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Transfers for extreme poverty reduction: Implications for patron-client relationships in the context of Bangladesh's agricultural reformation

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WIDER Working Paper 2014/029

Transfers for extreme poverty reduction

Implications for patron-client relationships in the context of Bangladesh's agricultural reformation

Lucy Scott*

January 2014

Abstract: This paper investigates how a development intervention which targets extremely poor households with investment capital influences relationships between those households and the landowning elite. It places this investigation in the context of the 'agricultural reformation' of rural Bangladesh, whereby the growth of the non-farm economy and increased connectivity of rural areas are eroding the historical rigid position of the landowning elite at the top of the rural hierarchy.

The paper is based on the findings of primary fieldwork on the *char* islands of north-west Bangladesh which examined the processes resulting from implementation of the Chars Livelihoods Programme (CLP). In weakening the economic dependence of extremely poor households on the landowning elite, this paper argues that the CLP is 'swimming with the tide' with respect to the wider social processes operating in rural Bangladesh. Because of this, the activities of the CLP have the potential to be 'transformative-by-stealth'. Short-term material gains and reduced insecurity provide a platform for changing inter-household relationships, particularly those with the elite. The activities of the CLP have had valuable short and medium term impacts as well as contributing to, and providing a basis for, longer-term transformation in society.

Keywords: extreme poverty, asset transfer, patron-client relationships, rural change, Bangladesh

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1 Introduction

There have been great strides in the reduction of extreme poverty. The success of poverty reduction since 1990 means that 'eradicating extreme poverty is no longer a pipe dream' (*The Economist* 2013). Between 1990 and 2010 the number of people living in extreme poverty, as measured by living below US$1.25 a day purchasing power parity, fell from 1.9 billion to 1.2 billion. However, recent progress at poverty reduction has been uneven and unequal. In particular, the incomes of the poorest 5 per cent of the world's population (350 million people, or roughly 30 per cent of those still living in poverty) are getting left behind (Milanovic 2012). It is clear that reducing the poverty of the poorest people within an acceptable timeframe involves more than just 'business as usual' for development interventions (Ahmed et al. 2007).

It is increasingly acknowledged that mainstream development approaches do little either to reach or to help the poorest households and that new approaches are needed (Hossain and Matin 2007). To eradicate poverty, development interventions have to be designed explicitly with the needs of the poorest people in mind. While the poorest people 'may benefit from policies to help the poor' they 'need other policies as well' (Sen and Hulme 2006: 8). Microfinance for instance, can reduce poverty but it often fails to reach and to help extremely poor people, particularly female-headed and landless households who require resources to meet immediate consumption needs, rather than loans for entrepreneurship (Sen and Hulme 2006).

In order to reach and help the poorest people, development interventions need to address the 'complexity of the knots' which the poorest households and people are trapped in (Matin and Sulaiman et al. 2008: 6). For the poorest people, poverty has clear economic, social and political dimensions. There is not just one cause, but instead multiple factors work together to maintain the poorest people in poverty (Shepherd et al. 2011). For instance, discrimination and limited social networks, combined with remoteness, inadequate physical and economic assets, no education and susceptibility to health shocks through working and living in poor conditions, can work together to maintain and trap households in poverty.

Directly targeting the poorest households, or people, with economic or physical assets has emerged as a response to tackle the complexity of knots which maintain the poorest people in poverty. This paper examines how a development programme with the mandate to reduce the poverty of the poorest households in a remote, rural area of Bangladesh is altering power relations and patron-client relationships. The DFID-funded *Chars* Livelihoods Programme (CLP) transferred £100 of investment capital to each of 55,000 targeted extremely poor households, between 2006 and 2010, under its Asset Transfer Programme (ATP). As this paper argues, this approach can both improve the economic situation of these poorest households and alter the power imbalance between the poor and the elites.

Section 2 discusses elite behaviour as a barrier to poverty reduction, before Section 3 examines the changing nature of power relations in rural Bangladesh—the social and political context within which the CLP is operating. Section 4 gives an overview of the research methodology, before Section 5 presents the results, examining whether the CLP is accelerating the transitions occurring in rural Bangladesh. Section 6 discusses the implications of the findings for interventions to reduce the poverty of the poorest households, and Section 7 concludes.

2 Elite behaviour as a barrier for the reduction of extreme poverty

This paper focuses on elite behaviour as one of the key knots of disadvantage which maintains the poorest people in poverty. Abusive elite behaviour is identified as a key dimension, and cause, of poverty (Narayan et al. 2000). Studies from rural Bangladesh since the 1970s, for instance, have highlighted that the behaviour of the elites is a real obstacle for poverty reduction (Davis and McGregor 2000) because of 'elite control of political and economic resources, widespread rent-seeking, corruption [and] pervasive patron-clientelism' (Davis and McGregor 2000: 56). These relationships not only minimize the possibility of protest against the rich, but also weaken social relationships among the poor (Lewis and Hossain 2008a).

However, while the relationships between the poorest and the elite are frequently highly exploitative, dependent and hierarchical they also offer a degree of security for the poorest households (Hossain and Matin 2007). Covariant risks, or those affecting whole communities, undermine the value of relationships between poor households and force them to rely upon relationships with the wealthy including for food and cash loans during periods of scare employment. In other words, it may not be to the benefit of poor people to be without relationships which they can call upon during hard times, though the destitute often cannot even hope to enter into patron-client relationships (Jansen 1983). What is important are the circumstances and degree of dependency governing these relationships during 'normal' times and the capacity of poor people to negotiate them (Duni et al. 2009: 49-68).

The power which the elites exercise over the poorest can be either material, cultural, or both (Lukes 2005). Elite control over material resources can operate as structural violence, the 'political-economic organization of society that imposes conditions of physical and emotional distress' (Bourgois 2001: 7). Marxist analyses of power of the rural elite in Bangladesh highlights material sources of power and how landless households are forced to work on the land of the wealthier under exploitative terms of employment (Rahman 1987). Another means of exerting material power is through everyday violence, routine practices which 'normalize violence at the micro-level', including domestic violence. This routine exercise of violence can grow into a 'culture of terror' (Bourgois 2001: 9).

