the tensions and processes discussed thus far are observable in forested sites across the Global South. Regardless of local contextual differences, a massive case study literature describes four common properties of what is a general, global problem (Marijnen and Verweij, 2016; Gerber, 2011; Ghazoul et al., 2010; de Schutter, 2010; Li, 2007; Amanor, 2005; Tsing, 2005; Escobar, 1995; Vandergeest, 1996; Peluso, 1992). First, mutually exclusive territorial claims are advanced by forest dwellers and State Forest Departments. Second, Forest Departments avoid the question of rights conferred through first settlement by emphasising the importance of securing conservation outcomes, blaming deforestation on small holder "livelihood dependency". Third, forest communities counter this narrative with accounts of state-led projects converting forest to cash crop plantations, agro-forestry, etc., in a way that benefits distant elites. Finally, the result is an uneasy stalemate, continuing deforestation, varying degrees of conflict between state and community, and the impoverishment of the latter. Climate change has recently been added to the repertoire of environmental discourses justifying the exclusion of small-holders from forests (Fairhead et al., 2013), despite the fact that such discourses have often not withstood critical

scrutiny (Fairhead and Leach, 1996). Neo-Malthusian models of forest loss are also unable to satisfactorily account for global deforestation processes (McConnell and Keys, 2005).

Conflict between community and state is most severe where the exclusion of the former reinforces their pre-existing ethnic or religious marginalisation. This strong association between the natural world and ethnic assertion is demonstrated by the historical co-development of conservation initiatives and counter-insurgency doctrine (Dunlap and Fairhead, 2014), as the state has attempted to quell “Ecological Nationalisms” (Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan, 2006). On the other hand, a global movement to decentralise forestry government has ostensibly attempted to bridge the divide. On paper, “Community” or “Joint Forestry” strengthens forest communities’ rights, bolsters conservation outcomes and reduces conflict by building co-operative relations between these communities and the state (Agrawal, 2002). These efforts are often criticised as superficial, serving as an instrumentalisation of “empowerment” rhetoric to further state control as governments “recentralise while decentralising” (Ribot et al., 2006), echoing the “participation as tyranny” debate discussed above. The land rights of forest dwellers and the claims of national Forest Departments, therefore, continue to comprise “battlegrounds of legitimacy” in many localities (Ishihara et al., 2017).

This general global problem is often present in South Asian forests, where many examples of “ecological nationalism” and associated conflict remain unresolved (Ludden, 1999; Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan, 2006). Joint Forestry Management in the region has a troubled history and assessments of its relative success and failure are mixed at best (Damodaran, 2006; Poffenberger, 2000; Poffenberger and McGean, 1998; Gain, 1998). Bangladesh is no exception; scant remaining forested terrain is home to many of the estimated 54 ethnic groups that self-identify as “indigenous peoples” (*adivasis*) and are highly marginalised (Barkat et al., 2009; Bal, 2007). *Adivasi* ancestral land claims invariably conflict with those of the Forest Department (Barkat, 2016; Gain, 1998), a situation which was a major cause of the Chittagong Hill Tracts conflict (1975 – 1997). Key sections of the Peace Accord that brought the conflict to an end in 1997 remain unimplemented, including those relating to land and forest administration (Adnan and Dastidar, 2011; Mohsin, 2002; 1997). Human rights violations remain part of everyday life for *adivasis* in both the CHT and the plains districts (Kapaeeng Foundation, 2018; Chowdhury and Chakma, 2016). This includes the use of “false cases” by the Forest Department against prominent community leaders as a way of bringing them to heel.

The article is based on extensive work experience and fieldwork in Bangladesh, which I first visited in 2008. Methods used include oral histories, in-depth interviews and participant observation. Access was achieved initially with the support of “ATS”, one of the community organisations described below, although the research was conducted autonomously from this organisation. A research assistant, recruited independently, provided translation support. Interviews were conducted in both Bengali and the local Indigenous language, depending on the respondent.

I have used a high level of anonymisation when presenting data. Names of individuals and organisations are all pseudonyms as is the name of the research site, which I have called the *Bondesh* (“Forest Country” in Bengali). This anonymisation has also included the conscious omission of a great deal of context. This is because of the need to give respondents plausible deniability; the study’s key evidence relates to highly sensitive intra-community issues. This approach and the level of anonymisation were discussed at length with key respondents and my research assistant; data are presented in this form with their agreement.

