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## Elite capture or capture elites? Lessons from the 'counter-elite' and 'co-opt-elite' approaches in Bangladesh and Ghana

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## **Elite Capture or Capture Elites? Lessons from the ‘Counter-elite’ and ‘Co-opt-elite’ Approaches in Bangladesh and Ghana**

Sam Wong\*

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### **Abstract**

Community-based development has been criticized for its inadequate understanding of power relationships at the local level, which thus leaves room for elite capture. This paper compares and contrasts two case studies, both of which take power seriously in their institutional designs. The solar home system in Bangladesh, represents the ‘counter-elite’ approach and explicitly excludes local elites from the decision-making process. The trans-boundary water governance project in Ghana, in contrast, adopts the ‘co-opt-elite’ approach and deliberately absorbs local elites into the water committee. This paper suggests that, while the ‘counter-elite’ approach is not necessarily effective in challenging elite domination, because of the structural asset dependence of poor people on the elites, the ‘co-opt-elite’ approach risks legitimizing the authority of the elites and worsening poverty by implementing ‘anti-poor’ policies. This paper concludes that the success of dealing with elite capture lies in the flexible use of the ‘counter-elite’ and ‘co-opt-elite’ approaches together with the need to secure alternative livelihoods and to achieve empowerment with the poor.

Keywords: elite capture, power, poverty, community development, water management, solar lighting

JEL classification: Z1, O3

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## 1 Introduction

Community-driven development, widely embraced by the World Bank and other international development agencies since the 1990s, is an attempt to return decision-making power to local people. By promoting decentralization and participation, the community-based projects are intended to achieve good governance at the grassroots level. Greater transparency and public election of leaders are expected to reduce corruption; a sense of ownership is expected to create fairer representation in committees across gender, age and generation; and free-riding behaviour is minimized by stricter rule enforcement and use of sanctions (Gibson et al. 2006; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2000). These ‘good governance’ principles and policies should ensure that the benefits of development ‘flow to the community as a whole and more specifically to the poor’ (Fritzen 2007: 1359).

Many of these projects have not, however, worked as intended. Some scholars have posed tough questions about the decentralized, community-based approach for ‘not necessarily empowering in practice’ (Mansuri and Rao 2004: 57). They challenge its effectiveness in targeting the poor. They also voice their concerns about the vulnerability of the projects to elite capture. Contrary to the assumptions that elite capture can be avoided by democratizing the decision-making process, Platteau (2004: 225) argues that the newly-created participatory space fails to ‘mitigate the opportunism of local leaders’, and instead, gives the elites incentives to intervene.

Some neo-institutional thinkers blame the failure of the community-driven projects for poor institutional design, explaining that ‘weak institutional control mechanisms create opportunities for local elites to siphon off substantial shares of the benefits’ of local resources (Iversen et al. 2006: 93). The solution, they propose, is institutional strengthening in order to remove the ‘incentives for rent seeking’ and to secure ‘a more equitable distribution of benefits’ (p. 106).

This institutional analysis has, however, been criticized for failing to understand the nature of elite capture. Some scholars argue that the problems lie in an over-simplistic approach to institutions and an inadequate understanding of power relations (Masaki 2007; Mehta et al. 1999). First, the faith in institutional crafting to achieve desirable outcomes of collective action is problematic. The instrumental use of institutions and the simplistic assumption of the linear evolution of institutions are inadequate in understanding the complexity and the unintended consequences of institutional crafting (Cleaver 2002). For instance, D’Exelle and Ridle (2008) suggest that setting up new formal institutions at the local level, such as sanctions and democratic decision-making by voting, are not effective in challenging indigenous leadership because villagers are ‘reluctant to make use of the punishment mechanism’ (p. 1) and consensus-seeking ‘makes it practically impossible for individual community agents to oppose the elite’ (p. 3).

Another limitation of the institutional thinking lies in an inadequate understanding of power relations. Fritzen (2007) warns that many community-based projects are only successful in changing the institutional forms, but not power relations. The problems, Sneddon and Fox (2007) argue, lie in ‘relative power of different actors’ in community dynamics (p. 1360). Local elites are capable of mobilizing, accumulating and investing in their already-owned social, political and economic capital to hijack the projects

(Platteau and Gaspart 2003). In contrast, poor people who contribute their time, resource and labour do not gain much out of the projects, and the sense of disillusionment discourages them from further participation (Marcus and Asmorowati 2006).

The literature offers two approaches to deal with the issues of elite capture: counter and co-opt-elite. The 'counter-elite' approach advocates challenging elites by completely excluding them in the institutional design. It assumes that all elites are bad in nature. By raising public awareness of power inequalities and building local capacity, this approach suggests that community empowerment and political citizenship would be effective in resisting elite domination (Hickey and Mohan 2004; Mohan and Stokke 2000).

The 'co-opt-elite' approach, in contrast, suggests that cooperation with elites, rather than confrontation, is the solution to alleviating poverty. It asserts that not all elites are bad, and some of them can play a constructive role in community development. It also assumes that power is not a 'zero-sum' game and a pragmatic use of elites' networks and resources channels benefits to poor communities. The notion of the 'benevolent elite' by Platteau and Abraham (2002) fits into this school of thought.

