Patron-Clientelism and Community Participation: Lessons From an Urban Poverty Alleviation Project in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper explores the logic of patronage and its manifestation in a community-driven development project in two poor urban settlements in Bangladesh. It is seen from the case study that long-term patron-clientelistic relationship has been more dominant than a short-term based brokerage system due to the existing typical socio-political culture in Bangladesh. The exertion of patron-clientelistic relationship depends primarily on the community specific socio-political context. This paper opines that the presence of multi-political parties' influence in a community reduces the dominance of patron-clientistic logic in shaping social relationship. This in turn contributes to a more meaningful participation.

Key words: Bangladesh; Community participation and patron-client relationship; Patron-clientelism

INTRODUCTION

Various recent writings reveal the existence and continuation of patron-client relationships both in the northern and southern societies, and both in urban and rural settings (Auyero, Lapegna, & Poma, 2009; Chandra, 2007; Cox, 2009; Kitscheld & Wilkinson, 2007). Many, for example, Chandra (2007), and Kitscheld and Wilkinson (2007) perceive many of the relatively established democracies in the south as "patronage democracies", where politics is critical for the survival of the poor since politics is a more effective channel than administrative ones for getting scarce resources and services. De Wit and Berner (2009) argue that the urban poor in developing countries are predominantly dependent on patronage-like relations—a situation that has severe implications for organizing the poor and making them capable for collective action.

However, academics and development practitioners seldom consider how patron–client relationships may influence not only within the intrigue of formal political systems but also in the reception of and participation in development programs. Community-development programs tend to be seen as altruistic, while distribution of resources by politicians is seen as self-serving and venal. Cox (2009) argues that clientelism shapes not only expectations of particularistic returns but people's very ability to engage with "participatory" processes. In most of the cases the issue of enhancing the poor people's voice in the governance process through building horizontal relationship doesn't work and it works less well the poorer and more dependent people are. De Wit and Berner (2009) point out some issues to scrutiny while assessing the role of "community based organizations" (CBOs) in representing a community in a participatory process. Firstly, who are actually the members and do they include all ethnic, gender, political and religious groups in a community? Secondly, the CBO leadership should also be examined to see if it is more self-interested than community welfare oriented.

The paper focuses on a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) sponsored development project in Bangladesh and endeavors to explore the logic of patronage and its manifestation in a community-driven development project in urban poor settlements in Bangladesh.

1. PATRON-CLIENTELISM AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

In social sciences, patron-client relationships are one of many types of interpersonal relationship. Scholarship on patron-client relationship has been expanded for more than five decades and has witnessed a recent revival with political studies' increasing focus on "informal institutions" (Auyero et al., 2009, p.2). Although patron-clentelism lost its value with the rise of social capital, Leonard, Brass et al. (2010, p.476) remind us that "The fashionable analytic concept 'social capital' can obscure some of these continuities [changing nature of patronage], so its advantages for other purposes should not displace an attention to patronage as well". They again point out that "… it is not that 'social capital' and research on it are not useful but that political patronage may have a form and endurance in rural areas that are independent of social capital's presence" (Leonard et al., 2010, p.476).

Sorauf (1960) defined patronage as "an incentive system—a political currency with which to 'purchase' political activity and political responses" (cited in Bearfield, 2009, p.65). Patronage is "the informal, personal and face-to-face relationships between actors of unequal status and power that persist over time and involve the exchange of valued resources" (De Wit & Berner, 2009, p.931). These types of relationship between patron and clients are featured by mutual intimacy, moral and emotional obligation, trust and empathy, the sharing of common "pure" basic values, and sometimes hierarchical differences. According to Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) the characteristics of such relationship are (referred by Auyero et al., 2009, p.4; Dwianto, 1999, p.163):

- Particularistic: In this relationship actors are involved in terms of their respective personal properties and not in terms of general universal categories.
- Personal: Such relationship is basically based on interpersonal obligation manifested by personal loyalty, reciprocity, and attachment between patrons and clients.
- Voluntary: A person can enter into, or abandon a patron-client relation voluntary.
- Institutionalized: Since the relationship is basically established on an informal understanding between two parties, it is not fully legal or contractual. However, this type of relationship is institutionalized in ritual terms.

Being highly selective, particularistic, hierarchical, bonds of dependence and control, and diffuse, these type of relations exchange two different type of resources and services (Auyero et al., 2009, p.4): "Instrumental" (e.g., economic and political), and "sociational" or "expressive" (e.g., promises of loyalty and solidarity). Therefore, patronage network, based on patron-clientelistic relationships, may be conflicting with some community-based development programs, because clientilism is generally opposed to the ethos of participatory process (Cox, 2009, p.964).