The omission of contextual detail, which some readers may find surprising, is defensible both in ethical terms and with reference to the research question. An assessment of the causes of deforestation in the *Bondesh*, for example, is a separate research question that would require at least a dedicated paper. My concern is to establish simply that different donors support opposing interpretations of the trend of ecological degradation. It is enough to note that the *Bondesh* displays all four properties of the common global problem of state-community conflict in agrarian environments referred to above, and that the plight of the local community would be intelligible

to counterparts from the Amazon to Sulawesi, regardless of contextual differences. I use the broad terms “Indigenous Peoples,” “IPs” or *adivasis* when referring to this local community.

The article adopts the “reflexive” social science epistemological stance, eschewing claims to objectivity and distance through recognising the “embeddedness” of enquiry (Burawoy, 2009). The researcher in this sense is not a disinterested actor, administering antiseptic research tools in a manner that successfully screens out the “noise” of context, but rather embraces the fact of the interview as a social encounter as a valid part of research. The article presents information through a series of vignettes, drawing on the anthropological tradition of “thick description” (Geertz, 1983). The article brings this thick description into dialogue with existing theory, with the aim of improving, revising and “reconstructing” it (Burawoy, 2009).

## A conversation in Ben’s house

It is early in the fieldwork process and I am talking to “Ben”, an indigenous leader currently serving on a Natural Resource Committee established by the Natural Resource Management Programme (NRMP). The NRMP is a programme run by a US-based international development consultancy on behalf of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), notionally to support community efforts to protect the natural environment in Bangladesh. It has a number of projects across the country, including in the *Bondesh*, working in close partnership with the Government of Bangladesh, primarily through the Ministry of the Environment and Forests. Speaking to me through my research assistant, Prashanta, Ben tells me how the forest disappeared as the indigenous villages grew larger. He talks of the need to create buffer zones around the villages, and how best to do this. He hopes that they will soon receive additional funding from NRMP to create more tourist infrastructure in the area, which will then be able to “sustainably finance” the buffer zones.

Prashanta had not interjected once during the interview, but once we are a safe distance from Ben’s house, and I ask him what he thought of the responses, he nearly shouts the words “*this is completely wrong. His thinking, it is completely on the wrong track.*” I am taken aback; I have never seen Prashanta angry. We stop at a tea shop which he “trusts”, where he believes we can speak freely without our conversation being overheard and relayed to others. As Prashanta explains the reasons for his objections, it becomes clear that the explanation for the forest’s disappearance, and the proposed remedy, were very old ideas. Prashanta had heard it all before, and not from Ben.

## The institutional landscape

During my time in Bangladesh, a large array of different groups and organisations have been active in the *Bondesh*. The most important international development actors active today are, on the one hand, the USAID-funded NRMP and, on the other, the International Non-Governmental Organisation (INGO) “the Global Aid Committee” (GAC). GAC, like most large INGOs, operates according to a federated structure, where Global North “members” fundraise for activities carried out by subordinate “country programmes”, and these comprise the main source of funds for GAC in the *Bondesh*.

In crude terms, NRMP supports the Forest Department’s claims to the *Bondesh*, while GAC promotes security of tenure for the Indigenous Peoples. Smaller interventions promoting IP land rights have also recently been carried out by the Bangladesh Peace Foundation (BPF), a small national NGO, with funding support from the European Union. Other organisations active in the region in the recent past (roughly 2004 – 2016) include a second INGO (Participate!), the National Indigenous Peoples Council (itself funded by the EU and Danish Embassy), and the Bangladesh Nature and Law Society (BNLA). All of these former activities were in support of the IPs’ land claims in the area.

1 The term is contentious in the Asian context (see Beteille, 1998, Karlsson, 2003 and Li, 2000). It is a complex debate that cannot be entered into due to space constraints. I justify its use on the basis that this is how respondents self-identify.

There are two other groups of related institutional actors. The first constitutes the local elected officials and bureaucrats of the Bangladesh Government, of which the most important are the “Union” council chairperson and Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF), respectively. The second comprises two “grassroots” Indigenous Peoples’ community organisations: “Adivasi Trinomol Samity” (ATS) and the women’s organisation “Bondesh Nari Odhikar Kendra” (BNOK). Both are largely autonomously organised and self-funding, although ATS received funding from Participate! in the past and BNOK receives some support from the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), a regional IP organisation that itself is funded by an array of major bilateral and multilateral donors. Both ATS and BNOK cite indigenous customary practices and traditional political and customary organisation as sources of their own legitimacy. Both organisations bear a far closer resemblance to “social movements” than “NGOs”.

