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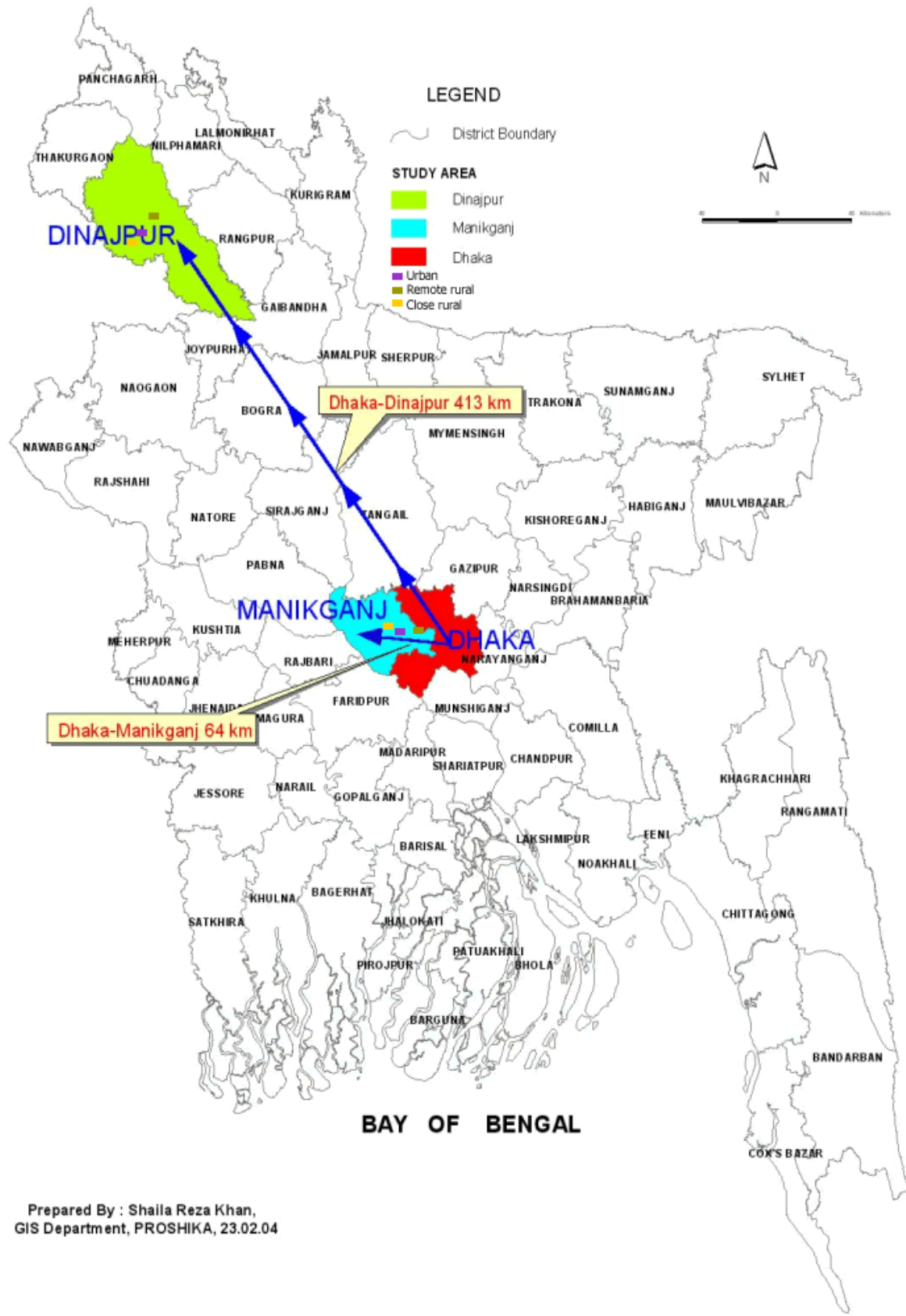
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**THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF
WELLBEING
IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH**

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THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF WELLBEING IN CONTEMPORARY BANGLADESH

Introduction

In the West, wellbeing has become part of our everyday vocabulary. People talk about or are frequently reminded of the need to care for and improve their wellbeing. It is a highly seductive word, in part because it comes across as an uncontroversial and largely positive quality. Wellbeing therefore implies a state in which people are able to live a life that is flourishing or experienced as being worthwhile. It is also a holistic concept associated with a wide range of human activity and experiences. It connects with material dimensions of people's lives such as financial security, asset accumulation, dietary habits, health seeking behaviour, physical exercise and so forth. It is also concerned with people's attempts to make or give meaning in their lives. So for example, wellbeing is associated with greater personal fulfilment and being able to live according to one's ideals, choices or preferences, and so forth. Finally, wellbeing draws attention to the significance of subjective experiences, interpretations and emotions. A lot of weight is therefore given to people's sense of happiness, life satisfaction and achievements.

Wellbeing has also become a focus of political concern and public debate. Policy related discussions of wellbeing take place on a range of arenas including local government, national economies, employment, health, education and the environment. Such is the potential of wellbeing that in the UK for example, the Government's Sustainable Development Strategy is committed to exploring how national policies might change *with an explicit wellbeing focus*. Those in favour of a greater wellbeing policy focus set out an ambitious and radical agenda. Thus Layard (2005) argues that a wellbeing focus requires a radical restructuring of the taxation system to reduce the income and wellbeing disparities between rich and poor. Another set of proposals, enshrined in a wellbeing manifesto written by a leading UK policy think tank, asks *inter alia* for an economic system that prioritises meaningful work instead of profit; an employment sector which respects work/life balances; an education policy that is less target driven and more value orientated; and a less materialist society (NEF 2004).

Bangladesh is one of four countries where the ESRC Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) Research Programme carried out research. To talk of wellbeing in a country where so many people struggle everyday to survive, may come across to some as

inappropriate, mistaken or indeed offensive. For this reason it is important to state from the outset that our interest in wellbeing is the progeny of a deep unrest with the dominant frameworks normally used to understand and then address the poor standards and quality of life suffered by so many in Bangladesh. Rather than flee from challenges posed by the reality of poverty, our contention is that a wellbeing focus is well placed to better understand it.

For over thirty years, 'development' has been the dominant framework that has driven efforts to promote social change in Bangladesh. At the heart of the development project lies a conviction that it can produce material prosperity and improve people's overall quality of life. The pursuit of this goal has not only given external agents unparalleled access to and authority over the country's major policy decisions (Stiles 2002), but it has also come to occupy a place in the "in the everyday culture and imagination of the local inhabitants" (Bhuiyan, Faraize and McAllister 2005:364). While there are strong claims, backed up with evidence, that development efforts have produced positive outcomes over the years, we have also witnessed over the same period increased inequality and the persistence of extreme poverty (see below). Whatever change has occurred as a result of development, it is certainly not unambiguous. Could development be responsible for both outcomes? What if the things that make for 'good development' actually harm people's wellbeing or aspects of their lives they consider important for their wellbeing? How do people then deal with this? Is development the most suitable vehicle to deliver wellbeing?