Power, however, is not always active and exercised. Inactive power implies the ability to act, while to act can actually be a sign of weakness (Lukes 2005). Lukes (2005: 11) argues for a dimension of power which 'prevents people […] from having grievances by shaping their perceptions […] in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things'. This type of symbolic violence does not involve the active exertion of power and may mean that the individuals subject to it subconsciously collude in their subjugation (Bourgois 2001). This could involve people living in poverty knowing that there is little point in believing that local institutions will provide them with their rights (Lewis and Hossain 2008b).

Partly because of the barriers which the elites pose to poverty reduction, it is increasingly argued that mainstream development activities will not 'trickle down' and benefit the poorest people (Shepherd et al. 2011). Resources have to be channelled directly to the poorest households which require more intensive assistance (Matin et al. 2008). This however, raises the question of how to identify and reach those poorest households or people.

'Targeting is probably the most controversial issue', associated with cash transfers (Hanlon et al. 2010). The methods used to identify and target beneficiaries face a number of issues, as, by their nature, the poorest people live at the margins of society and are often not present at community events or in existing institutions. Meanwhile, targeted transfers can lead to adverse responses

from other members of a community including resentment by those who do not directly benefit. There is not a single best approach to selecting beneficiaries and outcomes often depend on the quality of implementation, rather than the approach which is adopted (Coady et al. 2002 in Ellis et al. 2009). Context however, plays a key role in determining which approach(es) are likely to be the most effective at achieving the desired outcome; in this case reaching and reducing the poverty of the poorest people.

Key components of the context are the social relationships within a village or community. Particular social relationships can close off opportunities for upward social and economic mobility for some people while for others they can provide opportunities to improve their situation (Green and Hulme 2005). The nature of both bonding social capital (that between households of a similar level of wealth) and bridging social capital (between poor households and wealthy ones; Narayan 2005: 3-39) is important for poverty escapes. If, and how, targeting influences social capital and these relationships is crucial to assessing the effectiveness of a programme at achieving its outcomes.

A specific challenge relating to means tested criteria is setting them fairly in contexts where frequently there are 'wafer thin differences' between households in the bottom 50-60 per cent of per capita consumption (Ellis 2008). In such circumstances targeting criteria may only serve to exclude poor but recently lucky households—such as those who had no sickness last year—and next year they will probably be poor again (Ellis 2008). Meanwhile participatory wealth-ranking requires high quality field workers to ensure an accurate process which is not manipulated by the powerful. However, 'when the local power structure is dominated by land owning elites, to talk of people's participation in the execution of any development programme is almost meaningless', for in the name of participation local elites can stand in the way of development schemes (Baqee 1998: 45).

Targeted development programmes can increase acrimony, particularly among households of similar wealth, with villagers confused about why some households receive benefits while others do not. A sense of unfairness over the selection arising from application of targeting criteria can lead to social divisiveness (Ellis 2008). It may be that development interventions which specifically target the poorest households, or people, actually exacerbate one manifestation of poverty—their powerlessness vis-à-vis elite groups—that dampen the opportunities they have available to them.

The research findings presented below illustrate how the asset transfers of the CLP have contributed to transforming the relationship between landless beneficiaries and wealthy landowners. In particular, through decreasing the economic dependence of extremely poor households on the wealthy, ATP has given extremely poor households more power in this relationship in terms of negotiating the conditions behind credit and wage labour. This change though, cannot be separated from the context within which the CLP is operating, that of the 'agricultural reformation' in rural Bangladesh (Wood 1999 in Lewis and Hossain 2008a), where the rural hierarchy, of which the landowning elite always used to be a rigid force at the top of, is breaking down (Lewis 1991 in Lewis and Hossain 2008a). The next section describes these changes in more detail.

3 The changing nature of elite power in rural Bangladesh

Two processes dominated rural Bangladesh in the 1970s after liberation from Pakistan. The first was increasing socio-economic differentiation between rich and poor (van Schendel 1981). The second was pauperization, the absolute impoverishment of many households (van Schendel

1981). The wealthy, through their control of land, used employment, sharecropping and credit relationships to exploit poor peasants (Jansen 1983). These relationships forced peasants to sell off their land. This, combined with a scarcity of land in the face of population growth, meant that by the late 1970s and early 1980s one-third of households were landless (Jansen 1983) while fewer than 10 per cent of rural households owned more than half the country's cultivable land (Jannuzi and Peach 1978 in Hartmann and Boyce 1983).

During the 1970s and 1980s land was the key resource in rural areas and class formation originated from patterns of landownership (Jahangir 1979). A tradition of patronage, based on economic dependence bound landless, poor peasants to wealthy landowners (Alain 1973 in Jahangir 1979). This dependence stemmed from personal 'patron-client' ties, binding sharecropper to landlord, labourer to employer and debtor to landlord. Through these ties poor people gained access to land, employment and credit while the rich accumulated further wealth (Hartmann and Boyce 1983). Land however, was not just the source of economic power, but also of political power, with rich peasants able to branch into remunerative non-agricultural activities and seek new alliances in the town and administration. Control of the means of production, land, also enabled the wealthy to access political power and from 1975 new rural entrepreneurs began to emerge (Jahangir 1979).

During the 1970s farm mechanization increased the large-scale production of crops for market by the land-owning elite and affected the demand for labour, with tractors and power pumps reducing labour requirements for cultivation and irrigation. Meanwhile, during the harvest the demand for labour increased with timing essential to prevent crops being destroyed. In these conditions hiring labour under a wage system was more profitable than the previously dominant sharecropping, leasing and permanent labour arrangements (Jahangir 1979). This shift in the nature of employment from sharecropping and permanent arrangements to daily wage labour (Jansen 1983) forced peasants to sell their labour to survive and alienated them from the land (Jahangir 1979). This allowed them to become more mobile (Jahangir 1979) and while this shift increased economic insecurity for the poor it also gave opportunities for them to begin to free themselves from patron-client relationships (Hartmann and Boyce 1983).

The gradual erosion of traditional patron-client relationships since the 1980s stems from agrarian changes including improved infrastructure, increased mobility, commercialization of agriculture and the growth of the non-farm sector (Mannan 2005 in Makita 2007). The dramatic expansion of all-weather infrastructure, including roads and bridges, from the 1980s onwards brought a new degree of connectedness to rural areas (GoB 2005) and provided an enabling environment for this process. Labourers could take advantage of livelihoods opportunities outside the village including rickshaw pulling, petty trading and construction work (Ali Toufique and Turton 2003). At the same time, the rural landscape is now increasingly 'urban' in character. The Rural Electrification Programme, combined with road construction has opened up new opportunities for shops and marketing outlets in rural areas (Ali Toufique and Turton 2003).