## Two cases of participation in action

The NRMP has established two main management committees in the *Bondesh*, each responsible for a specific geographical zone. They sit at an apex of two subordinate tiers of natural resource management “groups” that on an organogram appear to reflect the perfect embodiment of crafted institutions: “local” and “community-based”. Attending a meeting of one of these groups with Prashanta, I am struck by how few people are talking. Out of twenty attendees, most are Indigenous People, and a majority are women. The only conversation, however, occurs between the Union Chairman (who sits as an invited member of the Committee), the ACF and the regional director of the NRMP. For nearly an hour, everyone else sits in silence while these three powerful men discuss the NRMP’s progress and next steps.

There is one intervention from the floor. A local resident describes how, following an encounter with a timber gang cutting down trees, he reported it to the nearest forest guard, but nothing was done. The ACF responds by requesting that committee members keep reporting such incidents and they will be handled. The main topics of conversation for the meeting are the possibility of committee members contributing funds for a tourist bungalow that can then be used to generate income for further conservation measures. Afterwards the NRMP regional director enthusiastically describes a national park elsewhere in the country that brings in millions of Bangladeshi taka a year through tourist facilities, making conservation measures there entirely self-sufficient.

Notable absentees from the meeting were any representatives from the local community organisations, ATS and the women’s rights group BNOK. Later discussions with the groups themselves confirmed they are not a formal part of the structure established by NRMP, and their leaders are in general not invited to NRMP meetings or committees. This is in notable contrast with another “Development” meeting I attend, this time called by the GAC.

The occasion is a community discussion meeting where David, the GAC Programme Director, is outlining a new proposed intervention to map indigenous lands in the *Bondesh*. After a general introduction, the project’s technical lead outlines plans to purchase and import high-precision surveying equipment, to hire local indigenous youth as volunteers, and to consult further with community leaders about the appropriate timings for implementation. The project is ambitious, covering dozens of villages on a plot-by-plot basis.

There are over a hundred people in the room. On the dais next to the GAC team are the leaders of the ATS, BNOK as well as other prominent figures in the community. ATS and BNOK leaders had been involved in numerous discussions from the beginning of the project design process. The final project design being discussed in this meeting has ATS as the lead organisation, with the responsibility for rolling out the mapping activities, with GAC providing technical support. BNOK staff will serve on the implementation committee, having a say in key aspects of programme execution, including volunteer recruitment. Apart from the number of people in the room, what is striking is that over an hour is dedicated to addressing questions and points of discussion from the floor. After the meeting David talks to me about the rationale for the project: “*one of the things the Forest Department always asks for in our discussions with them is a concrete description of the lands*

*Indigenous People are actually claiming. This is the aim of the project.”*

Having outlined the importance of avoiding naively valorising the community, community organisations and social movements, a number of points need to be made. First, there are significant problems of marginalisation and exclusion within the *adivasi* community, particularly relating to gender and religious minorities. Second, extant efforts are underway (led by BNOK in the case of gender) that simultaneously seek to address these problems while not questioning the legitimacy of community organisations. *Adivasi* women activists consider it their role to both support the struggle for community land rights, while in addition working internally to establish their equal share in those rights. Finally, the overwhelming impression is that community organisations do enjoy popular legitimacy in the villages, and that GAC’s approach to participation was genuine and of a high standard. This impression is further strengthened when we consider Hulbert and Gupta’s work on the “split ladder” of participation (2015). Their argument is that certain projects so obviously enjoy popular support that painstaking participatory processes are unnecessary: there are few projects that would garner more widespread support among *adivasis* in the *Bondesh* than “strengthening land rights.”

### **Contested claims, contested narratives**

Underlying the two contrasting projects being implemented across the *Bondesh* are two diametrically opposed narratives concerning, first, the reasons for forestry degradation in the area and second, a logical corollary to the first, how to arrest and reverse this trend. Public NRMP documentation adheres to the clear view that the forest has disappeared because of the growing strains inflicted upon the natural environment by the livelihood needs of an expanding “forest-dependent” population. In this, NRMP is in complete agreement with the institutional stance of the Bangladesh Forest Department and cleaves to a discourse that finds its genesis in the British colonial era. Although not explicit in NRMP materials, an important element of this thesis is the historical account of the damaging impact of the local *adivasi* practice of shifting cultivation.