The WeD programme is spurred on by and seeks to open space to reflect on these kinds of questions. It draws on a range of disciplines to examine the fundamental relationship between people's aspirations of wellbeing and the everyday experience of trying to achieve these aspirations. As such it hopes to offer fresher insights into how the possibilities for social change at individual and wider levels are created, managed or stifled. Understanding these dynamics, we argue, is pivotal to any commitment that has as one of its principal concerns the improvement of poor people's standard and quality of life.

Dimensions of Wellbeing

The conceptual ambition of WeD rests on a premise that wellbeing can deliver an improved understanding of the dynamics of poverty and social change. At one level then WeD can be seen as one of a number of initiatives that seek to move away from the restricted or narrow lens through which poverty is often analysed and understood. It does this in three main ways. First, WeD recognises the rather obvious but important fact that poor people are not completely defined by their poverty and that there are many aspects of their lives which impinge on their quality of life but which are not captured in

standard poverty approaches (Gough *et al* 2007). Second, and by implication of the first point, WeD seeks to present a holistic, embedded and historical understanding of the lives of poor people, in which a more positive focus on people's strengths rather than their needs is emphasised (White and Ellison 2007). Finally, WeD draws on a range of social science contributions, many of which are not traditionally associated with nor have roots in development studies or practice. This conceptual pluralism increases research sensitivity to a wider range of facets in people's lives.

The notion of wellbeing advocated by WeD highlights the relationships between resources that people command, the needs and goals they are able to satisfy, and the quality of life they are able to attain in their pursuit of wellbeing. In thinking about the relationship between resources, needs/goals and quality of life, Copestake (2006) correctly warns against the dangers of slipping into a rationalist analytical perspective in which wellbeing is construed as the outcome of individuals seeking to maximize their goal achievement subject to resource constraint. The WeD research takes a very strong stance against this through its insistence on the social and cultural construction of wellbeing¹. In pursuing this emphasis, WeD argues that we can only really understand the articulation of needs, preferences, goals, ambitions and so forth, if we locate them in the broader social context in which they arise. This kind of approach can be related back to Appadurai's (2004) work on the 'capacity to aspire' in which he argues that specific wants and needs all derive from 'intermediate norms' which in turn refer to 'higher order normative contexts.' In this way the material and visible are inescapably linked to the symbolic, and the pursuit of wellbeing calls into play both. Highlighting the social and cultural grounding of wellbeing also calls into question the tradition of regarding wellbeing as either solely objective or subjective, or indeed a composite of both. Not only are these two dimensions difficult to isolate but they are both equally grounded in 'the work of culture'. This notion of cultural embeddedness shapes both the meanings that people attach to wellbeing and their capacities – or otherwise - to achieve it. Finally, the insistence on the social and cultural restores an earlier concern for the relation between wellbeing and the 'body politic' (Sointu 2005), a relationship that is given very little attention in most studies of wellbeing. In highlighting this aspect, WeD draws attention to the relational dimension of wellbeing, and brings into clearer focus the contradictions and trade offs between opposing values, command over resources and the capacity to satisfy needs – all of which occur within individuals; between individuals; between individuals and collectivities; between collectivities and social groups; and from one time period to another.

¹ The formal aim of the WeD programme is to 'develop a conceptual and methodological framework for understanding the *social and cultural construction* of wellbeing in developing countries'

At the heart of our attempt to map out the significance of the social and cultural construction of wellbeing, lies a conviction in the centrality of power. In the WeD programme, culture and power are inseparable with the former, in some way, embodying how the latter is produced, reproduced and made present. While we are accustomed to thinking about culture as systems of meaning, an awareness of power reminds us that cultures are also fundamentally about systems of difference. This sense of difference is played out in the way people relate to each other or are positioned in relation to others. Both these aspects play a primary role in determining people's ability to contest meanings, values and material goods. Crucially however an awareness of the cultural construction of wellbeing alerts our analysis to the fact that the very disposition to contest the same meanings, values and material goods may also be distributed and exercised unequally (Appadurai 2004)

Research Rationale and Methods

The WeD team in Bangladesh was led by two senior researchers, one an economist with expertise in quantitative research, the other a sociologist with expertise in collecting and managing qualitative data. The research team included sociologists, anthropologists, economists and political scientists. The disciplinary balance of the team was important as the organisation of our research entailed frequent iterations between members of the team as the research programme developed. So while researchers were responsible for different sites and specific research components, the whole team moved between sites and also acted as a single group in certain phases of the research such as the larger surveys. The size of the research team also varied over time. While the core team consisted of 10 researchers in place for the duration of the fieldwork phase, other researchers joined the team for specific tasks. In total around 20 researchers were involved in the WeD programme in Bangladesh. A further characteristic of the WeD team in Bangladesh was that at least half of the team were employed by Proshika, one the country's largest NGOs. The participation of research-active development activists was a constant reminder of our overall challenge to produce research that would offer fresh insights into the possibilities of social change and the dynamics of poverty.

One of the first challenges faced by the WeD Bangladesh team was to connect the research to the overall context of social change in the country. The question we posed ourselves was to identify the most important change to have occurred in Bangladesh society. This was not an easy question to answer. Let us consider, even superficially, some of the changes that have occurred over the last 10 to 15 years. First in the 2003 Human Development Report, Bangladesh moved for the first time in its history into the league of the medium human development countries (UNDP 2003). A number of factors justified this 'promotion' including good economic growth, accompanied by a robust rate of export growth; marked improvement in a range of demographic and human capital

indicators (lowering population growth, increasing education provision etc.); achieving rice self sufficiency and so on. Second, the restoration of basic democracy in 1990 signalled a radical shift in the political life of the country evidenced in progress in electoral democracy; some public administration reform; and efforts to establish the Independent Human Rights Commission. Finally, there have been important and widespread societal changes that include a marked increase in the size of the country's urban population; increased participation in the formal labour market especially for women; and greater levels of representation in the political system again especially for women but also more generally at local level for all citizens.

These positive changes however tell only part of the story. Success in achieving economic stability and growth is tempered by evidence of increasing income inequality (World Bank 2006), and the persistence of extreme poverty (Sen and Hulme 2004). In the political sphere, Bangladesh's 'democratic progress' has since January of this year dramatically stalled. A military supported caretaker government is now running the country following a state of emergency, and elections have been postponed. Before this crises however, there were already concerns about the levels of widespread corruption (Transparency International 2005), social violence (Karlekar 2005) and perhaps more controversially, religious intolerance (Seabrook 2001). Finally, changes experienced at the societal level also defy a straightforward reading. Thus while there have been significant changes in gender relations, women throughout Bangladesh continue to be precariously vulnerable *vis a vis* property rights, wages and income rights, marital rights, and so forth.

Rather than prioritise one specific area of change over another, the WeD team in Bangladesh adopted a more general and pragmatic perspective and took as its starting point the more obvious observation that Bangladesh has gradually become a more integrated and connected country. The process of urbanisation, the development of physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges, the expansion of marketing outlets, the movement of people are immediate signs of this growing sense of connectedness. At the heart of this process stands Dhaka the capital city, home to an estimated 12 million people but also the centre of the economic, political and administrative life of the country. In response therefore to the challenge of linking wellbeing and social change, we came up with the following working hypothesis: levels of integration or proximity to the centre of economic and political life drive the process of change that affects different individuals, households, communities and regions in different ways. Our shorthand for this hypothesis was the 'Dhaka story'.