Some commentators argue that the phrase 'rural Bangladesh' no longer means what it once did (Ali Toufique and Turton 2003) and that there have been 'structural changes within the rural economy' (Sobhan 2010: 45). Agriculture no longer solely drives the rural economy with remittances and infrastructural development now also playing an important role (Ali Toufique and Turton 2003). This is the case for most developing countries. Non-farm activities are not just becoming central to rural livelihoods, but there is a 'profound transition from one way of making a living to another' currently underway, from relying on agriculture to earning a living from more diversified activities (Rigg 2006: 181).

In Bangladesh this transition is referred to as an 'agricultural reformation' (Wood 1999 in Lewis and Hossain 2008a) with the rigid force of the landowning elite at the top of the rural hierarchy beginning to break down as, 'landownership alone is no longer the main determinant of rural power' (Lewis 1991 in Lewis and Hossain 2008a: 34). In some rural areas landowners now have difficulty in finding sufficient day labour during peak agricultural seasons as landless people have opportunities to undertake non-farm work, transforming landowners 'from job *givers* to job *requestors'* (Makita 2007: 259). This reflects not only a change in employment relations but also one in power relations. In acceptance that 'the power structure is no longer confined to the village' (Westergaard and Hossain 2001: 334 in Lewis and Hossain 2008b: 92) landowners are increasingly engaged in a 'politics of reputation' (Lewis and Hossain 2008a: 49) and are organizing themselves into a 'power elite' with others at the top of the hierarchy, such as influential businessmen and *Union Parishad* (UP, the lowest level of elected government) members, to protect their shared interests (Lewis and Hossain 2008a).

There is a wealth of experience in rural Bangladesh at directly targeting the poorest people and households, in acknowledgement of the barrier which the elite pose to poverty reduction. The credit interventions of Grameen Bank offer loans to poor women. In doing this they contributed to changing the power relationship between poor labourers and wealthy landowners, enabling the former, through having additional sources of income, to bargain with the elite over their wage rates (Rahman 1987). A small NGO, founded in 1975 and offering credit facilities has also enabled poor rickshaw pullers to free themselves from 'tied' and exploitative relationships with powerful rickshaw owners (Lewis and Hossain 2008b). Similar processes have resulted from BRAC's Targeting the Ultra Poor (TUP) programme which transfers assets specifically to extremely poor households. Because of TUP, landowners report a decline in cheap labour and a rise in wage rates (Hossain and Matin 2007).

It is important though, not to overemphasize either the structural changes in the rural economy or how those have impacted on poor households in particular. Some commentators still argue that land is the primary asset influencing poverty outcomes (Zohir et al. 2007). Landlessness and reliance on agricultural day labour remain key characteristics of rural poverty (Kotikula et al. 2007). In addition, the agricultural reformation is not advancing at the same rate in different areas of the country and there is, 'a continuum rather than a divide, from areas where traditional views and images still hold true to areas where a more modern picture is taking hold' (Ali Toufique and Turton 2003 and Turton 2003: 6).

The extent to which an agricultural reformation has advanced on the Jamuna *chars*, where the CLP operates, is addressed in this research. *Char*lands are large, sandy and unconsolidated islands and bars resulting from shifts in the river course. The majority of Jamuna *chars* are very young and sandy, being less than six years old (Haque and Zaman 1989). The *chars* are a dynamic environment, with the Jamuna River both eroding existing land and accreting new lands.

Most Jamuna *char* villages were previously mainland and the land-registration papers then issued are still being sold and traded. There are, though, specific laws of alluvium and diluvium relating to land ownership in the chars. Most recently, the Estate Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1994 states that land accreting in-situ returns to the previous owner if it was submerged for less than 30 years (Thompson 2000). Land submerged for a longer period becomes *khas*, or government-owned, to be distributed among the poor. In reality though, rich and powerful landowners take control of emerging land with small landowners usually unable to re-gain control over it in a context of limited law enforcement (Hutton and Haque 2004).

Jansen (1983) argues that, to a greater extent than in other rural areas of Bangladesh, it is the strongest and most powerful party who wins, with physical fights over land being common. This is reiterated more recently; land ownership is 'the source of endless feuds in the char lands' (Baqee 1998: 22). Certainly, access to land, both for agriculture and a homestead, remain important in the *char* context, where there are limited alternative income generating activities.

Based on the findings from 12 months of primary fieldwork on the island *chars* this paper examines the dimensions of power on the *chars* and if, and how, the CLP is influencing hierarchical and exploitative patron-client relationships. It examines this in the context of the agricultural reformation, investigating if ATP is contributing to the decline of the traditional, fixed rural hierarchy.

4 Methodology

Between 2006 and 2010, the CLP focused its work in 700 villages on island *chars* in five districts (Bogra, Gaibandha, Jamalpur, Kurigrama, and Sirajganj) of the northern Jamuna. 55,000 extremely poor households each received £100 of investment capital under the Asset Transfer Programme (ATP). These households were targeted on the basis of having neither ownership of, or access to, agricultural land nor owning any cattle (see Scott and Islam 2007 for details of the targeting criteria). The investment capital was given to a woman within the household. Each beneficiary received the same package of support, but given the scale of the programme, assets were delivered in phases. The first phase of households (ATP1) received their assets during the first half of 2006, ATP2 in the first half of 2007, ATP3 in the six months from November 2007 and the fourth phase (ATP4) received their assets from the middle of 2008.

Over 95 per cent of female beneficiaries purchased livestock, mainly one cattle with a combination of sheep, goats, or chickens. These women also attended training sessions on livestock and homestead gardening, and attended social development sessions for 18 months after receiving the investment capital. In addition, these extremely poor households, along with other poor households in the village had their homestead raised above the flood-level (see Scott 2011 for details about the range of programme activities).