In contrast, senior community leaders from ATS and BNOK view the disappearance of the forest as being the outcome of a complex process grounded in the local political economy. The clearing of original growth forest in the region dates back to the colonial period, and it accelerated rapidly in a period beginning in the late 1970s / early 1980s, with the Forest Department’s active collusion, in order to make way for agro-forestry plantations owned by local elites. The local indigenous population is not only blameless in this process, but has itself been subject to repeated dispossession and displacement as a result. GAC’s approach in the *Bondesh* is shaped by this counternarrative.

The NRMP project supports awareness-raising activities among local residents from both the Indigenous and Bengali communities, in an effort to create “environmental subjects” (Agrawal, 2005). During fieldwork, the *Bondesh* was saturated with USAID-branded promotional materials urging local villagers to avoid cutting down trees, setting fires in the forest, etc. Key to the NRMP efforts, however, is the vision of a more heavily policed “Protected Area”, funded by tourism. Embodying neoliberal logic concerning “sustainability”, tourism in the view of the NRMP and the Forest Department would require substantial land-intensive infrastructure, including lakes, beauty spots, and bungalows. The Forest Department is happy to donate its land for the purpose, land which the local Indigenous people consider to be their own.

For ATS and BNOK, environmental concerns are irrelevant to their own claims-making. The local IP community played no role in the mass logging operations and land use change in the area, nor did they reap any benefits from such changes. They argue that securing land tenure for their community would support conservation goals, due to the prevalence of small-scale tree groves and homestead forestry on indigenous holdings. In their discussion with me, the leadership of both CBOs always tried to be constructive in their engagement with the Forest Department. They both endorsed the principle of a recent Forest Department project to employ local people as forest guards, for example, while criticising the fact that when it came to allocating these jobs, very few Indigenous People were selected. In a similar spirit, they are in principle open to idea of IP



households taking on custodianship duties for forest stands. Their misgivings are rooted in the recent history of local state-led conservation efforts and are not universally shared among IP leaders in the *Bondesh*. These two issues are interrelated and require careful discussion.

## Ancient history, current dispossession

The independence of what was United Pakistan in 1947 was followed by intense state-building efforts, including the intensification of Forest Department activity in areas like the *Bondesh*. Repeated schemes to enforce highly exclusionary conservation policies were successfully resisted by the *adivasis*, the most dramatic recent example being the resistance to the National Nature Reserve scheme in 2004-2006. The NNR, also co-funded by USAID, involved attempted dispossession of IP land, the creation of walls that bisected villages, and charging local inhabitants for entering and exiting the Nature Reserve boundaries. Although local resistance was successful at the time, current leaders of the CBOs note that current plans under the NRMP rubric are substantively identical to the Nature Reserve scheme. As one ATS leader put it, *“it is not a new plan. It is an old plan. We cannot accept it.”*

One of the most divisive aspects of the 2004-2006 confrontation involved the death and injury of local Indigenous activists at the hands of state security forces, and the fact that certain Indigenous leaders were supportive of the NNR plan, hoping to profit from construction contracts. One such individual, “Simon”, was directly implicated in a mass firing on demonstrators in 2006 that left one protestor dead and several severely wounded. Another of those individuals, “Peter”, is now a champion of a Forest Department initiative to “co-manage” agro-forestry plots with IP smallholders<sup>2</sup>. Under the terms of this scheme, the smallholder curates a patch of fast-growing acacia trees, which are harvested every 10 years, sharing the profits with the forest department on a 50/50 basis. The double catch is that the smallholder signs a contract agreeing that the land is formally owned by the state and that, in the event that the smallholder family cannot “protect” the acacia, the Forest Department has the unilateral right to transfer management of the plot to another party.

Peter has championed the scheme for members of his village. In his view, by agreeing to take plots on a co-management basis, the local IPs are able to take back land under their formal control, enhancing their access to needed resources. IP critics of the scheme make a number of points. First, the beneficiaries of the scheme are overwhelmingly not poor inhabitants and IPs, but rather local powerholders with political connections. Second, by “voluntarily” signing a contract transferring legal ownership to the forest department, participants are undermining their own land rights, as well as those of the wider community. Third, these contracts are often entered into under coercion and threat of expropriation. Fourth, the environmental benefits are highly dubious: acacia is a foreign species that is highly water intensive and does not support biodiversity, particularly local fauna, in the forest area.

These criticisms were born out during a visit to a village in the *Bondesh* later in the fieldwork period. In one household, we encountered two poor indigenous women who had had forestry cases filed against them and had been forced to flee from police by hiding in the forest, without any supplies or equipment. Their account was that hired thugs had come in the night and cut down trees on their homestead land. The family had been woken by the sound of motorbikes and felt unable to challenge the men because of fears for their physical safety. The Forest Department, through unclear means, had come to hear of the fact that the trees had been cut down and blamed the women. The women had only heard of the warrants for their arrest because they had relatives working in the Deputy Commissioner’s office.