Having accepted the broad principle of the 'Dhaka story' we then used it to guide the purposive selection of sites. Initial discussions on site selection took into consideration

prior experience and knowledge of different geographical contexts, but also the logistics and need for researchers to be able to meet together frequently. As a result of these discussions, we identified the Districts of Manikganj and Dinajpur as two suitable areas that satisfied our primary criteria. Manikganj is a District in central Bangladesh and is part of the Dhaka Division². Situated to the south of Dhaka, Manikganj covers an area of approximately 1,379 square kilometres. One of the most important national highway networks connects Dhaka to the Aricha Ferry Ghat. This passes directly through Manikganj, making travel and communication with Dhaka very easy. In terms of our 'Dhaka story' therefore, Manikganj District represents a well connected site. A further and important characteristic of Manikganj is that it has many riverine areas and is bounded by both the Padma and Jumuna rivers. This means that the area is particularly prone to riverbank erosion and flooding. The significance of this came to the fore in July 2004 when two of our research sites were almost entirely inundated during the flash floods that affected much of the country. Dinajpur is the northern most district of Bangladesh and covers an area of approximately 3,438 square kilometres. It is located in the very fertile tract lying between the river Padma and the southern slopes of the Himalayas. Agricultural production in Dinajpur is therefore very high and profitable. However as it is situated to the west of the river Jamuna, travel and communication between Dhaka and District are more difficult³. In terms of the 'Dhaka story' therefore, Dinajpur represents a relatively isolated and remote research site.

Once we had decided on Manikganj and Dinajpur, we then selected an urban site and two rural sites in each District. We began by selecting the urban sites and in so doing we were keen to carry out our research in areas that were considered prominent in terms of the economic, administrative and political life of the area. Then we used distance to select our rural sites. Thus we chose one rural site that was relatively closer to the urban site and another that was relatively distant. Our final six sites therefore were all situated at different distances from the centres of economic and political life (both in relation to Dhaka and their respective urban centres). Having used distance as a proxy, we also hoped that the sites would provide sufficient diversity of conditions to strengthen our research.

² There are six administrative Divisions in Bangladesh and 64 administrative Districts.

³ The opening of the Jamuna bridge in 1998 has enabled much greater communication and travel to and from Dinajpur.

The empirical challenge of the WeD programme was to generate data that gave insight into the specific mechanisms⁴ through which individuals and groups seek to define and achieve their wellbeing. This was a challenge that necessarily had to evolve over time. In line with programmes in the other WeD countries, the Bangladesh programme undertook six main research activities⁵ that enabled us, through different disciplinary sensitivities,

- to measure and map wellbeing *outcomes* of different individuals, households and groups in different sites;
- to identify and analyse the *processes* that underpin and enable particular wellbeing outcomes;
- to understand the role of *structures* in mediating these processes;
- to explore how outcomes, processes and structures interact and change over *time*

Data was collected over a period of 20 months from March 2004. Efforts were made to ensure that the same activities were carried out at the same time in all of the sites. This was particularly true in the case of the larger quantitative surveys.

Introduction to the sites

The first main research activity was to produce community profiles for each of the sites. Data for this was gathered from secondary sources or generated through observation and other methods inspired by participatory techniques. In building up the profiles of the communities, it quickly became apparent that the sites differed considerably and that there were patterns behind the differences that seemed to confirm the relevance of our 'Dhaka story'. The following brief descriptions of each of the sites illustrates this:

Name of site	Location and number of households	Brief description
<i>Aloknagar</i>	Urban site in Manikganj. 2,502 households	site contains residential area, a well developed market, and administrative offices; communication with Dhaka is very good and easy; many government and private amenities and services; very diversified occupations; 65% Muslim and remainder Hindu
<i>Bichitrapur</i>	Rural site, 4.5 km	good and easy communication with Manikganj;

⁴ Mechanisms, Tilly (2003:20) notes, are causes on the small scale. Combination and sequences of different mechanisms constitute what we refer to in social science as process. Tilly further identifies three main mechanisms: environmental, cognitive and relational.

⁵ The six research components were Community Profiling, Resources and Needs Questionnaire, Quality of Life survey, Income and Expenditure survey, Qualitative Process research, political economy analysis focusing on Big Structures. For a fuller statement on the WeD research tools, see <http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/methods-toobox/toolbox-intro.htm>

	from Manikganj. 488 households	diversified occupations with agriculture being a secondary livelihood source; good government and private amenities, 77% Muslim and 23% Hindu
Achingaon	Rural site, 18 km from Manikganj 310 households	difficult communication with Manikganj (no paved roads in site); very few facilities (no electricity); agriculture or small business are main source of livelihood; significant out migration (Dhaka and abroad); 100% Muslim
Baniknagar	Urban site in Dinajpur 683 households	site contains residential area, a well developed market, and administrative offices; many government and private amenities and services; very diversified population in terms of religion and occupation;
Shantipur	Rural site, 5 km from Dinajpur 750 households	major road runs through site therefore good communication with Dinajpur; over 60% of households depend on agriculture for their livelihood and seasonal migration common; busy market area; basic amenities and services; 75% Muslim, 22% Hindu and 3% belong to a tribal group known as the Santals
Telkupigaon	Rural site, 17 km from Dinajpur 750 households	good communication with Dinajpur; services and amenities are scarce; agricultural activities dominate although some have started working as rickshaw pullers; 75% Muslim 25% Hindu

As one might expect therefore, urban sites tend to have better means of communication, more amenities, a wider range of occupations and less dependence on agriculture. In very general terms we also see that the profiles of the two rural sites are distinct with the site closest to the urban centre having a closer 'urban fit'. The next table allows us to take our reflections one step further. It uses RANQ data on education; health; sanitation and electricity; household demography; occupation; and access to credit to compare sites. Where possible, we also include regional and national indicators to allow broader comparisons.

The table confirms three important points. First of all, the indicators from the WeD sites broadly match the regional and national averages. This gives us some confidence that the selected sites are not idiosyncratic and that they offer conditions and contexts that can be considered 'typical'. Second, there are obvious patterns that again seem to confirm the 'Dhaka story'. Thus in both urban sites we find higher adult literacy rates, greater access to sanitation and electricity, more diverse occupational structures, and higher levels of access to formal credit suppliers. In Manikganj town the uptake of immunization is higher than the rural sites and the household size is smaller. This is not the case for Dinajpur. However at least in the case of immunization uptake, the Dinajpur

sites all have higher scores than the regional and national averages and this might partly explain why the trend observed in Manikganj is not replicated in Dinajpur. Third, again if we look across the urban and two rural sites in each District we detect a pattern in which the rural site closest to the urban one has more of an 'urban fit' than the remote rural site. This again is what we would anticipate from our Dhaka story.