The research findings presented below are from two districts purposefully selected on the basis of programme data, as being more and less wealthy parts of the CLP operating area. Located close to the Jamuna Bridge and closer to Dhaka, Sirajganj district is one of the richest CLP districts. In contrast, Gaibandha district is further north and among the poorest of the working areas. Within the two districts six criteria[1] were used to compile a village short-list. This shortlist gave eight villages in Sirajganj and five in Gaibandha. From the shortlist, four villages—two in Sirajganj and two in Gaibandha—were purposively selected on the basis that distance from the mainland (in the form of a market) is important in explaining the vulnerability and livelihoods strategies of *char* dwellers. The villages in Sirajganj were matched with those in Gaibandha on the basis of *char* remoteness and stability as well as village population and the proportion of ATP beneficiary households (see Table 1). In each district then, one village was some distance from the mainland, while the other was closer to the major markets on the river embankments.

[1] The criteria are that; both ATP2 and ATP4 is being implemented in the village; CLP infrastructure activities (plinth raising) have already taken place in the village; absence of the 'Infrastructure Employment Programme' operating during the lean season of 2008; ATP4 had not yet been implemented at the start of fieldwork; a well-established NGO which had already implemented ATP1 in different villages was implementing ATP; and absence of another NGO asset transfer programme 'CARE-Shouhardo'.

Table 1: The four case study villages (village names anonymized)

	Total hh	No. ATP2 hh (% total hh)	No. of ATP2 hh interviewed (% ATP2 hh)	No. ATP4 hh (% total hh)	Approximate age of char	One-way journey time to major market	
						Wet season (June-August)	Dry season
Gaibandha district (more northerly and remote from Dhaka)							
Ananpur	319	67 (21%)	54 (81%)	15 (4%)	8 years	Zigabari market 40-minute boat journey for 5 months of the year	2 hour walk for 7 months of the year
Satarbari	175	42 (24%)	36 (86%)	15 (9%)	12 years	Balashi market For 8 months, a half hour walk and boat journey	Half-hour walk for 4 months of the year
Sirajganj District (closer to Dhaka)							
Kuragasapur	270	41 (15%)	36 (88%)	38 (14%)	12-13 years	Enathpur market Half-hour by boat and 1½ hour walk throughout the year	
Nanabari	161	20 (12%)	19 (95%)	43 (27%)	9 years	Mokimpur market 20-minute boat journey for half the year	Half-hour walk for 6 months of the year

Source: Scott (2011).

There are two groups of ATP beneficiaries in each village, namely those which received assets between December 2006 and April 2007 (ATP2) and those who entered the programme between August 2008 and February 2009 (ATP4). When fieldwork was conducted between September 2008 and October 2009, this was 17 to 21 months after ATP2 beneficiaries had received investment capital. By the end of the period of fieldwork, this cohort of beneficiaries had completed their social development curriculum and stopped receiving a monthly stipend and thereby had finished their direct involvement in ATP. Meanwhile, ATP4 beneficiaries had either just received their investment capital before the start of fieldwork, or entered the programme during the fieldwork. This cohort therefore acted as a comparison group for the ATP2 beneficiaries who had completed their direct programme involvement.

Semi-structured interviews, conducted with two groups of respondents, were the central research method used in each village. One set of respondents was ATP2 households: semi-structured interviews were conducted with all ATP2 beneficiaries living in, or near, each of the four case study villages (n=145; see Table 1). These interviews were undertaken with the same beneficiary twice, the first near the start of fieldwork and the second towards the end of the fieldwork period. The interviews were repeated to gain an understanding of the seasonal dimensions of livelihoods strategies and also to build rapport with the interviewee so increasing the reliability and depth of interview responses. These interviews examined changes in the lives and livelihoods of ATP2 beneficiaries since entering the programme (a within case comparison).

The second group of respondents for semi-structured interviews were a wealth cross-section of the village. In each village this included four households identified as among the wealthiest in the village, seven ATP2 households, seven ATP4 households and six households, which though very poor, were slightly too wealthy to receive ATP. In-depth semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were repeated frequently throughout the year with these households, enabling relationships to be built-up, particularly with female household members. These interviews investigated differences in the livelihoods and vulnerabilities of women and households with different levels of wealth and at different stages of programme involvement (a between case comparison).

Other methods were two focus groups in each village with ATP2 beneficiaries and two focus groups in each village with ATP4 beneficiaries on managing food insecurity. These focus groups comprised female beneficiaries and each focus group contained between five and seven participants. Focus groups were conducted with women since they are in charge, not only of preparing and cooking food, but also in planning food purchases and ensuring that household members have enough to eat. Participants for the focus groups were selected on the basis of their willingness to discuss issues with an outsider and the groups were kept reasonably small to ensure that everyone felt comfortable contributing.

5 Results: changing patron-client relationships on the *chars*

Before entering ATP, beneficiary households owned no cattle and had no access to agricultural land. With one exception, all of the ATP2 households in the four case study villages purchased one cattle with their initial investment capital. By September 2009 (approximately 32 months after entering the programme) 75 per cent of those ATP2 beneficiary households still owned cattle, owning 1.7 cattle on average. In addition, 20 per cent of ATP2 households had gained ownership of, or long-term tenure over, land, while 44 per cent had access to land through renting or share-cropping over the 12 month period before September 2009. Ten households had taken advantage of the limited opportunities on the *chars* to diversify away from agricultural activities, through opening a small shop, for instance. Just 13 ATP2 households (nine per cent),

had failed at a 'disaster avoidance' strategy and had once again fallen into a poverty trap, returning to around the level of material asset ownership which the CLP used to target extremely poor households.

This section, structured around the different types of power operating on the *chars,* investigates how these new assets and activities of extremely poor households are influencing their relationship with wealthy landowning households in the village. Before doing this Table 2 gives an overview of the progress of the agricultural reformation in the four villages.