Subsequently, this same poor household was offered a simple choice by the Forest Department: hand over some of their homestead land to be “co-managed” as an agro-forestry plot under the terms outlined above, or otherwise they would allocate it to a different household. Although this second course of action would be entirely illegal, the onus would be on the poor family to

<sup>2</sup> NB This initiative is separate from the NRMP.

challenge the move in court, which they lacked the resources to attempt. Instead, they agreed to the terms of co-management; in doing this they have given the Forest Department legal ownership of their land. Their access to the plot can thus be terminated at any time and for any reason. It was not clear during the interview whether the family was fully aware of these ramifications.

### **Sell-outs, dupes and whistle-blowers**

The role of individual agency, and how people may choose to “cross the lines” between these competing interventions, provides more insights into the processes at work. We visited GAC’s land survey project several times while it was being implemented. Local volunteers assisted with house to house surveys, while the technical team carried out its work with imposing equipment. The team carefully explained what was proposed to each household before proceeding. Tea and biscuits were served at regular intervals.

During this process we grew to be on very close terms with ATS and BNOK leaders, as well as various members of GAC staff. I described my experience of the Forest Management Group sub-committee and my discussions with the staff members of the Natural Resource Management Programme with one of the GAC’s programme managers, whose reaction was pained frustration:

*Exactly, that’s what they do; handpick people for the committees who they know won’t speak up, call it participation and later say they have run an inclusive process.*

I went on to describe the conversation in Ben’s house, his analysis of expanding villages and the need for funding for buffer areas. I also outlined my findings concerning Peter’s support for the Forest Department’s agro-forestry co-management scheme. The programme manager was quiet for some time, and then he said simply:

*The problem with Ben is that he is stupid. The problem with Peter is that he is very, very clever.*

Aside from stupidity or venality, my research assistant Prashanta suggests simple ignorance on the part of many “active” members of the NRMP’s user groups. “*They do not live near the forested areas, or where the Nature Reserve plan was to be put in place, so they just have no clue about the meaning of what is being proposed.*” The Nature Reserve scheme, because of the very high levels of violence that attended its attempted construction in 2004 – 2006, remains the key normative touchstone for activists I speak to, as well as those the activists regard as traitors to their people.

When asked directly, for example, as to what their attitude to the Nature Reserve scheme was, both Peter and one of his close associates do not attempt to defend it, in the same way that Peter defends the allocation of social forestry plots. Instead, both men avow today that they were implacably opposed to the project. I put these strenuous denials to Arjun, a brooding combative man in his late fifties who played an integral role in the community’s resistance efforts at the time. “*They were members of the Nature Reserve Implementation Committee,*” is his flat response.

Of all those he regards as “sell-outs”, Prashanta only refuses to help me with Simon. “*You do what you need, but I will not meet him. I will not shake his hand,*” he tells me. Simon’s close association with the mass shooting in 2006, extending to his direct culpability in the eyes of many, means that “*he has no acceptance in most places here. He has to always move around in his vehicle,*” according to Prashanta. Simon, however, cannot be safely ignored by the wider community; he has wealth, some level of local influence among the mainstream community and is one of the few IP leaders to retain active ties with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Although at the time of writing the BNP has not led a government since 2006, indigenous community leaders emphasise that they cannot safely assume an explicit stance in favour of the Awami League, the party which has run the country since 2008. However secure the Awami League’s position appears to be now, things can always change, I am told. Should the BNP ever again come to power, the first thing they would do is mount a purge of AL-supporting organisations

and prominent individuals at all administrative levels across Bangladesh. The community leaders, therefore, maintain a policy of strict Party-political neutrality, and Simon still represents an “insurance policy”, a line to the BNP leadership in the event that they form a government.

The vengeful recriminations of a transfer of power are brought home to us in a way that makes us laugh, exploring ownership patterns of agro-forestry plots elsewhere in the *Bondesh*. Enquiring into the ownership of a particular plot, a local villager explains that, while notionally owned by a local, in practice it is the property of the local *Upazila* (sub-district) Chairman. He goes on, however, explaining that it used to belong to Simon, but when the Awami League won the 2008 election it was summarily reallocated to *Upazila* Chairman, an AL-supporter.