Selected Indicators by research site

Indicators	National Average	Manikganj				Dinajpur			
		District Average	Remote Rural	Close Rural	Urban	District Average	Remote Rural	Close Rural	Urban
Education									
Primary enrolment	82.8	85.9	79.9	86.3	81.9	86.2	84.4	86.2	74.8
Adult literacy	49.6	40.0	38.7	52.7	67.6	45.6	47.4	57.9	71.8
Health									
Immunization (DPT3)	81.0	69.6	48.6	63.1	82.2	82.6	97.3	93.0	89.2
Immunization (measles)	83.4	87.6	47.3	66.9	82.2	80.7	90.5	84.0	83.8
Sanitation and Electricity									
Access to Sanitary Toilet	38.93	41.80	22.0	66.8	99.6	17.67	29.2	43.2	97.6
Access to electricity	32.83	30.52	0.8	76.0	98.8	23.72	29.6	52.0	93.2
Household Demography									
Household Size	4.9	4.6	5.10	4.80	4.70	4.5	4.50	4.52	5.34
Activity/Occupation									
Farmer			9.8	2.4	0.0		12.5	7.8	0.8
Agricultural day labourer			5.5	0.9	0.2		8.6	5.4	0.0
Non-agri. day labourer/ Petty professional/Transport worker			15.1	20.9	5.1		15.0	18.4	13.3
Business/ White-collar professional			3.3	8.8	25.4		5.0	8.0	20.3
Access to Credit									
Access to formal credit (Banks)			0.6	3.9	31.6		4.8	5.9	17.8
Access to NGO credit			11.9	10.4	3.1		27.9	23.1	10.7
Friends, relatives or neighbour			70.2	67.9	59.8		34.4	46.3	60.3

One of our RANQ questions also asks about respondents' level of happiness. This was introduced as a preliminary attempt to measure life satisfaction and happiness, and was later supplemented by a more detailed Quality of Life survey. Although the table below indicates an overall low score (46.6 %SM, s.d. 0.56), this is very similar to the results from the Satisfaction with Life Scale (49.71 % SM, s.d. 3.32) administered as part of the QoL survey.⁶

Happiness by site and wealth grouping

	Very happy 3	Fairly happy 2	Not too happy 1	Mean	s.d.	% SM
Site						
Manikganj						
Aloknagar	15.2	78.8	6	2.092	0.451	54.6
Bichitrapur	8.8	70.4	20.8	1.88	0.531	44
Achingaon	13.2	74.8	12	2.012	0.502	50.6
Dinajpur						
Baniknagar	25.2	59.2	15.6	2.096	0.631	54.8
Shantipur	7.2	58.8	34	1.732	0.583	36.6
Telkupigaon	6	66	28	1.78	0.540	39
n=1,500	12.6	68	19.4	1.932	0.562	46.6
Household wealth group						
Rich, n=146	31.5	62.3	6.2	2.253	0.559	62.65
Average, n=714	15.8	74.5	9.7	2.061	0.501	53.05
Poor, n=640	4.7	62	33.3	1.714	0.546	35.7
All households (n = 1,500)	12.6	68	19.4	1.932	0.562	46.6

If we look closer at the RANQ data by site, we find that both urban sites (i.e. Baniknagar and Aloknagar) have higher scores than the rest of the sample (54.8 %SM, s.d. 0.45 and 54.8 %SM, s.d. 0.63 respectively, compared to 46.6 %SM, s.d. 0.56 overall). This suggests that households living in urban areas are generally happier than those in the rural areas. Similarly, the three sites of Manikganj report a mean score of 49.73 %SM, s.d. 0.49, compared to 43.47 %SM, s.d. 0.58 for the three sites of Dinajpur (i.e. Baniknagar, Shantipur and Telkupigaon). Earlier we argued that the urban sites tend to have more amenities and services than the rural sites (and Manikganj more so than Dinajpur). RANQ data also confirms that the level of needs satisfaction is higher in urban than it is in rural sites (and Manikganj more so than Dinajpur). Taken together, this lends support to the argument that people in urban sites tend to be happier because they have greater opportunities to meet their needs. This kind of analysis is strongly supported by our QoL findings which confirm that rural respondents have significantly higher negative affect⁷, significantly lower satisfaction with life scores, and significantly lower individualised goal attainment scores.

Finally if we look at differences in happiness levels by self-assessed wealth group, the results suggest that people who perceive their households as richer (than others in the research site) are happier, reporting 62.65 %SM (s.d. 0.56), compared to 35.7

⁶ Kaneta Choudhury (kanetachoudhury@gmail.com) is currently working on quality of life scales in Bangladesh as part of her doctoral research.

⁷ For this score there were no real differences between urban sites and the closer rural sites.

%SM (s.d. 0.55) for respondents who perceive their households as poorer. The difference in overall happiness between those who consider their households to be richer and (62.65 %SM, s.d. 0.56) and those who consider themselves average (53.05 %SM, s.d. 0.50) is much smaller. This again is consistent with the argument rehearsed in the previous paragraph because we would expect richer households to be in a stronger position to satisfy their needs. The fact that the difference between average and richer households is less pronounced can be explained by the 'threshold' theory according to which, once people's basic needs have been satisfied, the returns from income in terms of improved life satisfaction are reduced (Layard 2005).

The remainder of this report provides overviews of the main research themes that were carried out in Bangladesh. The following themes were developed under the Qualitative Process research component: Marriage, Gender and Generational Relations in Bangladesh; Wellbeing, Democracy and Political Violence in Bangladesh; Crises, Shocks and Wellbeing; Resources, Needs and Wellbeing; *Dharma*, Order and Wellbeing.

Marriage, Gender and Generational Relations in Bangladesh⁸

Marriage lies at the heart of the construction of wellbeing in Bangladesh. It is fundamentally associated with ideas of the good: fullness, relatedness, order, fertility, bounty, fecundity, abundance, increase and re-generation (Kotalova 1996). It is the home context for the simplest Bengali expression for wellbeing, '*sukh-shanti*', which conjures a state of peace, happiness and contentment.⁹ In practical terms also, it is central to all the elements of the good life which the statement above identifies: material, social and emotional. Marriage thus constitutes the critical lynchpin in people's – particularly women's – fortunes. A good marriage is a source of prosperity, social status, extended and enriched networks, personal fulfilment and physical comfort. A bad marriage can wreck a life. Structurally, marriage constitutes a core social institution, which is fundamental to the broader organization of economics, politics and society in Bangladesh.

The most striking contrast between the WeD research and classical village studies of Bangladesh is the accelerated rate of integration within and exposure to outside forces, or globalised development. This takes material form in new roads, new businesses, new schools and offices, increased traffic of people and goods, more electrification, more sanitation, more media and communication. It is also evident in a proliferation of discourse about how the world is and should be, as people seek to make sense of the changes they are experiencing. Conservative nostalgic discourses jostle with those of liberal development; folk Bengali oral traditions contend with the injunctions of self-consciously textual reformist Islam. Marriage, and its associated gender and generational relations, are at the centre of such debates.

Since liberation in 1971, the two issues that have dominated women-focused development in Bangladesh are fertility and employment. The WeD data suggests that for fertility the battle is largely won, and on women's employment the terrain has significantly shifted. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) census data show a rapid drop in fertility rates, from an enumerated child to woman ratio of 807 in 1981 to 519 in 2001. This is confirmed by WeD research with a marked drop in the number of siblings recorded in the grandparents' generation compared with the present.