The objective of this paper is to examine whether these two approaches are effective in challenging elite capture and maximizing benefits to the poor. It will draw on two community-based projects as case studies. The first case study is a communal solar home system project in Bangladesh. It is influenced by the 'counter-elite' approach by explicitly excluding local elites, known as *sardars*, from the new governance structures of managing the solar lighting facilities. Another case study is a trans-boundary water governance project in Ghana. Local chieftains and *tindana* (religious leaders) were co-opted in the water committee in order to bring tangible benefits to local poor people.

By comparing and contrasting these two case studies, this paper will demonstrate the paradoxes of including and excluding local elites in the decision-making process. It will argue that the 'counter-elite' approach is not necessarily effective in eroding the elites' power whereas the 'co-opt-elite' approach can worsen poverty at local level. It will show that *sardars* in Bangladesh felt threatened by their exclusion from the solar system, which led them to jeopardize the micro-credit system in revenge. Local people bowed to the pressure and consequently invited them to the committee as 'advisers'. This paper will also suggest that the asset dependence of the poor on the elites forces the poor to exercise agency that help reinforce the authority of the elites. This paper will also draw on the experience of the water committee in Ghana to demonstrate how political absorption of the local elites risks legitimizing their leadership. It will suggest that the lack of poverty sensitivity amongst the elites helped implement water-related policies that could worsen poverty at the local level. Therefore, this paper suggests a set of policies to deal with the paradox of inclusion and exclusion of elites in development projects. It stresses the importance of breaking the patron-client dependence by securing alternative livelihoods for the poor. The role of NGOs becomes more crucial at the post-implementation stage of the projects in order to scrutinize and respond to elite control over the development processes.

The structure of this paper is as follows. It first conceptualizes elite capture and power and then discusses the 'counter-elite' and 'co-opt-elite' approaches. It then elaborates the two case studies in Bangladesh and Ghana respectively and explores the complex consequences of excluding and including local elites in the institutional designs. It

concludes by suggesting a number of principles that may help address the elite capture problems.

## **2 Conceptualizing power and elite capture**

Elite capture and power are two inter-related and contesting concepts. Being asked what she meant by ‘elite’ in an interview, Sarah Palin, the former US Republican vice-presidential candidate, replied: elites are ‘people who think they’re better than anyone else’ (NBC Nightly News, 23 October 2008). Her definition highlights the subjective dimension of elite capture and suggests how elites command ‘moral superiority’ (a term used by Mosca quoted in Higley and Burton 2006) to make their claims. However, her definition is not complete because elites are dependent on non-elites. In Fumanti’s word, elites come to power ‘through *publicly* recognised merit, inheritance, or even force’ (Fumanti 2004: 2, my emphasis).

According to Beard and Phakphian (2009), elites are: ‘individuals who can exert *disproportionate* influence over a collective action process’ (p. 11, my emphasis). Elite capture is a situation where elites manipulate the decision-making arena and agenda and obtain most of the benefits. In explaining elite domination, Platteau (2004) suggests four factors: disparate access to economic resources, asymmetrical social positions, varying levels of knowledge of political protocols, and different education attainment in some cases (p. 223). Their power is perpetuated through land holdings, family networks, employment status, wealth, political and religious affiliation, personal history and personality (Dasgupta and Beard 2007: 234).

Elites can also be analysed from the temporal and spatial perspectives. Higley and Burton (2006) suggest that the influence of elites is not ‘one-off’, but is usually ‘continuous, regular and substantial’. Their influence is not confined to their own communities. Bardhan and Mookherjee (2000) demonstrate how elites make use of their intricate networks to occupy various locations of authority and to ‘scale-up’ their power from community to regional and national level. What makes elite capture so powerful is that elites exert their influence less often by coercion, and more by moral claims and symbolic power (Bourdieu 1996). Lay people often follow their leadership in a less-than-conscious way (Lewis and Hossain 2008).

The dynamism of elite domination can be demonstrated by a process of ‘elite continuity, transformation and replacement’ (Parry 2005: 2) through which elites cooperate, compete and reconcile their differences from time to time. This non-linear development makes the solution to elite capture proposed by Platteau and Abraham (2002) plausible. They claim that elite control can be minimized by heterogeneous representation of elites, and that would be ‘sufficiently diversified for a division of opinions to development among them’ (p. 124). The collaboration of elites in power sharing, however, reduces the effectiveness of the divide-rule.

### **2.1 Four dimensions of power**

The complexity of elite capture requires a more critical analysis of power. This paper draws on Rowlands’ multi-dimensionality of power. Combining Foucaultian and feminist perspectives on power, she suggests four inter-dependent dimensions of power: power-over, power-with, power-from-within, and power-to. ‘Power-over’ is coercive

force that forces one to do things against their will. 'Power-with' emphasizes the collective forces, where people cooperate with each other to achieve some outcomes. 'Power-from-within' touches on the psychological power in the minds of people. In Shields' words, this dimension of power is effective in overcoming internalised oppression and it focuses on 'self-value, self-acceptance and self-knowledge' (1997: 23, in Wong 2003: 310). 'Power-to' refers to the capacity of individuals to take action. It is actually embedded in the three dimensions of power mentioned above. Rowlands stresses that these four forms of power are inter-related and context-specific.