Table 2: The agricultural reformation and the four research villages

	Ananpur	Satarbari	Kuragasapur	Nanabari
Agricultural reformation	least advanced →			most advanced
Accessibility	Daily migration for work outside village not possible	Daily migration to neighbouring villages, *chars* and mainland	Daily migration to neighbouring villages and mainland	Daily migration to neighbouring villages, *chars*, and mainland
Main income generating activities for extremely poor households since ATP	• Seasonal agricultural daily wage labour in village • Migration to Dhaka and neighbouring districts • Cattle rearing • Sharecropping	• Seasonal agricultural daily wage labour in village • Migration to Dhaka and neighbouring districts • Petty businessman in village • Cattle rearing	• Seasonal agricultural daily wage labour in village • Year-round weaving on mainland • Rickshaw pulling on mainland • Migration to Dhaka and neighbouring districts • Homestead gardening • Cattle rearing	• Seasonal agricultural daily wage labour in village and on mainland • Year-round weaving on mainland • Rickshaw pulling on mainland • Migration to neighbouring districts • Homestead gardening • Cattle rearing
Characteristics of the elite	Landowners, moneylenders and sole employers in village. Also have land and house on mainland. Some family members retain presence in village to retain land there	Landowners, though much of their land is currently submerged. Moneylenders	The wealthiest of all the villages, landowners in village and on mainland as well as being 'businessmen'	Landowners and weavers
Source of labour for elite	Landless villagers	Landless villagers	Landless villagers	Landless villagers in Nanabari and surrounding *char* villages
Dominant mode of elite power before ATP	Cultural – symbolic violence	Material – structural violence	Material – structural violence	Material – a weak form of structural violence
Elite reactions to ATP	Largely dislike CLP activities, but no active reaction	A campaign of everyday violence based on control over land	Forming a 'power elite' Charging rent for homestead land	Accepting of CLP activities

Source: Scott (2011).

5.1 Structural violence on the chars: elite control over credit

The focus of much of the literature from the 1970s and 1980s on power relationships in rural Bangladesh is on material sources of power and the structural violence which the land owning elite exert over landless households. Structural violence is related to the socio-economic organization of rural society. In particular, to control of an elite minority over credit, labour and land (Hartmann and Boyce 1983).

There are no microfinance institutions (MFIs) operating in either Satarbari or Ananpur, the two villages in more remote Gaibandha district. The elite in Gaibandha are used to being sole credit providers, charging extortionate interest rates. Their monopoly however, is now threatened with ATP2 beneficiaries also lending money. The teacher in Satarbari, the wife of an influential landowner in the village, explains with disgust, if anyone, 'loans Tk. 1,000 for three months and then takes back Tk. 1,000 and one *maund*[2] of maize this is a bad business. Some beneficiaries are doing this. If they stop then maybe they will be rich in the future'. Her comment is supported by the CLP fieldworker in Satarbari who says that beneficiaries are loaning cash to other poor households in the village for them to buy food.

In Ananpur, interviews highlight three ways through which reliance on wealthy moneylenders is decreasing. First, increased wealth of many beneficiaries means they have less need to borrow for survival. As Jomena, an ATP2 beneficiary says, 'now we have no need to borrow from rich men. We have Tk. 70,000 because of my husband's chilli business and from rearing bulls'. Second, as in Satarbari, some ATP2 beneficiaries are informally lending money, including Sobhura who loaned Tk. 25,000 to a man in the village who pays her 5 per cent interest a month. Third, since the CLP, the husbands of ATP beneficiaries have set-up two *shomiti*,[3] loaning to other villagers. One of these, *Jubok Anando Shomiti,* was established in 2008 by 12 young men. They lend to villagers with a monthly interest rate of Tk. 100 on every Tk. 1,000. Villagers do warn though, that the *shomiti* can only lend when they have money available.

5.2 Structural violence on the chars: elite control over labour

It is not just in terms of credit that patron-client relationships are weakening in Ananpur. Alafa, the wife of a landowner in the village, explains that, 'because all the poor people are now busy with their cows the rich people cannot find any labour. This is the main problem caused by the CLP. But, the CLP is good, poor people could not afford clothes or food before but now with the CLP they can'. Alafa has a more favourable view of the CLP than another better-off couple in the village, Mohammed and Nurnahar. Nurnahar strongly expresses her views, 'CLP is good giving to the poor, but I think that CLP is harmful for us. We are destroyed by the CLP. We have to pay more wages now. Before the CLP we paid Tk. 50-80 [a day] and now we pay Tk. 120. It is now difficult to find day labour'.

This research does not attempt to attribute changes in wage rates to the CLP. However its qualitative methods do reveal that programme activities are affecting both the availability of labour for rich households and the means through which beneficiaries obtain work. Chaina, an ATP2 beneficiary says that, 'the rich sometimes cannot find labour when they need it. This is for two reasons. Men go and work in Dhaka. The wage you get here is normally Tk. 100 a day. In Dhaka a man can get Tk. 2,000 for ten days […] If a man does not go to Dhaka then he can look after his cow. If he looks after it very well then he can sell it after a few months for a much

2 A local unit of weight, 1 maund is approximately 40 kg.

3 committee

higher price'. Men in CLP beneficiary households now also have the resources to pay for the up-front costs of seasonal migration. However, many are now choosing not to migrate seasonally from Ananpur as a coping strategy; for work at the destination is not guaranteed, but rather to remain in the village and cultivate shared-land or raise livestock.

Hosneara, another ATP2 beneficiary, explains how increased income-earning opportunities, including cattle rearing, sharing land and running a small shop, have changed how her husband gets work in the village. 'When we had no assets then we went to the house of the landowner to ask for work. But now I have assets I do not go and ask for work as I can look after my family […] the rich people now come round the village and ask people if they want to work for a particular wage'. In contrast to the views of Nurnahar, though, she does not believe that this has affected wage rates. The wage 'is the same however you get the job'.

In Kuragasapur there is a similar situation regarding labour acquisition. Bilkis, whose husband owns 25 *bighas* of land in the village and seasonally employs five to eight labourers daily explains; 'the CLP is very good. Before those with nothing had to request work from the rich men. They depended on them and because of this got a lower wage. Now they have got cows and sheep and so are not looking for work. They are not dependent on the rich people as they can look after their own families. The rich people do not mind about this, they are not angry'. She is currently looking for labourers to weed but says, 'it is difficult to find labour, because of the CLP people […] are looking after their cows. There is also the matter of the wage rate, before people would work for Tk. 70-80 but now labourers want more, about Tk. 120'.

Changes in labour and credit availability because of CLP activities however, have not occurred in least isolated Nanabari, where the labour market is less closed and the agricultural reformation is more advanced. There then, wealthy households are no longer accustomed to a rigid power hierarchy. As Shamina, the wife of a landowner says, 'it is easy to find people in the village to work. When they are not available then we go to another village'. Meanwhile, Asma explains how her husband employs labourers from both the village and the mainland. Indeed, while they both point to the recent sharp rise in wage rates with no corresponding rise in sales price, 'now it is horrible, we have to pay Tk. 120-150 [a day] but the paddy price is low', neither believe this is related to the CLP. In contrast to the other villages all landowners in Nanabari are supportive of the CLP. Asma exclaims, 'why do you ask me if the CLP is bad? It is good as there are poor people here and now they are less poor'.