Traditional purdah prohibitions on women doing work 'outside' the household have shifted with increased needs for cash income and increased diversity of options for employment. While some still maintain that women should not work outside the home, for most people the major issues now are the kind of work, what and where it is done, and how women conduct themselves within it. Office work or teaching, for example, are seen as enhancing status, fusing as they do the symbolic capital of salaried employment in public service; educational achievement which serves as an index of moral intelligence as well as formal qualifications; a genteel modern occupation involving non-manual labour; and an inside location. For women to work in a rice mill or road construction is, by contrast, widely disapproved. Here the symbolism is reversed, with heavy, manual labour, attracting low rates of pay and carried out under the hot sun in full public view (see also Ueda 2004). These criteria of value are obviously not limited to women, they are more general indices of class based status in Bangladesh. For women, however, there are two additional dimensions. First, teaching in particular links easily to ideas of women as mothers, passing on knowledge and guidance to the new generation, and so is easily assimilated as gender appropriate. Conversely, women working on the roads or in construction constitutes a direct affront to gender norms. Secondly, norms of female modesty are easily accommodated within office work, including the wearing of a burkah if desired.¹⁰ This is compounded by the view that educated women know how to conduct themselves with honour. By contrast, physical labour outside is seen as immodest, as a woman will not be able to keep her body properly covered. Again, this is intensified by the cultural association between lower class status and greater

⁸ For further information on this theme contact Dr Sarah White (S.C.White@bath.ac.uk)

⁹ Thanks to Joe Devine for this point

¹⁰ A head to foot over-garment worn by some Muslim women on top of their sari.

proclivity towards sexual misconduct. Thus, while the shift in discourses around women's work is marked, it should not be exaggerated. Firstly, the 'new' narratives strongly re-emphasise 'old' value markers for class and status. Second, there has always been considerable flexibility in the interpretation and observance of purdah norms, with marked structural variations by religion, location, and class (see also White 1992:22-25). Nor is the move from 'external' to 'internal' indicators novel: Patricia Jeffery recorded in the 1970s the notion of 'purdah of the eyes' amongst Muslim women in a Delhi shrine (Jeffery 1979).

The expansion of formal education is another striking feature of the landscape of contemporary Bangladesh. BBS statistics again confirm this. The literacy rate for the population of five years and upwards was in 1981 23.8 percent, with the female rate 16 percent, and male 31. In 2001 the total figure is 43 percent, with the female rate at 39, and the male at 47 percent. WeD figures are not directly comparable to the BBS, since they relate only to adults. Also, the totals are driven upwards by the inclusion of urban informants as one third of the sample: 85 percent of those in urban sites were able to read and write, compared with 54 per cent in rural.¹¹ The marked rise in levels of literacy follows sustained pressure from the donors to improve educational levels, which were historically very low, especially for women. Most recently, this has taken the form of a nationwide programme to support adolescent girls' education. The motivation for such programmes is not simply the promotion of gender equality. Numerous studies have shown that the education level of the mother is the most reliable determinant of fertility rates. In view of the agenda being so significantly externally driven, and the rapidity of change in this area, the commitment to education expressed at the village level is striking. It is an almost unquestioned good, and necessary investment in future prosperity, which justifies considerable expenditure even for quite poor families. The need to gain money to support children's education is one of the accepted explanations for women going out to work. The importance of education is expressed in both material and symbolic terms, employing a mix of folk and liberal modernist idioms. It will increase earning power; enhance parents' ability to support their children's learning; extend humanity and understanding; and advance social respect. What dissension there is from such views evokes a conservative or nostalgic perspective: that educated children lose respect for their parents; that educated women become argumentative wives.

The shift towards staying longer at school is contributing to a trend towards later marriage. Marriages pre-puberty are reported only for the grandparents' generation. Social practice is therefore drawing more closely into line with state laws, which decree twenty one and eighteen years as the minimum age of marriage for men and women respectively. Marriage has always been a matter for legislation, but the involvement of the state is now much more in evidence. Whereas earlier marriage often took place with just a religious celebration in the village, most marriages are now formally registered. Marriage disputes are now frequently brought to local government (*union parishad*) for adjudication, when formerly they would have been heard at a gathering of the village elders (*bichar, shalish*). Continuing a long-standing trend, polygamy is becoming a rarity. Against the dominant trend some people also note contradictory pressures to marry girls younger. These derive from fears of ever rising demands for payment by grooms on the one hand; and a sense that society is becoming increasingly lawless, jeopardising their daughters' honour, on the other.

The spread and inflation of payments to the groom, '*demand*,' is an issue which recurs repeatedly in discussions of marriage in Bangladesh. This marks a shift from the 'traditional' practice of relatively limited gifting on marriage, borne mainly by the groom's side, including for Muslims the agreement of a sum (*mehr*) as security for the bride in case of divorce.¹² Marriage payment from the bride's side (dowry) was

¹¹ These figures represent fluency in Bengali only, they do not include Arabic, which some women may know even if they don't know Bengali

¹² It is not clear to what extent this was actually paid in practice

historically practised only amongst high caste Hindus, but it is now virtually universal in North India and Bangladesh, across all communities and social groups. Lindenbaum (1981) locates the beginning of this change in the 1950s, when it affected only the elite. Since the 1960s, however, it has rapidly gathered pace. The law forbids it, Islam denounces it, NGOs reject it, parents of sons deny it, the people bemoan it, yet the payments increase day on day. For parents of daughters the cost of fulfilling the social and religious obligation to get them married can be ruinous. For the society as a whole it seems like a cultural vortex, an ironic caricature of the rampant growth of the market; the rewards it brings to some and the ruin to others; and its erosion of moral relationship.

The other dominant concern is with shifts in generational relations. Most simply, this is seen in changing household structures. The cultural norm of a joint family household, in which married sons and their families live together in their father's house, has now become relatively rare. The shift away from joint living has again been evident for many years, and seems to result from a mix of many factors. Most obviously these include declining landholding per household as population rises; and the diversification of wages and sources of income, which make calculating fair shares in household resources much more complicated than they were in the past. Women's outside employment can be a factor, either because it brings tensions with other women left to do all the work in the home, or because of the additional income it brings which people may be unready to share with the whole family. More rarely, women's employment can enable household unification, when it offers an additional income source and encourages others in the family to view a woman with a new respect.

The shift towards more separate households is seen as a broader movement, whereby power is transferring from the older generation to the younger. Narratives here concern a re-centring on the marital rather than parental relationship; the increasing involvement of young people themselves in choosing their own marriage partners; and material anxieties about care and support in old age. These in turn express a more general anxiety about the break down of the moral order: the rise of action motivated by personal desire rather than conformity with social rules; an increase of 'greed' or selfishness; and claims of rising inter-personal conflict. The aspect of 'moral panic' attending these issues may exaggerate the extent of change: the figure of 'love marriage', for example, appears as a kind of folk devil standing for disorder incarnate, but such marriages are actually relatively rare in the WeD data. Similarly, there are some signs of a shift in the conjugal division of labour, with men substituting for women in the care of children and even cooking, especially when the woman has a job. The extent of this seems to have increased, but as Oakley (1974) comments, who does the work is always more flexible than who holds responsibility for it being done and behaviour never perfectly conforms to rules. The dominant model of proper relationship remains firmly patriarchal, configuring strong hierarchies by age and gender. Nonetheless, there is clearly more room for choice and more options for many kinds of mobility than historically there have been. It is not surprising that any decline in the security of the inter-generational bargain would feature large in a context where welfare is still supplied largely from within the family. Again, this sense of a shifting order is at once material and deeply symbolic. Narratives opposing 'tradition' to 'outside' influence: the media, the NGOs, the fashion industry; or a drowsy folk religion to reformist Islam; show how alternative discourses and appeals to authority jockey with one another for the right to define what the moral order should be.