This understanding of power offers a useful analysis to the current two mainstream approaches to elite capture; they are: 'counter-elite' and 'co-opt-elite' approaches. The 'counter-elite' approach conceptualizes elite capture as exploitative and suppressive in nature (Scott 1985), which is necessarily undesirable because it works against democratic, participatory and pro-poor values. For example, Lewis and Hossain (2008) consider local elites as 'obstacles to progress with poverty reduction development' (p. 33). This approach characterises resistance to elite domination as a 'zero-sum' game since undermining elite influence will return power to the powerless. The solutions to elite capture, it suggests, are first, to exclude elites from participating in the newly-created or existing institutions and second, to empower poor people to take an active role in the decision-making process by raising awareness and capacity building (Abe 2009). Using Rowland's analysis of power, the protagonists of the 'counter-elite' approach stress the interdependence of the two dimensions of power: 'power-over' and 'power-from-within'. In other words, from this perspective, confronting elite domination will only make a difference in poor people's lives if local people have a sense of ownership in the process of power seizure.

The 'counter-elite' approach is, however, criticized for taking a simplistic view of power, without acknowledging the diversity of elites and the function of elite interference. Mansuri and Rao (2004) argue that not all elites are bad. They make a distinction between 'greedy' elites (p. 43) and 'benevolent' elites (p. 55), and the latter show altruism and willingness to share some benefits with poor people. This leads Dasgupta and Beard (2007) to highlight the differences between 'elite capture' and 'elite control' as the latter implies that 'the project was controlled by local elites, yet resources were targeted to deserving beneficiaries' (p. 244). Our research on solar lanterns in Rajasthan, India shows that elite interference could be considered as a barometer to indicate the potential values of the projects. If local elites do not show any interest in getting involved, it might imply that the benefits that they could get from the projects are so limited that even power-thirsty elites cannot be bothered (Wong 2009a).

These ideas shape the 'co-opt-elite' approach. It suggests that confrontation with the elites may not do the poor a favour. Instead, it takes a pragmatic perspective and makes use of the networks and know-how of the elites to facilitate the management of the projects (Rao and Ibanez 2003). In their experience, Lewis and Hossain (2008) find that some of the village elite work with external NGOs to improve village water and sanitation out of 'a sense of public duty' (p. 35). Instead of confronting the elites, they recommend that NGOs exploit the 'politics of reputation' (p. 49) that can bring some benefits to the poor.

From the perspective of power, the 'co-opt-elite' approach focuses on 'power-from-within'. It considers elites as partners, rather than enemies. It accepts that power is not evenly-distributed in communities, but working with local elites helps address some of

the practical problems that the poor face. This school suggests that the solution to elite capture is to absorb the elites into the projects and to let them play an active role in the decision-making process. This approach risks repeating the mistakes of the top-down, elite-driven approach to development, but Abe (2009) defends it by suggesting that including elites in the management can ensure good leadership that builds social capital in the community (p. 63).

## **2.2 Subjectivity-Institution-Structure theory**

While the ‘counter-elite’ and ‘co-opt-elite’ approaches highlight different strategies in managing elites, we argue that they share a common weakness: an inadequate understanding of the interactions between elites and non-elites in the process of producing and reproducing power dynamics. In particular, we need to have a deeper analysis of how community members, especially poor people, feel and think about their local elites, of how social norms and rules help challenge and reinforce the subordination of the power relationships, and of how power inequalities are embedded in social structures.

In order to explore such complex relationships, we will draw on the ‘Subjectivity-Institution-Structure’ theory (Wong and Sharp 2009). Subjectivity is defined as the reasoning and perception of human actions. It articulates the conscious and less-conscious aspects of people’s motivation for participation and exercising their rights in their communities. Gough and Scott (2006) argue that the dual nature of subjectivity – transformative and reactionary – offers opportunities as well as obstacles in promoting citizenship. In the context of elite capture, the concept of subjectivity highlights the ‘emotional, cognitive and physical’ experiences between elites and non-elites. Institutions are rules, norms and conventions which shape people’s daily interactions. Douglas (1987) suggests that: ‘social institutions encode information. They are credited with making routine decisions, solving routine problems, and doing a lot of regular thinking on behalf of individuals’ (p. 47). In the context of elite capture, the concept highlights how the relationships between elites and non-elites are mediated by social values and precedents, and how that helps legitimize, and question, the power domination and subordination. Structures, defined by Layder, are ‘structured patterning of social relationships and reproduced practices over time and space ... and the power relations that underpin them’ (1994: 140). Structures show hierarchies of social control, such as class, gender and ethnicity that affect the distribution of resources and power between individuals. The concept of structures matters in the study of elite capture because it provides the historical and socio-cultural backgrounds that enable and constrain individuals to take actions.

The ‘subjectivity-institution-structure’ theory, I argue, is useful in understanding the intertwined relationships between elites and non-elites. It explores how differing subjectivities and institutions govern attitudes and behaviour and how they are shaped in the context of wider structural issues. In other words, subjectivity and structure are linked through institutions and expressed in social practice. This understanding of the complex interactions helps contextualize power dynamics in the process of social connectivity between elites and non-elites.



### 2.3 Research design and questions

The two case studies illustrated in this paper come from two separate projects. The original designs of these projects were not intended to deal with the issues of elite capture. We were requested by a Bangladeshi NGO, Participatory Research and Development Initiative, to examine the social impact of a communal solar home project in a Hindu fishing community in the Cox's Bazar district in south Bangladesh. This project was sponsored by the British Council and we completed it in August 2007. We conducted another study on the impact of a regional trans-boundary water governance project in which communities in the north of Ghana and the south of Burkina Faso negotiated the use of water with government officials and NGOs. It was conducted in August 2008, funded by the British Academy.