On the other hand, the “reactionary” impact of the NRMP’s work is not lost on some of its employees, and several voiced their disquiet over the fact. Of these the most important was the local project officer, Jahidul, who we became close to during the fieldwork period. During several interactions, many of them informal, it became clear that Jahidul has misgivings concerning the NRMP, and in particular the way it worked in such close alignment with the Forest Department and its various other initiatives. At one point, he volunteered to Prashanta that if business continued as usual, he could not see how it could be possible for the Indigenous Peoples of the *Bondesh* to remain in the area. With Jahidul’s help, we secured photocopies of the NRMP’s extensive internal project documentation. This yielded several insights, by far the most important of which was an internal study carried out in 2010 concerning the reasons for deforestation.

Instead of unnuanced claims concerning the damaging “extractive” activities of local smallholders, the study reported that deforestation was the result of a complex web of local political-economic relations and, by implication, correspondingly complex processes at work in the area, in which local smallholders played a small and peripheral role. Instead, the study implicated elected officials and bureaucrats in the police, and land and forest departments. There is no indication from the NRMP’s work on the ground that this study’s conclusions were recognised, let alone acted upon. The study was never published nor, according to local community leaders, discussed in public fora or consultation meetings.

## Ongoing processes of contestation at the end of fieldwork

Various contentious processes and events were underway during the denouement of my last fieldwork visit in 2015. GAC’s local land survey project had been interdicted by Forest Department officials. Officials twice confiscated equipment, requiring local appeals to the UP Chairman and even the MP for the constituency. GAC’s Director David was philosophical about the problems:

*When we discussed the project with the National Board, they were worried it might cause some problems with the Forest Department. I told them frankly, ‘I am damn sure this will cause problems with the Forest Department.’*

Eventually the project was successfully completed. GAC has produced a comprehensive report, which it is keeping to a limited circulation within the community. This is pending the results of expanding the project to other *adivasi*-inhabited areas in Bangladesh. Following the completion of these additional efforts, GAC plans to work with ATS and BNOK to both launch an expanded advocacy campaign and pursue public interest litigation in the courts, using the information from the projects as collateral.

Despite this apparent success, fieldwork ended on a note of despondency. The ATS and BNOK believed that they had successfully secured the agreement of Forest Department staff to cease the lodging of frivolous cases against their community, after extensive advocacy with the Divisional Forest Officer and Assistant Conservator of Forests. In my last conversation with the ATS General Secretary before my departure, he told me that this understanding was clearly no longer valid: the previous day he had been served warrants for two forest cases, alleging that he cut down several plots of trees near his village.

## Explaining conflicting objectives and contrasting means: *bricolage* and forum shopping at multiple scales

The second section concluded by demonstrating that there was a theoretical and empirical basis in the literature for at least a degree of variation in what donors do, based on different approaches to politics, participation and institutions and through enlisting the support of diverse coalitions of interests. Field data provides empirical support of this in action, with the added complexity that this variation occurs in the same locale. The result has been two donors pursuing mutually incompatible goals in the same place, simultaneously. The USAID-funded NRMP “renders technical”, excluding the difficult political issues in the area from its intervention-design through establishing new “empty” institutions facilitating instrumentalised “tyrannical” participation. GAC’s intervention grapples directly with political problems, drawing on existing institutions with local legitimacy to enable meaningful participation.

The concept of *bricolage* is useful in explaining why and how this has occurred, albeit with some small refinements. Specifically, critical institutional ideas of *bricolage* tend to focus on a single scale, “the community”, for the simple reason that this is where most of a given intervention’s “institution building” takes place. A theoretical gap exists concerning how actors at higher administrative levels can also act as *bricoleurs*, and the important corollary question of how interactions occur across geographic and administrative scales between different resulting *bricolages*.

No fewer than four actors, each operating at different geographic scales, constitute *bricoleurs* in this scenario. At the “community” level, the grassroots organisations ATS and BNOK combine their authority from the vestiges of *adivasi* customary law, the institutional niche in Bangladesh for “local groups” and, according to their view, the actual wishes of local people. They borrow from international human rights discourses to articulate their views and draw on a strong narrative of local custodianship of nature in opposition to a discourse of deforestation driven by the profligacy of local resource users.

The Forest Department, operating at sub-regional and national scales, draws on its formal legal authority and mandate within the Bangladesh administrative system to advance claims on forested territory. Its staff borrow from over a hundred years of discourses concerning the culpability of local populations for environmental destruction. The need for livelihood diversification is rooted in colonial notions of the ignorance of the poor, and this retains stubborn if nowadays *sub-voce* ethnicised references to a peculiarly “tribal” ignorance, drawing on a colonial era verdict on the “ecologically ruinous” practice of shifting cultivation alluded to above.