Wellbeing, Democracy and Political Violence in Bangladesh¹³

Initial research in the communities highlighted the ongoing significance of social relationships in the way people talked about themselves, organised their lives and sought to secure, often in competition with others, goods or services that were considered important for their livelihoods. Social relations therefore are clearly central

¹³ For further information on this theme contact Dr Joe Devine (J.Devine@bath.ac.uk)

to much of what really matters to people in their everyday lives, and are perceived to play a strong role in the production of advantage and disadvantage. This is not a new theme for researchers interested in the dynamics of social change in the context of Bangladesh. For example one of the favoured ideas of the development literature is that the reproduction of poverty is in part a consequence of the fact that poor people are trapped in dysfunctional and oppressive social relations (BRAC 1980, Wood 2003).

This research theme set out to understand the connections between collective action and people's experience and aspirations of wellbeing. It began by mapping out the different organisational forms present in the communities, and interviewing people on the significance of selected ones. During this initial phase however our attention was drawn to a specific set of social relations that people referred to most when talking both about the dynamics of social change. At the centre of these dominant social relations were local political party leaders and activists who were also identified as the main gatekeepers to key public resources and services. Discussions on the role of these political actors led almost inevitably to a second set of actors known locally as *mastaans*, a term that in Bangladesh is normally associated with organised criminals. *Mastaans* were often seen as working in collusion with the political actors. This observation promoted us to focus our empirical analysis on these two sets of actors and through a mixture of case studies and semi structured interviews, we sought to explore the significance of their rise to prominence.

One of the changes to have occurred in all of our sites (but most notable in the rural sites) is that the main political parties have expanded and institutionalised their presence in an attempt to recruit followers. This has occurred primarily through the patronising of different interest-based organisations such as trade unions, farmers' cooperatives, youth and women's groups and so forth in the communities. Normally local party leaders are responsible for the local coordination of the different party organisations, and also for their integration into other party organisations found at higher administrative levels. In this way, a chain of command is formed linking party activists in the community all the way to party leaders in Dhaka. The support of the latter enables local activists to exert considerable influence on the local elected government bodies responsible for a range of wellbeing related issues including the distribution of relief, the delivery of key public services, the implementation of development projects and the allocation of construction contracts. In our interviews, there was a very strong consensus that establishing relations with local party activists (as opposed to elected local officials) was the only real way to access these public benefits or goods. We also have a detailed case study of relief distribution where the local party leader decided, against the wishes of elected officials charged with distributing the relief, the list of beneficiaries. Moreover, activists aligned to the ruling party or the incumbent Member of Parliament exercised far greater influence over the allocation of public goods than activists belonging to the opposition party. Belonging therefore to the wrong party weakened considerably the chances of wellbeing needs being met.

These evolving political arrangements have created opportunities for different groups to organise and mobilise. In our research we found considerable overlap and interaction between local party activities and networks of *mastaans*. While the latter deploy the former to capture or retain power within their constituencies, the former use the relationship to promote their own political careers, or protect and extend their different rackets. Relationships between these different actors are highly organised but often informal and tacit. Similar to the case of party activists therefore, people turn to *mastaans* to resolve issues such as gaining access to health and education services, dealing with law enforcement and judicial systems, protecting business interests, securing relief services and so forth.

Analysis of the RANQ data confirms that connections to government through the use of government services is significantly associated with better need satisfaction outcomes (McGregor, McKay, Velasco 2007). The findings of this research theme provide important details of the processes involved in making these connections

function. The emergence of political activists and *mastaans* highlights the significance of the informal and sometimes shadowy practices and actors that underpin formal political processes. These informal channels are what makes things really happen in Bangladesh and are often the only way to press home claims or demands. The presence of *mastaans* however alerts us to the fact that the threat (real or potential) of violence now permeates the local context in which people seek to make claims on material goods, establish both formal and informal rights to basic services, and make meaning in their lives. With the ascendancy of *mastaans* therefore, the terrain through which people have to negotiate their wellbeing has become even more harsh and hostile.

Autonomy, Quality of Life and Wellbeing¹⁴

The notion of personal autonomy features in many philosophical discussions of wellbeing and indeed is one of the key initial conceptual inputs into our research (Doyal and Gough 1991). It is presented as a basic human need and a universal precondition for human action. One of the most persistent challenges to such formulations of autonomy highlights its Western roots and questions its relevance as a concept for understanding the dynamics of wellbeing in developing countries (e.g. Christopher, 1999). The research reported here used primary qualitative data collected for the Quality of Life component of our research in Bangladesh to explore if and to what extent the notion of autonomy is useful in making sense of people's understandings and experience of wellbeing. The data used specifically for this research consisted of explorations into people's goals, values, motivations, future aspirations and their views on what it means to live well in Bangladesh.

Two overarching themes emerged from our research. First, although Bangladeshis do not explicitly use the word autonomy, they place considerable value on the idea of securing greater control over more areas of their lives. Second, this ambition for greater control nonetheless retains a strong reference to the social relationships people find themselves in. Although both these themes are prioritised equally by men and women, young and old, rural and urban residents, there were important differences of emphasis. For example, there was a clear gender difference. Women's autonomy needs were more focused on other people and the quality of relationships with them. In particular the family network emerged as a primary reference point when women discussed autonomy needs. For example, older women wanted to be physically fit so that they would not be a burden on their children and younger women wanted independent incomes so they could contribute to the household and also participate more in household-decision making. Men also stressed the importance of relationships, notably the need for social recognition from others in the wider community (as opposed to the immediate family). However the autonomy needs of men appeared to be more focussed on themselves, giving greater priority to issues of personal competence, self-efficacy, self mastery and so on. More than any other group for example, young men emphasised their own education - even above that of their children.

A significant amount of the literature on autonomy advocates a disaggregated approach in which autonomy in specific domains of life such as work, politics, kinship etc are assessed (Alkire 2006). The advantage of such an approach is that it allows for a stronger appreciation of the embedded nature of autonomous action, and helps identify potential areas of policy intervention. In our research, we found that the majority of rural respondents identified four key domains where they wanted greater autonomy: family or household decision-making; employment; finances; and community participation. Our urban respondents also identified household decision making and employment, but added a third domain of education.