During our investigation, we realized that local elites in both projects played a significant role in shaping the process of implementation and outcomes. They exerted their influences through direct involvement as well as indirect ties with other stakeholders. We therefore changed some of our research questions, asking what motivated elites and non-elites for participation in the projects. We wanted to know the subjective feelings and experiences of poor people in interacting with the elites in their everyday interactions. Regarding the participation process, we explored the contributions elites and non-elites had made to the projects in terms of time and resources. We examined who made what decisions in the projects and how negotiations were made. We also raised questions about the distribution of costs and benefits in the outcomes of the projects.

Both of these projects had conducted participatory appraisal exercises before they started. The solar home project in Bangladesh was poverty-specific. The participatory exercise identified *Sardars*, the local elites in the Hindu fishing community, as the main cause of the poverty since they owned most of the fishing equipment. In contrast, the trans-boundary water governance project in Ghana was more concerned with climate change and the long-term ecological stability of the White Volta River Basin. The participatory exercise had identified chieftains and *Tindana* as local elites. Chieftains owned most of the land while *Tindana* were religious leaders who had the authority to command resources from their community members.

After identifying the elites, we wanted to find out who were the poor and the very poor in the communities. In the first few days of our site visits, we randomly asked villagers what they meant by poverty and who they considered as poor and very poor. Both case studies characterized poor people similarly as people with limited savings, limited education, no sons in the families, widows with small families to look after, the elderly, the ill and the disabled. The very poor were villagers without savings, no education, no sons in the families, widows with big families to take care, elderly with poor health, the severely ill and the disabled. In the fishing community in Bangladesh, villagers considered households without fishing equipment, such as boats and fishing nets, as poor. In contrast, community members in Ghana considered the land-less or those owning small and marginalized land as poor. We also talked to NGO workers, local politicians and government officials in our projects. Apart from formal interviews, we also relied on informal conversations, observations and participatory map-drawing exercises to capture the interactions of the elites and non-elites in the projects. We kept a research diary and notes during interviews and then coded the data according to themes and key concepts, such as gender, power and participation, to make our analysis.

In the following section, we outline the contexts of the two case studies, focusing on the institutional arrangements that worked with, as well as against, local elites.

### **3 Case study A: The ‘counter-elite’ approach in a communal solar home system in Bangladesh**

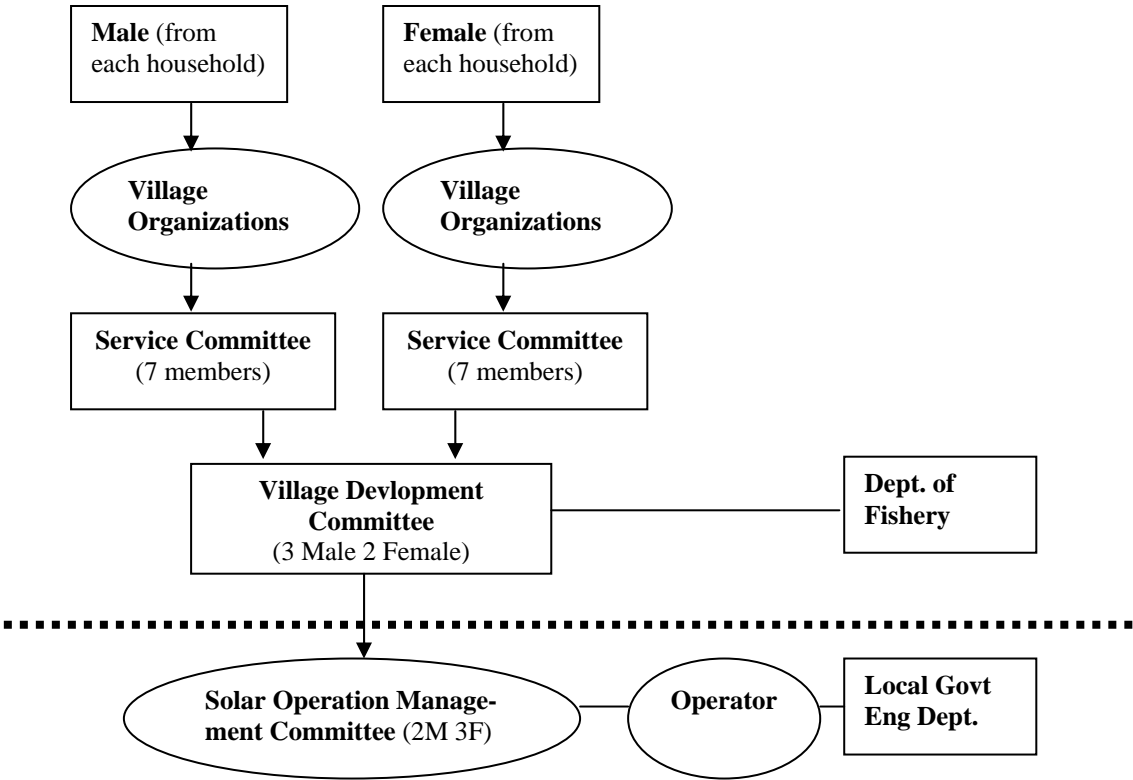
This village was one of 37 fishing communities targeted by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Department of Fisheries in Bangladesh. These organizations carried out an ‘Empowerment of Coastal Fishing Community for Livelihood Security’ project (Coastal Empowerment Project in short) in 2002-2006 which aimed to mobilize communities to improve the management of coastal fisheries resources and disaster preparedness. The organizations recruited a Dhaka-based NGO to run the project and offered micro-credit financing to promote alternative income generating activities.