5.3 Structural violence on the *chars*: elite control over land

With the exception of Nanabari, ATP has reduced the material power of the wealthy in the village, weakening their control over labour and credit. This has resulted in dominant families exerting influence through the third material source of power, land. Indeed, the CLP has not addressed land ownership. The limited law and order enforcement and the complexities of land ownership in a continually shifting environment mean *de facto* and *de jure* ownership of land do not necessarily coincide. While some beneficiaries have purchased land on the mainland and now live there, the rest, with one exception, reside on land claimed by others. Even in Nanabari, where relationships with the wealthy are less acrimonious, beneficiaries say, 'if the CLP did not raise the land where we live [which is owned by someone else] but gave us homestead land that would be better'.

Living on somebody else's land means that the landlord always retains a source of power. In Satarbari some wealthy individuals are now abusing this through evicting people from their homestead and forcing them to move (see section on everyday violence). While the force used by

the wealthy in Satarbari appears exceptional it is not unusual for the powerful to retain their dominance through land. In Kuragasapur, extensive landowners are eager to express their discontent about the CLP digging earth from 'their' land without fully consulting them first. Others have started to charge annual rent. Amina, an ATP2 beneficiary, explains that after their homestead was raised by the CLP the landowner, who lives in the village, asked them to move or to pay rent. She refused, so he placed thorns around her homestead for a day, intimidating her into agreeing to his demands. She now pays Tk. 500 as annual rent, while arguably paying rent represents a normalization of the relationship between a landowner and tenant.

Certainly, the issue of land ownership could seriously threaten the success of the programme. As a livelihoods manager says, 'if, when the CLP finishes the owner forces them to leave then we have no standpoint […] land ownership is very important. If a household is pushed off the land then they may decline in socio-economic status'. Another staff member also has these concerns, 'the CLP is improving the land where its beneficiaries are living, but the land does not belong to them'. He is surprised not to hear more reports of landowners increasing rent or making people leave the land. In September 2009, CLP data reported that of the 80,519 homestead plinths raised, 2,444 (3 per cent) remained vacant. This was either because the landowner had not allowed people to move there, or had ousted households from them. However, when there is no longer a CLP staff presence in the village it is possible that landowners may increasingly exert their power through control over land.

5.4 Structural violence on the *chars*: elite control over government and NGO benefits

With the exception of Nanabari, there is a fourth source of structural violence; control over government and NGO benefits. In Satarbari, villagers explain how an NGO previously working there targeted powerful people (whether or not this was its intention), giving them shared cattle. Meanwhile, in both Ananpur and Kuragasapur government stipends are usurped by the better-off for themselves and their relatives. Mahela, the wife of a former UP member and landowner in the Ananpur, explains that her daughter receives a government scholarship for attending school between class two and class five. Mahela does not see anything wrong with her wealthy family receiving this when other poor households do not, 'all good students in the village receive the stipend' she says. Mahela's husband also tried to influence the ATP selection process to include his relatives.

In Satarbari, the wealthiest landowner, Amjad Sarkar, has successfully used his influence to have some of his children included in ATP. Ratna, an ATP2 beneficiary explains, 'Amjad Sarkar snatched six cows and gave them to six of his sons. He dominated her [the CLP fieldworker]. Four rich people are now in ATP4. Will they also get ATP5 and 6?' The actions of the fieldworker though, are understandable, with the powerful in Satarbari threatening to cut off her legs if she continued to work there and they did not receive direct benefits. Overall, though, the CLP seems a break from the norm, with most ATP beneficiaires being those households in the greatest need. Indeed, this puzzles medium-sized landowners in Ananpur who ask beneficiaries why the CLP wants to help them; they are only daily wage labourers.

In the context of the agricultural reformation, though, the capture of development resources is no longer sufficient for the elite. Rather, landowners now engage in a 'politics of reputation' (Lewis and Hossain 2008a: 49) to preserve their situation at the top of the rural hierarchy. In Kuragasapur wealthy landowners are the most successful at this. Rofiqul Sarkar, the wealthiest landowner in the village, organized meetings with the UP chairman and members to open the

new *haat*[4] in the village, increasing his reputation and power by delivering prestige infrastructure. The UP representatives gain by securing Rofiqul Sarkar's support, and that of his clients, in the next election. Certainly, the influence of the UP chairman is shaped by his ability to form alliances with, and maintain the support of, village elites (Bode 2002 in Hobley 2004). Meanwhile, in Ananpur at least two of the last UP members from the village are also extensive landowners there.

5.5 Symbolic violence on the chars

Symbolic violence does not involve the active exertion of power and may even mean that the individuals subject to it subconsciously collude in their subjugation (Bourgois 2001). In Kuragasapur changes in labour availability due to ATP are compounding those resulting from the agricultural reformation, including the use of irrigation technologies. However, in highly isolated Ananpur the reformation is far less advanced. Indeed, in Ananpur, with sandy soils and less valuable land, the most extensive and powerful landowners live on the mainland, keeping retainers in the village to ensure their continued control over the land. Certainly, poor people there now actually seem to be incorporating themselves into relationships of patronage, particularly through share-cropping in order to attempt to improve their situation. As Jansen (1983) previously argued, there may be a group of people who are just so poor that they could not even hope to achieve client status in relation to a patron.

This geographical isolation of poor villagers in Ananpur from the elite contributes to their general feeling of helplessness. Beneficiaries there see their subordinate situation as 'normal' and so do not even attempt to change the *status quo*, colluding in their symbolic violence. This is clearly seen with the Upazila elections at the start of 2009, when there was a polling station in the primary school. Villagers expressed how they would vote, but they 'would not vote for a *char* candidate as they have no power'. Safia, an ATP2 beneficiary, tells me that she heard about an incident on the mainland when people quarrelled with the UP member and chairman about the unfair distribution of the VGD[5] card. They hit the chairman on the head, hospitalizing him. However, she says '*char* people would not do this, mainland people did this. *Char* people are weak and are not able to quarrel or hit'.