These two *bricolages* constitute the principal reference points for other actors in the region. Acting at the international, national and local scales, the NRMP and GAC have made choices concerning their interventions that flow from an initial decision as to whether to align themselves with one or the other. In crude terms, this is reducible to the decision to work through or in parallel with (and potentially in opposition to) agencies of the Bangladeshi State. Once the NRMP tied itself into “partnership” with the Forest Department, the intervention could not avoid appropriating and reusing the key elements of this initial *bricolage*, particularly its emphasis on local resource users as the cause of environmental degradation. Conversely, the GAC decision to work with local grass roots organisations meant that this discourse had to be rejected out of hand and, as a result, a trajectory of avoiding or colliding with State agencies and the NRMP became unavoidable.

The NRMP and GAC then acted as *bricoleurs* across scales, both “downscale” towards community level, and “upwards” towards the assemblage of developmental ideas, theories and frameworks at the international level. The downward interactions are primarily defined by each organisation’s approach to participation. Through working closely with ATS and BNOK, GAC is able to appropriate substantial local legitimacy for their interventions. GAC is then able to build on this initial level of credibility with a more inclusive and painstaking approach to participation that is arguably actually unnecessary, in view of their interventions’ objectives and the theoretical understanding

of environmental degradation that underpins them.

Relations between the grassroots organisations and the Forest Department are, on the other hand, so strained that NRMP has no choice in practical terms other than to manufacture a “new” set of “Natural Resource Management” institutions, populated by a different set of beneficiaries recruited for the purpose, and operating in parallel. Without the participation of ATS and BNOK, other participants have to be found, selected and convened in a superficial manner that recreates exactly the classic examples of bad participation that are the reference point for the “participation as tyranny” literature. Both interventions have “community support”, with GAC working with existing institutions, and NRMP borrowing from extensive (and heavily critiqued) practice creating new, “empty” institutions that are colonised by existing elites to further their own ends.

They are able to take such contrasting approaches because both organisations are then able to also “borrow upwards”, acting as *bricoleurs* through reference to different components of the assemblage of international development priorities and discourses. For NRMP, these fall within the broad areas of conservation, climate change and, most recently, “resilience.” GAC, on the other hand, emphasises human rights, particularly those of marginalised groups and ethnic minorities. NRMP stands squarely and unapologetically on the side of “compensation” to ensure equity outcomes, whereas GAC invokes the concept of justice. In a point I will return to below, it is because of the lack of consensus, this “fuzzy” quality of development theory and practice, that two major organisations can take such divergent approaches and, in principle, both be right and both be wrong.

Another way of viewing this “fuzziness” is through the lens of “forum shopping”, which again can be refined so that it describes multiscale interactions between administrative and geographic scales, and with a greater focus on how discourses support institutional frameworks. It is helpful to examine this at work in the case of the *Bondesh* at the local and international scales. The local scale constitutes a busy marketplace of people shopping for sources of authority and legitimacy. In a crucial point made by German et al. and von Benda Beckmann, in contexts of legal pluralism, dispute resolvers themselves engage in the practice of “acquiring” disputes to manage because this enhances their own legitimacy and political advantage (von Benda Beckmann, 1981).

GAC and NRMP have gone forum shopping “downscale” in a manner that mirrors and shapes their approach as *bricoleurs*, seeking constituencies of “local beneficiaries” to legitimise their respective actions in the field. Simultaneously, they do the same “upscale”, browsing the many options on offer at the “International Development Theory and Practice” bazaar, where the array of institutions, themes and objectives on offer provide justification for almost any intervention. The SDGs are a microcosm of this phenomenon and a useful model. NRMP might quote SDG 13 “Climate Action” in support of its activities; GAC on the other hand would find SDG 16 “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions” more useful. As long as there is no prioritisation of the different goals, or sense of hierarchy (beyond boilerplate, non-binding platitudes to “respect for human rights”), both interventions are perfectly justified in acting as they do.

Going further, tracing the granular contours of this “battlefield of legitimacy” leads us to the provocative conclusion that, in a sense, the failure of ODA here is not the result of the top-down ignorance of international policymakers and planners. It rather arises almost directly as an adverse consequence of discursive and institutional attempts to address this very problem: “partnership” with “local” governments, cemented through close partnership with the concerned line ministries and departments. This is a powerful assemblage of discourses and institutions at international level, cemented by the creation of the Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation at Busan, and emerging partly from a secondary narrative arguably even more powerful in that it is germane to various *domestic* political arenas in the Global North: aid effectiveness.