The NGO conducted a ‘poverty-sensitive’ appraisal exercise before the project started and realized that *Sardars*, known as local money lenders, were responsible for causing local poverty because they exploited poor people by charging high interests. *Sardars* were rich and powerful because ‘they have more sons, more manpower, they can get more fish ..... their sons receive better education, they start to loan money to people’ (interview with government official, 17 August 2007).

In light of this, project leaders considered *Sardars* as the main obstacle against the success of the project. With the goals to reduce poverty and to empower local people, democratizing local management by encouraging participation of poor people in new institutional arrangements was introduced. Any man and woman above 18 years old from each household was encouraged to join the Village Organizations, one for men and another for women. The separation of women from men was intended to enable women to express themselves without worrying about men’s interference. From each Village Organization, seven members were elected to form a Service Committee. One of the key roles of the Committee was to manage the micro-credit financing. During the construction of the solar home system, a Village Development Committee (VDC) was set up. It comprised three male and two female members, all elected by local villagers. It worked with the Department of Fisheries to deal with local and financial affairs. *Sardars’* authority was challenged by institutional exclusion – they were not invited to join the new institutional set-up.

In 2004, the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) in Bangladesh approached the UNDP and the Department of Fisheries, and asked if they were interested in trying out communal solar home systems in one of their 37 communities. The officials of the LGED, during the interview, suggested that they needed a demonstration site to show that it was possible to provide an alternative energy supply to villages, which were not covered by the national grid-based electrification systems (interview, 21 August 2007). The Hindu community in Cox’s Bazar was selected because it was the poorest among the 37 communities, and the Hindu fishermen have long suffered from direct competition from their Muslim counterparts, as the latter are more organized and better-equipped.

Diagram 1: New governing structure of the communal solar home system in Cox's Bazar



Source: Authors.

A new Solar Operation Management Committee (SOMC) was formed and added within the new governance structure (Diagram 1). SOMC, comprised another five members (two male and three female), also elected by the public. If villagers faced any technical problems related to the solar home system, they were encouraged to meet the members of SOMC. If more serious issues, such as disputes over the payment arose, villagers should go to see VDC. If problems persisted, they could seek help from the government officials of LGED. *Sardars* were, once again, excluded from SOMC.

*Sardars* felt that their dominant positions in the community had been undermined. Rather than making direct confrontation, *Sardars* exerted their influence in the new committees through their control of resources. Many committee members relied on *Sardars* for boat hiring and loans, so they felt the need to appease *Sardars* in return for stable livelihoods. As a result, they invited *Sardars* to play an ‘advisory’ role in the committees. A female committee member justified their action: ‘people respect them’.

Apart from silencing opposition by bribing some committee members and threatening others ‘not to say anything’ (interview with government official, 23 August 2007), *Sardars* discredited the new governance structures in order to erode the villagers’ confidence. On one occasion, *Sardars* applied for 40,000 *taka* of micro-credit funding from the VDC for investment. The committee members believed that this would help create employment opportunities for the village, so they approved the application. To their surprise, *Sardars* refused to pay back on the due date. Other community members followed suit, and refused to repay their loans. A villager explained: ‘this creates a situation that others say: oh, actually, *Sardars* don’t need to pay, therefore we don’t

need to pay' (interview, 26 August 2007). Although some villagers made formal complaints to the LGED, and LGED officials subsequently intervened and tried to pressure *Sardars*, their interventions proved ineffective, because of their limited political influence at the local level. As a result, the micro-credit system collapsed. In the short term, some poor community members might benefit from the collapse of the micro-credit system since they did not need to repay, but as a NGO worker suggested, in the long term, the poorest villagers ended up suffering the most because the micro-credit system was intended to help them obtain cash and develop small business in order to escape the poverty trap (interview, 25 August 2007).

The solar home project had some other unintended consequences in elite building. First, it allowed temple leaders to re-gain some influence in the community. According to the traditions of the fishing community, villagers paid a visit to the temple to receive blessings before they went fishing. A female Hindu temple leader suggested that the solar lighting system, which had enabled the temple to light the statues of gods inside the temple, had made worshippers more reverential to their gods because they could see their fearsome appearances. Second, both the LGED and the system operator gained tremendous influence over the process. The LGED devised the rules without consulting community members. According to the regulation, villagers could change the rules provided that they got the approval from the LGED. UNDP and LGED acknowledged the significance of capacity building in ensuring the sustainability of the solar energy project. They worked very hard to train a 20-year-old college student in the village to maintain the system. He received 1,500 Taka a month and was responsible for the daily functioning of the system. He became influential since he controlled the times of the electricity supply (although, officially LGED had fixed the time). During the interview, he admitted that some villagers attempted to bribe him in order to extend the opening hours of the electric supplies during wedding celebrations. Although local villagers could file complaints to LGED, they did not do so because this would upset interpersonal relationships in the community.

Despite the limitations, this project had some success. Fourteen out of 70 households were connected to solar lighting. The lighting enabled the households (most of which were not poor) to prolong their income generation activities, such as making fishing-nets, in the evening, at home. As a result of lighting, women and girls felt safer walking in the village.