5.6 Everyday violence on the *chars*

In the less-isolated Gaibandha village of Satarbari, however, where the agricultural reformation is more advanced, the elite are forced to adjust to their declining position, a decline which is accelerated by ATP. They are not adapting skilfully, as have landowners in Kuragasapur who have formed a 'power elite' with others at the top of the rural hierarchy. Instead, they are exercising their power through what Lukes (2005) would see as a sign of weakness, an extensive campaign of land grabbing and theft. As well as being directed against poor households in the village, this campaign is directed against the UP member, who they attacked when he came to the village to investigate an instance of theft.

One motivation behind this campaign of everyday violence by the elite in Satarbari is their desire for revenge (*kortinsho*) over ATP beneficiaries, because of the help they received. Since the campaign of everyday violence began, 200 households have left Satarbari going mainly to the re-emerging surrounding villages. Both Ricta, and Sobedha, ATP2 beneficiaries, left Satarbari for a

4 Periodic market, held weekly or bi-weekly.

5 Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) Programme is the largest social safety net programme of the Government of Bangladesh.

neighbouring *char* as their vegetable gardens were destroyed. They were also not allowed to graze their cattle, 'we had no independence in Satarbari. People ruined our vegetable gardens'.

Rani and Aziz, an ATP2 household who moved from Satarbari to a close-by *char*, explain that they left because they had 'no land there, there were problems involving the bad behaviour of addicted people (gambling, cannabis and alcohol) […] a whole landowning family of about 12 people is involved […] the problems in Satarbari started last year. The family did not get a CLP cow and so they took revenge'. Ricta and Sobedha also give the same explanations for the terrible behaviour, 'the problems started in 2007, when the CLP gave the cows. The landowners wanted to take revenge for not getting CLP benefits'.

Sabri, an ATP beneficiary who has moved from Satarbari also concurs that the problems are fuelled by a combination of the wish for revenge and the influence of drugs and alcohol. 'We had no land in Satarbari and were pressurized by the landowner. We could not grow vegetables there as the landowner would destroy them or eat them. This problem started after the CLP began; the landowners took revenge as we benefitted and they did not. We left the village to keep our honour. It was impossible to live there as you could not rear cows or goats or grow vegetables'. Certainly the CLP does seem to have fuelled a spate of violent revenge attacks based around control of land. These attacks, however, are not just against ATP beneficiaries and are continuing well after the powerful have received ATP benefits in ATP4. Sabri tells me how one individual in the same family, 'employs people to steal from others to fund his drugs habit'.

Certainly, the powerful are embarking on their campaign of everyday violence against most landless households in the village. Those who have left Satarbari for newly-emerging surrounding *chars*, because of a previous claim to land there, are the lucky ones. There are still households in Satarbari that want to leave but cannot find land. Landless households still living there were all forced to shift their houses around the village in a blatant exercise of power. The wife of a wealthy landowner, Jobedha, explains why this is perfectly justified, 'we ask people to leave from our land where they live for free […] people should leave our land as CLP gave them a cow and now they are rich. They must make the most of themselves'.

A key question is how this everyday violence affects the achievement of the poverty reduction goals of ATP. The behaviour of the elite has not affected the ability of ATP2 beneficiaries to accumulate cattle (a higher proportion of ATP2 households in Satarbari than in the other three villages still owned cattle in September 2009 with these beneficiaries also owning more animals on average). It has though, limited their opportunities to step-out into other productive assets such as land, if they did not have a previous claim over that land.

6 Discussion: implications for interventions to reduce extreme poverty

Rural Bangladesh is undergoing an 'agricultural reformation' (Wood 1999 in Lewis and Hossain 2008a). Increased population movement facilitated through road construction and accompanied by rural electrification has given people more opportunities for earning a living outside agriculture. This, in turn, means that the landowning elite are no longer a rigid force at the top of the social hierarchy (Lewis 1991 in Lewis and Hossain 2008a).

This agricultural reformation is advancing at a different rate throughout the country (Ali Tourfique and Turton 2003). While in some areas the previous imagery of rural Bangladesh may no longer hold, in others, including on the *chars,* and particularly the more isolated *chars*, agricultural and land-based livelihoods activities still predominant. Certainly, the four *char*

villages, all of which are not electrified, do not have an 'urban' character with thriving shops and small businesses which is argued now to characterize rural villages.

In the 1980s Jansen (1983) argued that, in rural Bangladesh, a lack of material assets 'causes people to adjust their relationships to each other' and so material assets shape 'the social patterns dominant in rural Bangladesh today'. Despite evidence of an agricultural reformation in much of rural Bangladesh, analysis on the *chars* of the interventions of the CLP demonstrates that this argument is still relevant. On the *chars,* households at the top of the rural hierarchy have extensive landholdings. Through their control over land and the wealth which they have acquired from its cultivation they exert their power through offering unfavourable conditions for labour, credit and land access in a context where there are limited non-agricultural income opportunities.

ATP is reducing the economic dependence of extremely poor households on the landowning elite through two mechanisms. The first is through directly improving their material situation and so decreasing their need to request loans and wage labour opportunities. The second is through providing alternative sources of credit and food loans, notably from other beneficiary and poor households in the village; an increase in bonding social capital. Through decreasing the economic dependence of extremely poor households on the wealthy, ATP has given extremely poor households more negotiating power in their relationships with the landowning elite. These changes represent not just alterations in employment and credit relationships, but also one in power relationships (Makita 2007). For development interventions to have maximum impact though, it is important that they 'swim with the tide' with respect to wider social processes, in this instance contributing to the wider processes which are driving the break-down of a rigid rural hierarchy.

The extent to which the agricultural reformation has advanced in each of the four villages affects the nature of the dominant dimension of power there (see Table 2). In Nanabari, the agricultural reformation is most advanced and, while patron-client relationships do still operate, landowners can no longer enforce the exploitative and dependent relationships which they were previously able to do. Here the elite accept CLP activities, acknowledging their position in a more flexible rural hierarchy. Meanwhile, in the most isolated and least fertile village of Ananpur the agricultural reformation has advanced the least. Here, though ATP is weakening the structural power of the elite, in terms of their control over labour and credit, this does not threaten their continued position at the top of the rural hierarchy. Indeed, villagers there still collude in their symbolic violence, believing that they have no power to change their situation.