GPEDC is arguably problematic in this sense, because it establishes a clear set of priorities for effective participation. Participation here is invested in a valorised “national government” that must by definition have a greater understanding of “local needs” than international agencies. In

defining “local” as “national”, the international community has handed potentially very repressive and reactionary practices and institutions a powerful tool to burnish their own legitimacy and authority, much diminishing the perceived need to ensure “quality” participation at the local level. This is GAC’s counter-veiling strategy: championing legitimate community organisations as holding greater legitimacy than the agencies of the state, implicitly challenging the paramountcy of “national partnership” through more thorough and effective mechanisms of participation. GAC does this while being “*damn sure this will cause problems with the Forest Department.*” To reiterate, community organisations like ATS are implicated in perpetuating social exclusion themselves, particularly along gender lines. GAC’s approach nonetheless remains the antithesis of anti-politics.

## Conclusion: The future of big D

There are several implications that arise from “donor collision”. The first is that there is no universal rule as to how big D development works in practice: both the cautious optimists and the irreconcilable post-developmentalists would find empirical support for their respective theories within the narrow confines of the *Bondesh*. Mosse’s observation that “ideas that make for ‘good policy’ – policy which legitimizes and mobilizes political and practical support – are not those which provide good guides to action” (Mosse, 2004: 663), *may* be true in many, if not most cases. But GAC policy in the case study simultaneously mobilises political and practical support while also providing a good guide to action. Arguably, it achieves the second objective through accomplishing the first through genuine participatory approaches.

The second implication, a corollary to the first, is an alternative and probably complementary explanation for big D’s failure, according to Deaton’s criteria. The problem is not that big D always acts as an anti-politics machine, but that it both does *and* does not. Globally it is not clear how common situations like the USAID / GAC standoff in the *Bondesh* are, but it is at least possible that a substantial portion of International ODA spend over the years has been wasted by funding opposing interventions, all of them “justifiable” through adroit use of *bricolage* and forum shopping by respective donors.

The third implication is that this obviously undermines “Aid Effectiveness” and, therefore, a review of both the GDEC and the international development policy bazaar is in order. The ambiguity, fuzziness and sheer number of offerings at the international level is a major reason why different interventions can be locked into opposing configurations, while GDEC offers the sinister prospect that “reactionary approaches” will generally win out. While Lewis’ observation that “the significance of western aid” (2019) will continue to decline is true as narrowly defined by its share of Global South governmental expenditure, the task of poverty alleviation and addressing inequality will be drawn inexorably into engaging with political problems.

Addressing the plight of poor populations living in Middle Income Countries, comprising Andy Sumner’s “new Bottom Billion” (2010), arguably synonymous with Hickey and Du Toit’s “adversely incorporated” marginalised groups (2007), cannot fudge the “small p” politics. To the extent that big D development has generally avoided “small p” politics and has still been able to achieve some successes (Deaton, 2013)<sup>3</sup>, such low hanging fruit is increasingly scarce. Such adversely incorporated groups are also, like the inhabitants of the *Bondesh*, likely to inhabit remote, “difficult regions” including, in the context of South Asia, coastal areas, forests and riverine environments prone to flooding. Such areas are already deemed to be of key importance to addressing climate change, and climate change finance will continue to focus on “Most Vulnerable Countries” long after they accede to MIC status.

So while the international significance of ODA will decline, in certain locales hosting specific geographies and populations, it will retain its importance. It is too early to speculate on the long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, but it is the case that future pandemic risk is viewed by the scientific community as emerging from tropical forested regions subject to recent significant land-

<sup>3</sup> This needs to be caveated: Deaton acknowledges some successes at the intervention level, and particular as regards public health. Otherwise he is a firm Big D sceptic, arguing for its abolition in his book.

use change, a powerful potential addition to any *bricolage* empowering militarised and exclusionary approaches to forest-dwelling populations (Allen et al., 2017; Scanlan, 2020). This is in the context of a new variable that Lewis, Horner et al. do not address: the galvanised authoritarianism across the Global South (Neimark et al., 2019). The future of big D remains what it always has been: a series of choices concerning politics, participation and institutions. The difference is that “small p” politics will haunt big D as never before. Privileging GDEC in the age of Jair Bolsonaro and his ilk can only lead back down the path of anti-politics and rendering technical, with potentially huge human and environmental costs.

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