#### **4 Case study B: The 'co-opt-elite' approach in a regional trans-boundary water governance project in Ghana**

Ghana and Burkina Faso share 85 per cent of the Volta River Basin. How they manage water is crucial to the development of the region. The World Conservation Union (WCU) and the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) funded and initiated the 'Improving Water Governance in the Volta Basin' Project (in French abbreviation PAGEV) in 2004. This 3-year project aimed to develop dialogue between Ghana and Burkina Faso over the trans-boundary use of water. It set up a regional trans-boundary water governance committee in which regional ministers, bureaucrats, NGOs and local community members met and designed policies that helped adapt to climate change and ensure long-term ecological sustainability of the White Volta River Basin (PAGEV Annual Report 2007).

Public participation is normally not considered in many trans-boundary water governance set ups (Hirsch 2006; World Bank 2005). But this project chose eight local communities (four in north Ghana and four in south Burkina Faso), to participate in the regional trans-boundary water committee. These eight communities were selected based on four major factors: (1) adjacent to the White Volta River, (2) close relationships with the NGOs; (3) scale of the problems, and (4) diversity of the region, in terms of language and faith (interview with the Water Resource Commission officer, 20/8/09). Of the 24 total, eight female and sixteen male representatives were expected to represent the interests of their communities in planning discussions about the long-term use of the river.

To decentralize the process, the project initiators adopted an open bid to select two local NGOs (one from north east Ghana and another from south Burkina Faso) to manage the ground work. To help local communities select their representatives, the NGOs requested that each community first choose three nominees. The NGOs set a number of criteria for the nomination: the nominees should come from three out of five categories: (1) chief or chief representative, (2) farmer group, (3) youth group, (4) *Tindana* (religious leaders) or assembly man (politician), and (5) women's group. At least one out of the three local representatives must be female in order to promote gender equality (interview with Regional Ministry of Agriculture officer, 23/8/09). These arrangements were intended to ensure fair representation by choosing committee members from different socio-economic groups. Yet, some powerful people could easily exert their influence by getting their family members and relations elected in different categories. For instance, while the brother of a local chieftain in Sapeliga was elected, the wife of the chieftain in Kugrasia successfully secured a place in the committee.

The NGOs stressed that public participation in the trans-boundary water project was crucial to tackling climate change because local villagers are the managers of local natural resources and they needed to develop a sense of ownership of the project in order to understand the inter-dependence of water resource management between communities and between countries.

The NGOs identified the chieftains and *Tindana* responsible for causing poverty in the rural communities in north Ghana. Most of the land was owned by chieftains. The chieftains might act as 'benevolent' leaders by leasing less-fertile land to poor farmers during dry seasons. However, they actually preferred less-poor farmers because they owned cattle and they provided free ploughing service for the chieftains. *Tindana* contributed to rural poverty through the way villagers showed respect to the gods. *Tinda* performed religious ceremonies in return for which villagers donated crops and even animals.

Instead of confronting the elites, the project coordinators and NGOs worked closely with local chieftains and *Tindana*. They considered them as 'friends', rather than 'suppressors'. They argued first, cooperation with the elites could maximize both the efficiency and effectiveness of the project. According to the participatory appraisal exercise, land was owned by the chiefs or *Tindana*. Their support would ensure a smooth process from, for example, confiscating land to creating the buffer zone to protect the river bank. Second, they were the traditional authority figures in their communities. Their involvement was seen as a sign of respect and approval. As a NGO worker explained: 'no project will succeed without their support' (interview, 28 August

2008). He also suggested that there was no point in choosing ordinary villagers as representatives because ‘no one will listen to them’.

The regional water governance committee called for meetings twice a year. English and French were the official languages in the meetings, and interpretation was provided in order to enable local representatives to participate. The community representatives were expected to consult local opinions before the meetings, but some farmers told me that they rarely did so. The representatives were also expected to call for local meetings in order to explain what policies would be implemented. In my observations, local people rarely raised opposition. A few farmers did not participate in the meetings because their lands were located far away from the river, and they believed the project only targeted farmers along the river (interview, 29 August 2008).

By the end of the project, a number of policies had been implemented in all eight communities. A 10-metre wide buffer zone was formed and trees were planted to stabilize the river bank. Although local chieftains and *Tindana* owned most of the lands in the communities, this scheme had not received much resistance from them. It is because free mango seedlings were offered to compensate for their loss. Organic farming was also introduced to improve soil fertility. In order to avoid poor people cutting down trees within the buffer zone, fuel-wood crops were cultivated at the edge of the buffer zone. Local representatives in Ghana and Burkina Faso participated in capacity building workshops three times a year.

This policy, however, affected poor farmers disproportionately. Although most of them did not own land, particularly the relatively-fertile land along the river, the chieftains usually leased the small lands along the river to poor farmers during the dry seasons for two reasons: first, getting water from the river to irrigate farmlands during dry seasons was a hard work. Second, the chieftains wanted to be seen as ‘good’ leaders. The new buffer zone protection policy had made the chieftains reluctant to lease the land to poor farmers, and that had affected their livelihoods.

The village representatives were generally considered by their communities to be problem-solvers. For example, engineers helped Sakom community to repair the leaking reservoir while pumping facilities were provided to Sapeliga and Mognori in dry seasons (PAGEV Annual Report, 2007). The reputation of the leaders had been improved because they brought tangible benefits, such as free trees, mango seedlings and pumping facilities, to their communities. In interviews, quite a lot of poor farmers expressed their willingness to hand over their farmlands to their leaders for the creation of the buffer zone. In their words, they believed that their chiefs ‘know the best’ and the creation of the buffer zone was good for long-term ecological sustainability. This project showed that the participation of the local elites in the water committee served to consolidate their authority in the communities.