¹⁴ See Devine, J., Camfield, L. and Gough, I. (2007) 'Autonomy or Dependence – or Both?: Perspectives from Bangladesh' in *Journal of Happiness Studies* for fuller discussion of the ideas presented here. See JHS Online: <http://www.springerlink.com/content/104910/?k=autonomy+bangladesh>

Bangladesh was a particularly fertile context in which to explore the significance of autonomy for wellbeing because it is often characterised as a society in which people express themselves through relational rather than individualist forms. Often, but not always, these relationships both reflect and reproduce patterns of hierarchy, deference and dependence – qualities which on the face of are opposites to the value of autonomy. Our findings indicate that even in such contexts, people value and seek autonomy. Indeed we would contend that in Bangladesh autonomy is expressed primarily in relational forms. Conceptually, this leads us to affirm that even if autonomy is considered a universal psychological need or a desirable development goal, its expression is always profoundly contextual. From a point of view of praxis, the implication is that people's social relationships, starting from their most intimate ones, are the most effective medium through which to strengthen people's autonomy in their lives.

Wellbeing, happiness and relationships in Bangladesh¹⁵

Existing literature on happiness in Bangladesh throws up two important anomalies. First the persistence of poverty sits cumbersomely with authoritative reports claiming that Bangladeshis report a higher level of happiness than many other countries (including Britain) where people enjoy significantly larger per capita incomes and access to a wider range of basic services and goods (Worcester, 1998, using data from the 1996 World Values Survey). Poverty and happiness are unlikely partners. Second, despite significant positive changes in Bangladesh's human poverty (Sen and Hulme 2004) and development indices during the past decade, Bangladeshis now report lower levels of happiness than in 1996 (see World Values Survey 1996 till 2002, and also confirmed by WeD data).

Data from the exploratory study into individual Quality of Life (QoL) as well as from the Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ) enabled us to identify key categories and components of quality of life, and personal experiences of happiness. The sampling procedure meant that we could also explore and compare different people's experiences and this would offer an important corrective to the findings of more generalized data sets that deal mostly with higher levels of aggregation.

One of the key differences influencing the reported experience of happiness is wealth. RANQ respondents who self-assessed themselves as economically rich (in comparison with others in the research site) report significantly higher levels of happiness than those who are poor. However the difference between the 'rich' and the 'average' respondent is less obvious. Taken together the findings lend support to the view that wealth positively impacts on subjective wellbeing, but also to the 'threshold' theory that once people's basic needs have been satisfied, the returns from income in terms of improved quality of life are diminished (Layard, 2005).

We also looked at the relation between the satisfaction of everyday basic needs (food shortage, housing and health) and happiness, and found the relation not surprisingly to be positive. This helped explain another important factor, i.e. location. Our RANQ data confirms that households living in urban areas are generally happier than those in the rural areas. Moreover those in Manikganj town (closer to Dhaka) report higher levels of happiness than those in Dinajpur town. In our research sites, the urban locations provide far greater opportunities and services (for example more hospitals, schools, shops, entertainment centres and so forth) that are considered central to the satisfaction of core needs.

In the QoL study, we explore in more detail what people considered to be the source of happiness in life. Both income and good health were mentioned by most respondents but there were differences in the way these were considered valuable. Young men for example saw income as an indicator of their personal achievement and success, and for this reason was necessary for happiness. Young women instead

¹⁵ See Camfield, L. Choudhury, K. Devine, J. (forthcoming). 'Wellbeing, Happiness, and Why Relationships Matter: Evidence From Bangladesh' in *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

valued household incomes because they signalled the presence of a good husband capable of looking after his household.

The key finding from the QoL study however was that happiness depended crucially on good relationships. This gives considerable weight to other studies internationally, which suggest that relationships are highly correlated with subjective wellbeing, especially in conditions of poverty and insecurity (Biswas-Diener and Diener, 2006). In our case, the household emerged as the primary relationship from where people aspire to achieve happiness in life, although men in particular also highlighted the importance of community relationships. As well as intrinsic and experiential value (noted especially in the way people referred to relationship with spouses and children), all relationships are seen as possessing instrumental value, and potentially leading to material and non-material benefits such as income and status. At the same time, material and non material resources are considered necessary to strengthen relationships.

Crises, Shocks and Wellbeing¹⁶

One of the areas covered in the Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ) asks about types of shocks that may have led to significant reductions in asset holdings, household incomes or consumption patterns. This is a particularly relevant area of research in a country like Bangladesh which is ecologically fragile, and is often characterised as disaster and hazard prone.

In July 2004 we had just started administering the RANQ when the banks of the country's main rivers burst their banks after a sustained period of heavy monsoon rains. This caused flash floods that inundated almost 40 percent of the total area of Bangladesh, affected one quarter of the entire population and were directly responsible for the death of an estimated 800 people. Two of our rural research sites were particularly affected by the floods, and as a result research activities were suspended. When we returned to the research sites, we asked 40 households to keep a self-administered diary that sought to explore the kinds of adjustments households make, and the resources (material or otherwise) they deploy to deal with the aftermath of the flood. Diaries were kept for one year and researchers visited the households regularly to discuss diary entries.

We then decided to incorporate shocks created through health into our research. There were a number of reasons behind this decision. First, health is considered a core determinant of wellbeing because it facilitates participation in a whole range of life activities (Doyal and Gough 1991). Second, recent studies in Bangladesh confirm that ill health is the single most important factor causing crises in households. Davis (2005) for example found that an average of 18 percent of household income was spent on health-related costs. Finally, initial analysis of RANQ highlighted both the salience and frequency of health related shocks. We then chose another 40 households and asked them to keep a diary that collected information on health and health seeking behaviour. This again was maintained over a period of one year. Finally we also included specific health related questions in the Income and Expenditure survey that was administered in all of our research sites.

Although the dynamics of coping with shocks related to health and floods are different, there are a number of key common findings:

- People's judgements of crises depend less on the objective intensity of the shock and more on their perception of whether or not they can deal with and manage the consequences of the shock. In making this judgement, people consider their ability to deploy material and non-material resources.
- The ability to cope with shocks depends fundamentally on the household's economic resource base. However households also turn to relatives, friends and different social networks as part of their coping strategies. For poorer

¹⁶ For further information on this theme contact Dr Iqbal Khan (iqbalkhan@proshika.bdonline.com)

households, these networks of support are more important because their asset or economic base is weak. Normally however the networks of support of poorer households are usually less able to provide support over time.

- People's resilience is key to their ability to adjust to circumstances (Camfield and McGregor 2004), and this resilience is both constructed through and embodied in relationships.
- The way people deal with crises is also informed by norms, values and expectations. In some cases, the norms may strengthen crises management but in other cases they may serve to constrain people's attempts to cope.
- Shocks and crises produce important, but often overlooked, psychological consequences such as stress, depression and frustration.

Resources, Needs and Wellbeing¹⁷

One of the distinctive features of WeD was to develop a concept of wellbeing that allowed for a deeper and broader understanding of the ways individuals and households use the different resources at their disposal to satisfy particular needs in life. In this light, the interest in wellbeing builds directly on a tradition that rejects narrow (often income measures of economic status) understandings of poverty and argues for a more holistic and people-centred conception. The Resources and Needs Questionnaire (RANQ) is informed by a Resource Profile Approach, which sets out to capture a fuller range of resources at people's disposal and also to accommodate more explicitly the significance of social and cultural resources (McGregor 1994). The research reported here used data from RANQ in both Bangladesh and Peru to test statistically the influence of social and cultural resources. There are a number of questions dedicated to social resources in the RANQ and these cover people's relationships to a range of institutional spheres including family and kin, communities, governmental bodies and markets. For cultural resources there were a more limited range of questions relating to issues of status, language and religious identity.