In both Kuragasapur and Satarbari, the agricultural reformation is reasonably advanced and ATP is accelerating the social changes resulting from it. ATP is further weakening the control of the elite in terms of their monopoly over labour, and for Satarbari, also over credit. The elite in the two villages are responding differently to this threat. In Kuragasapur, wealthy landowners are effectively adapting to these changes, forming a 'power elite' (Lewis and Hossain 2008a) with elected officials to increase their reputation and power through instigating and building a local *haat*. In Satarbari however, the wealthy, seeing ATP as the cause of their demise and fuelled by drink and drugs, have embarked on a campaign of everyday violence. They are using their remaining source of power, over land, to evict poor landless households. Currently this does not seem to be adversely impacting the poverty reduction aims of ATP in terms of their ability to accumulate cattle. Arguably it will not be possible for the elite to maintain their power over time by using coercion (Eyben et al. 2006).

Certainly, a gain in power for some means the loss of power for others. This can lead to conflict. Daily livelihood imperatives can mean that extremely poor households prioritize subordination

and conflict avoidance rather than explicitly aiming to improve their situation, for instance through exercising their right to vote (Cleaver 2009: 127-44). The poorest people may decide that short-term benefits and stability are worth more than potentially radical changes in the future (Eyben et al. 2006) and so may choose not to exercise their agency as citizens because of anticipated reactions by patrons, on whom they are economically dependent (Kabeer 2002). If development interventions are going to challenge the power of the elite then they need to be aware of this from the outset and ensure that they can support extremely poor households during any period of 'anticipated reactions' by the wealthy. ASA, now a leading Bangladeshi MFI, experienced this reluctance of poor villagers to challenge the existing power structure. ASA began during the 1970s to train villagers to fight for their social and political rights. However, it found that villagers did not want 'unending conflict' and were unenthusiastic to ASA's calls to mobilize against exploitation by landlords and moneylenders (Rutherford 2009: 53). Instead, villagers were interested in programmes which tackled their financial and employment problems. ASA faced a dilemma, how could it encourage people to rise against their oppressors if it did not then provide immediate support to landless people in their consequent struggle (Rutherford 2009)?

Rahman (1987) argues that once people have a sound economic base then they can begin to mobilize against the wealthy; for instance to claim their right to vote. Greater economic self-sufficiency can reduce the potential costs of making the strategic choice to mobilize against wealthy landowners. In terms of programme sequencing he believes then, that first generation interventions should build the economic base of households, while second generation asset accumulation interventions (Moser 2006) involve empowerment and citizenship.

A challenge when aiming to reduce extreme poverty is where to start; the complexity of knots which extremely poor people live in 'raises another set of questions, about setting priorities and choosing entry points' (Ashley and Maxwell 2001: 413). In the context of extreme poverty on the *chars* transferring investment capital directly to the poorest households both contributes to meeting their immediate needs for survival while it also supports the processes occurring in rural Bangladesh; those of the agricultural reformation and a breaking-down of the rigid rural hierarchy.

This is not to say that economically-based interventions are all that are needed to reduce extreme poverty. Rather, that they provide one starting point. Certainly, while ATP is contributing to a decline in the material basis of power of the elite it does less to address culturalist explanations of power, or inactive power, whereby people accept the existing situation, either because they do not believe that alternative arrangements can happen, or because they do not even realize that there are alternatives. As Lukes (2005) analysis of power shows people also the need to understand that there are other choices and options available. Increasing people's knowledge of their rights through social development interventions is one way of doing this. Knowledge however, is insufficient and has to be accompanied by other interventions which reduce the economic and social risks associated with individuals and households making certain strategic choices.

There do remain questions about the nature of relationships in the future, when there is no longer a CLP staff presence. Wealthy households may then start to exert excessive influence through their control over land. The CLP has begun the long process of development for the poorest households in the region but these gains could be brought to a standstill, or even lost, if there is not effective sequencing of other interventions within Jamuna *chars* and if broader social processes do not take forward the advances ATP has achieved.

7 Conclusions

Household-level interventions are argued not to enable sustainable poverty escapes as they fail to address social relationships (ADB 2006) with unequal and exploitative relationships being a key maintainer of extreme poverty. The findings from this research show that this viewpoint is not necessarily the case with respect to reducing extreme poverty on the *chars*. Overall, the provision of investment capital directly to the poorest households has reduced their economic dependence on wealthy landowners and in doing this has given them greater negotiating power in employment and credit relationships. The approach of the CLP is that short-term security and income enhancement are essential pre-requisites for social and political advancement. In adopting this approach it has the potential to be 'transformative-by-stealth'. Short-term material gains and reduced insecurity provide a platform for changing inter-household relationships, particularly those with the elite. The activities of the CLP have had both valuable short and medium term impacts as well as contributing to, and providing a basis for, longer-term transformation in society.

The CLP, though, is operating in a favourable context in terms of the broader processes of social change. Electrification, rural roads and the growth of the non-farm economy have all contributed to the 'agricultural reformation' of rural Bangladesh, whereby the position of the landowning elite at the top of the rural hierarchy has been weakened (Lewis 1991 in Lewis and Hossain 2008a). The CLP is further contributing to these social processes and, in two of the villages, accelerating this transition. Across the four case study villages the agricultural reformation has advanced to a different extent and as a result the response of the landowning elite to the CLP activities is different in each. In the least isolated case study village of Nanabari, where non-farm weaving jobs are already available the landowning elite accept CLP activities, already acknowledging their position within a flexible rural hierarchy. In contrast, in both Kuragasapur and Satarbari where the agricultural reformation is less advanced, the landowning elite are attempting to protect their position at the top of the rural hierarchy, in the former through demonstrating their ability to deliver prestige infrastructure to the village and in the latter through a campaign of everyday violence against the landless poor.

It is important not to underestimate the struggles involved for extremely poor people to improve their situation and position with respect to the wealthy. Development interventions need to minimize the costs associated with extremely poor people advancing their social and political situation. Reducing the economic dependence of extremely poor people on the wealthy is one way of doing this. However, development interventions also need to be designed with an understanding of the context, particularly of the types of power operating and the social processes occurring. Reducing extreme poverty is challenging and is more likely to be successful, and sustainable, if development interventions 'swim with the tide' and those wider social processes.

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