Despite the limitations, the project had a number of successes. It promoted an understanding of the inter-dependence of communities in dealing with climate change. It embraced social diversity in the institutional designs, for instance, Muslims, Christians and Pagans were involved in the project. Apart from English and French, interpretation of other languages, such as Bisia and Kussasi, were provided during meetings. Gender inclusion was also a key feature of the project. To ensure fair gender representation, each community was asked to select at least one woman as their representative (see Wong 2009b for more details).

## 5 Discussion

The processes and the outcomes of the ‘counter-elite’ and ‘co-opt-elite’ approaches are summarized in Table 1. The nature of the elite domination in both case studies is slightly different. In the fishing community in Bangladesh, *Sardars* control most of the fishing equipment, such as boats and fishing nets. The resulting asset dependence contrasts with the Ghanaian case in which land is owned by chieftains and *Tindana*, resulting in land dependence.

Table 1: Comparing the ‘counter-elite’ and the ‘co-opt-elite’ approaches

	<b>Solar home system project in Bangladesh</b>	<b>Trans-boundary water governance project in Ghana</b>
<b>Backgrounds of the projects</b>		
Location	Cox’s Bazar, south-east of Bangladesh	Around the border between Ghana and Burkina Faso
Population	700	500 of each affected community
Context	Rural	Rural
Project nature	Using solar lighting to address energy poverty	Community participation to improve trans-boundary water decisions
<b>Approach</b>	Counter-elite	Co-opt-elite
<b>Power perspective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Power-over (resist elite domination to make changes)</li> <li>- Power-from-within (raise awareness and build capacity to empower the powerless)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Power-with (build partnership with elites to bring benefits to the poor)</li> </ul>
<b>Strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Sardars</i> controlled most of the fishing equipment and assets</li> <li>- they were excluded from institutional building and committee participation</li> <li>- NGO empowered poor people to make decisions themselves</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chieftains and <i>Tindana</i> controlled all the land</li> <li>- they were invited to join the trans-boundary water governance committee as local representatives</li> <li>- they negotiated the use of water with regional ministers, bureaucrats and NGOs</li> </ul>
<b>Elites’ responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Sardars</i> felt threatened by the exclusion</li> <li>- they infiltrated into the solar home management committee to influence agenda</li> <li>- they destabilized the micro-credit system to discredit the newly-created committee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Tindana</i> were happy to let chieftains represent their interests in the water committee</li> <li>- Chieftains built networks with regional and local government officials</li> </ul>
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- local people finally invited <i>Sardars</i> to work as ‘advisers’ in the committee</li> <li>- Hindu temple leaders re-gained influence in the village</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Chieftains brought benefits, such as free mango seedlings, to their villages</li> <li>- ‘anti-poor’ policies, such as confiscating lands along the river bank, were implemented</li> <li>- pumping facilities reduced chieftains’ willingness to give lands to the poor for cultivation in dry seasons</li> </ul>

Source: Authors.

Both projects had conducted participatory appraisal exercises before the projects started. These exercises created the opportunity to explore local politics to identify elites and subsequently discuss with local people how elites could be ‘managed’. In both cases, the exercises were a missed opportunity. For instance, in the water project in Ghana, the focus of the participatory appraisal exercise was on climate change. Its aim was to find out the solutions to protecting the long-term ecological stability of the river with efficiency as the primary concern of the project. In the absence of a deep power analysis, the chieftains and *Tindana* were seen as the solution, rather than the problem; they were co-opted, rather than confronted.

NGOs played an active role in both projects, but their domination in the decision-making resulted in a top-down process of implementation. In both projects, local people were not involved in shaping the objectives and governance structures of the projects from the beginning. They were expected to carry out the tasks, rather than to lead.

Similar to the observations of Beard and Phakphian (2009), often this is ‘to rush the implementation of community-based approaches and ..... not take the time to adequately empower poor’. This can, they warn, ‘create an environment ripe for capture by more powerful interests’ (p. 11).

Both projects were shown to have a strong influence of institutional thinking, but the institutional solutions were very different in content and in practice. In Bangladesh, the rules of the game of local governance were completely re-drawn by the NGO. *Sardars* were excluded from participating in the solar home committees. Raising public awareness and organized capacities were also expected to foster community empowerment to further undermine their influence. On the contrary, the governance structures of the water project in Ghana were organized around the existing structures of authority by facilitating the chieftains and *Tindana* active roles in decision-making.

### **5.1 Specific experiences in Bangladesh**

A few more specific lessons can be drawn from each project. The project organizers’ decision not to work with the local leaders in Bangladesh might appear to be the right thing to do because *Sardars* were identified as the cause of poverty. That said, a lack of detailed understanding of the complexity of people’s livelihoods (such as the dependence of poor people’s livelihoods on local elites) and a lack of public participation at the initial stages of the project (such as the choice of technological interventions and the approach to governance restructuring), have made this top-down project fail to challenge the power inequalities between the funders and local communities in the first place. The LGED explained that the project was largely ‘technical and financial’ in nature at the initial stage, and community involvement would be premature. We also had an impression that both government officials and the NGO thought they were doing something good for the communities, and they knew how the goals could be achieved. Similar to the research findings of Cornwall and Coelho (2007), empowerment is a necessary condition to challenge elite capture, but skipping the empowerment phase by simply asking the powerless people to form committees and to elect leaders could prove ineffective.