Analysis of the data confirmed that material resources (in particular the level of assets owned by households) and human resources (the number of unskilled equivalent workers) had strong positive associations with needs satisfaction. This is a predictable finding. When cultural resources were analysed we found that in rural sites households following the dominant religion (Islam) had better needs satisfaction outcomes than those following other religions. There was also some evidence that households with members having honorific titles tended also to have levels of needs satisfaction. Interestingly in the case of Peru there was no evidence for significance of cultural resources. In terms of social resources, we found higher levels of needs satisfaction for those households with connections to government (though this was not found to be the case in urban areas), in those areas where there was access to financial services, and for households where members participated in community activities or belonged to some form of organization. Again to give some idea of comparison, in Peru participation in collective community activities and the impact of being a member of an organisation were negatively correlated with needs satisfaction. Also in Peru, access to financial services was not found to be a significant factor.

The analysis of RANQ offers important insights into the relationship between resources commanded and needs satisfaction. On the one hand it confirms that command over material and human resources is positively associated with greater needs satisfaction. This was found to be true in both Bangladesh and Peru. However in the case of social and cultural resources, the analysis is more complex. While there is compelling evidence that social and cultural resources matter in both countries, their significance changes according to context (both between and within countries). This reinforces the need for more in-depth exploration and analysis.

Dharma, Order and Wellbeing¹⁸

¹⁷ For fuller details of this theme see McGregor, J.A., McKay, A., Velazco, J. (2007) 'Needs and resources in the investigation of well-being in developing countries: illustrative evidence from Bangladesh and Peru', *Journal of Economic Methodology*, 14:1, 107-131.

This particular research theme is ongoing and brings together our work on wellbeing with the Religions and Development research programme located at the University of Birmingham¹⁹. Religion animates a cultural repertoire through which people make sense of their everyday lives – whether or not there is an explicit religious reference. It is a unique repertoire because unlike most other human processes, religion ultimately organises itself around some notion of the sacred. Notwithstanding this, it is important to note, as we have seen in various moments of our research, that religion in Bangladesh is very much part of people's everyday and practical lives. Equally, people continue to mark the areas of their lives they consider most important with different religious references.

In Bangladesh religion is directly translated as *dharma* however the latter embraces much more than what is traditionally captured by the word religion in the West. On the one hand *dharma* refers to the overall 'moral order of things' and one's relationship to it. The existence of *dharma* therefore is essentially about the correct ordering and behaviour of things in accordance with their intrinsic nature (Inden 1985). On the other hand, *dharma* also refers to people's religious affiliation. However the question 'what is your religion' is not so much a question of faith and belief, but about everyday lifestyles, ways of doing things, of being with people, of feelings and so forth (Kotalova 1996). Religion therefore is not only about narrative but also about material ordering.

An important inspiration for this research is offered by Arjun Appadurai's insights that everyday wants, needs and aspirations derive from intermediate norms or values that in turn form part of higher-order ethical and metaphysical ideas (Appadurai 2004). Linking everyday aspirations with higher normative orders in this way offers an important route to understand the deeper cultural grounding of wellbeing. In this research, *dharma* is taken to represent that ultimate sense of order which people experience as given and use to navigate their lives. Although this research theme is ongoing, initial analysis of existing WeD data highlights the continuing vitality of notions of *dharma* in personal and public life.

In one of our sites we found that religion was used very directly to mark the boundaries of social and political organisation. All muslim households in the community belong to one of 13 *jamats* (literally praying namaj together). Each *jamat* has its own mosque, and plays a role in a range of activities including religious celebrations, arranging marriages and burials, organising arbitration processes and so forth. Belonging to a *jamat* is a requisite for participation in social life. Structurally *jamats* are very similar in terms of organisation and function. No *jamat* is seen as belonging more to Allah, or being 'less muslim'. *Jamat* boundaries are therefore not dogmatic but relational. In other words they mark one group in relation to others. The main reason new *jamats* are formed is to create not only a sense of belonging but to mark the lines of difference with others. *Jamats* are always referred to in very positive terms as they are considered to bring harmony, nurture peace of mind, ensure society stays on the right path; offer moral authority and guidance. Practically however *jamats* are sites of intense conflict and competition for external resources, as well as for leadership positions within and outside of the community.

One of the main concerns of people is that the *jamat* is losing its authority and that people are becoming individualistic (*apon apon*) and opportunistic. While people acknowledge that these concerns existed many years ago, there is a sense that in recent times they have intensified. This is normally linked to the pace and direction of broader socio-economic change in Bangladesh. The reference to *apon apon* is important. Anxieties about social order tend to hone in on particular behaviour or conduct that are considered inappropriate (e.g. drinking alcohol, dressing in a particular way), unruly (e.g. bullying or harassing others) or immoral (usually refers

¹⁸ For further information on this theme contact Dr Sarah White (S.C.White@bath.ac.uk) or Dr Joe Devine (J.Devine@bath.ac.uk)

¹⁹ For more details see <http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk>.

to illicit relationships or sexual activity). *Apon apon* however is not just about behaviour it is equally about higher-order values and norms; about the way things should be done, the ways people should be and should act.

Like community, family roles and responsibilities are also considered fundamental to the moral order. While it holds aspects of both religion and class, the moral order is most critically configured through gender and age. Although we have many examples of differences in practice, there is remarkable consensus in the ideal form of the patriarchal order. This comprises a strong gender division of labour governed by *purdah* norms and clear reciprocal, though unequal, roles and responsibilities between husbands and wives, parents and children. Three key findings emerge from our preliminary analysis. First and arguably foremost, the interweaving of the material and spiritual in this order is striking. This is illustrated well in the following statements:

- *"As a wife I do the work in my husband's household. I cook food, sweep house, read the Holy Quran and pray, rear hens and ducks and grow vegetables."*
- *"I feed and clothe my wife. I tell her to pray because if she doesn't pray, in the eyes of God I will have not fulfilled all my duties as a husband"*

Second, although there is a strong sense of an overarching moral order which is all-holding (captured in the statement that *"the major determinant factor for a good marriage is God"*), people also stress the need to be pro-active, to 'make things happen', to take some initiative:

- *"Happiness lies in work. Happiness is a form of consciousness, a power. But if you sit idle with that power, you won't get peace. You have to use the power adequately. Your actions determine your fate."*

The mix of the material and the spiritual, the need to make things happen as well as trust in God as ultimate power is very evident in areas that cause anxiety and concern. A pertinent example here is that of dowries. On the one hand dowries are illegal, forbidden by Islam, and parents of sons often deny demanding or taking them. On the other hand, the prevalence and costs of dowries increase day by day. For parents of daughters the cost of fulfilling the social and religious obligation to get them married can be ruinous. For many however dowries equally represent an erosion of moral relationship and for some at least Islam offers a bulwark against this.

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