Without the political and financial support from outside, the experience in Bangladesh has also shown that institutional strengthening alone was not adequate to challenge local inequalities. It is clear from the case study that *Sardars* were capable of influencing the politics within the solar home committee, even without their physical presence. The elites’ strong manipulative skills have cast doubt over the assumption that the powerless can become transformative agents to challenge the elite domination even though the new institutional arrangements are intended to empower the poor. Since the livelihoods of the poor community members were heavily dependent on *Sardars*, the poor easily bow to the pressure from the privileged in return for stable livelihoods and community harmony. Their initiative to invite *Sardars* as ‘advisers’ in the solar home committee could be seen as the poor exercising their agency to reinforce the existing power inequalities. Furthermore, the revival of the influence of the Hindu temple leaders and the rising power of the government officials and the system operators were the unanticipated consequences of institutional crafting. This has demonstrated the difficulties of getting the institutions right.



## 5.2 Specific experiences in Ghana

The project organizers in Ghana were convinced of the need to co-opt local elites for the sake of project efficiency. My research has, however, demonstrated that it is difficult to control the elites once they are absorbed in the system. This political reality has raised uncertainty about the claim by Platteau and Abraham (2002) that ‘benevolent elites’ would channel some benefits to the poor.

The co-option strategies have the potential to have significant implications on poverty. Elites are power-sensitive, but by definition, they are financially better off than the poor. Therefore, they are less poverty-sensitive and less concerned about how policies implemented on the ground will affect the local poor. In the Ghana case study, the chieftains appear to have helped to make the right decisions to restore the long-term ecological stability of the river in response to the threats of climate change. In achieving this, however, the short-term livelihoods of the poor may have been compromised. The creation of the buffer zone along the river banks, for example, aimed to reduce soil erosion and strengthen flood protection. Farmers were asked to stop cultivation within the buffer zone. This policy hit poor farmers disproportionately because lands along the river bank were usually fertile, and the availability of river water made irrigation easy. The confiscation of the farmlands, for the sake of creating the buffer zone, had, therefore, become a blow to the livelihoods of very poor farmers. Furthermore, as a result of the water project, the availability of pumping facilities has changed the chieftains’ altruistic acts. Traditionally, the chieftains were willing to lease the less-fertile lands to poor farmers during the dry season because at that time productivity was low. But, pumping has revolutionized farming practices in the communities because irrigation enables farmlands to be located away from the river. As a result, the chieftains and *Tindana* are less willing to lease their land to the needy families.

The water project has also demonstrated the complexity of power in two aspects: benefit-sharing between chieftains and *Tindana* and dissatisfaction from local people. This study has stressed that chieftains and *Tindana* controlled half of the land in some communities in north Ghana, but *Tindana* have not been represented in the water committee. This lack of representation has not caused any conflicts between them. In one case, the *Tindana* was the brother of the chieftain. In others, the chieftains would ensure that the benefits, such as free mango seedlings, would be shared with *Tindana*. Concerning the relationships between elites and local people, my interviews suggested that not all farmers were content with the performance of the chieftains in the project. They complained that the elites rarely had consultations before the water meetings started. One male villager believed that ‘they go to Bolga [a city] to meet the important people’ (interview, 28 August 2008), and then kept all the political gains, rather than to share with them. Despite the grievance, they rarely confronted their chieftains because, as one villager put it, he did not want to be seen as a trouble maker. The strong norms of conflict avoidance in the communities have silenced the opposition, and therefore worked favourably with political co-option.

## 6 Conclusions and policy implications

This paper has demonstrated the paradoxes of including and excluding local elites in the community-based development. The dilemmas are that challenging the authority of local elites, by excluding them from the governance structures, does not necessarily undermine their influence, whereas co-opting with them in the new institutional

arrangements risks reinforcing power inequalities and worsening poverty. The subjective feeling of the poor in both case studies has helped perpetuate the elite capture problems. One of the constraints of the ‘counter-elite’ approach shown in Bangladesh is the asset dependence of the poor on *Sardars*. Risk aversion, feeling insecure about their own livelihoods and the sense of powerlessness have all constrained them from confronting the elites. In contrast, the ‘co-opt-elite’ approach in Ghana has further legitimized the rules of the chieftains and *Tindana*. The poor tended to feel inferior, and they did not feel it appropriate to challenge the elites in the community meetings.

However, this paper does not suggest that shifting community-based projects from elite-driven to community-focused is doomed to failure. First, the ‘counter-elite’ and ‘co-opt-elite’ approaches should not be seen as ‘either-or’. Elites can be absorbed and challenged in the same project at the same time. More time should be given to observations and to conduct proper participatory appraisal exercises in order to have a deeper understanding of the underlying power structures in the communities. Our research on solar lighting in India indicates that there are some ‘benevolent elites’ who have accumulated certain levels of wealth and social status genuinely want to serve their communities simply since they feel good to do so (Wong 2010).

Second, reducing the land and other asset dependence by seeking alternative livelihoods with the poor offers a necessary condition to break the patron-client relationships. Third, the process of challenging elite domination can only be sustained if the poor are genuinely empowered and they feel that this can make a difference to their lives, as suggested by Cleaver and Harmada (2010). Fourth, NGOs and other development agencies should maintain their high power-sensitivity at the post-implementation stage of the projects. They should continuously provide support to local people in order to monitor the influence of the elites over the development processes.

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