The scope for patronage can be explained as a function of a lack of resources or services, access problems to agencies and institutions, and a lack of enforced impersonal rules for the allocation of resources. In urban poor slums in the third world countries, patronage is a dominant factor of distributing public as well as private goods and services. Therefore, it is the main strategy for obtaining scarce resource and services for the poor. The poor usually prefer to establish or maintaining ongoing contact with local intermediaries and politicians then organising rallies to voice their demands or initiating collective endeavors to meet their needs themselves (De Wit & Berner, 2009). Contacting a chief, leaders or trusted persons for making things done is a tradition—a cultural inducement. According to Auyero, Lapegna et al. (2009, p.5), this is a routine work and therefore, is not limited to material problem solving. Since the poor live in 'destructive uncertainty' they need to rely on vertical patronage relationship. Cutting off patronage relationship is dangerous for future survival of the poor (De Wit & Berner, 2009).

From the writings of various writers it becomes clear that patronage relationship still exists both in rich and poor countries but taking different shape than in the past (Auyero et al., 2009; De Wit & Berner, 2009; Leonard et al., 2010; O'Reilly, 2010). One of the changing facets of today's patronage is the instability in relationship between the patron and client(s). This is mainly because of the competition among today's potential patrons who mainly provide supplementary services in contrast to the survival services provided by the old day's patrons to their clients. Consequently, patronage relationship in poorer countries is gradually taking the form of brokerage. Gradually the relationship between patron and client is becoming fluid and flexible, giving way to an army of brokers and intermediaries who cater to the needs of anyone who contracts them for a fee. Such mediating can be done on an incidental basis, but more often regular patterns develop, depending on the locality, price, loyalty and perceived efficacy, which is often related to political affiliation. Thus, permanency in brokerage may develop (de Wit & Berner 2009, p.932). Considering this new shapes, a arrays of new scholarship, for example, Auyero, Lapegna et al. (2009) points out, in contrast to the traditional view of patron-client relationship which is contradictory to contentious collective action, clientelist and contentious politics might connect with each other, sometimes overtly, sometimes in more hidden way. And put forward the importance of paying attention to the impact of collective action on clientelist arrangements.

2. LOCAL PARTNERSHIP FOR POVERTY ALLEVIATION PROJECT: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Local Partnership for Poverty Alleviation (LPUPAP) was one of the largest UNDP sponsored poverty alleviation projects in Bangladesh under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development & Cooperatives (MLGRD&C). Municipal/city corporations, together with Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) were the sole implementing agencies of the project. The project was implemented in 11 towns for eight years from 2001 to 2008, and endeavored to improve the socio-economic and political status of the urban poor through empowering poor communities and building the capacity of local government bodies. Instead of the traditional supply-driven approach, the project claimed to adopt a community-based, bottom-up and demand-driven approach to achieve its development objectives: Community groups were formed to identify and prioritize needs, communicate effectively with local government bodies, and participate in designing, implementing and evaluating community level development activities (GHK-International, 2006).

At the community level, there were two types of community groups: the primary group (PG) and the community development committee (CDC). A PG was composed of persons in the community that desired to address a development issue of common interest. The maximum number of PGs in a community was 20, each with 15 to 20 members. If a PG started a savings and credit operation, it was known as savings and credit group (SCG). Every PG had a group leader (GL) and secretary elected by the group members for two years. Group funds were operated jointly by the GL and secretary. PG members were supposed to meet once a week to discuss various issues, and workout plans to address those issues. On the other hand, a CDC was comprised of the GLs and secretaries of the PGs in a community. CDC chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary and the treasure were elected by the members of the CDC as office bearers (OB) (but in most of the cases they were selected) for two years (in practice, after being elected/selected once as office bearers, most of them continued their positions till the end of the project). Every CDC had a constitution of its' own and was supposed to receive accreditation from the local authority (municipality/city corporation). CDCs were the focal point for implementation for all development activities and addressing common development issues faced by the entire community. Therefore, CDCs were entrusted with a list of functions, for instance, physical implementation (settlement improvement), water and sanitation, primary health care, gender awareness, environment and solid waste management, literacy campaigns and establishing schools, social and cultural activities, law and order maintenance etc.. The project provided two types of fund directly to the CDCs: the community development fund (CDF) for physical infrastructure development and the poverty alleviation fund (PAF) for income generating activities, capacity building and skill development.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA SOURCES

This paper draws on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through field investigation in 2006 lasting about one month in two LPUPAP communities in Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) area, situated in the north-west part of Bangladesh. For collecting primary data, interview and participant observation methods were used. Interviews were conducted with 60 community people through a questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative type questions. At the beginning of the field work, two LPUPAP communities, Baze Kazla (west) and Khulipara, were selected purposefully. Few criteria influenced the selection of these two communities: First, in both communities the project had been working for about five years; second, all the project components were introduced into both communities; third, project officials helped the researcher to identify these communities, where interesting variations in performance were expected. A total of 30 respondents from each community were selected randomly from the LPUPAP group member lists and included 10 group leaders (GLs), 10 general group members (GGMs), and 10 non-participant community members. In addition, semi-structured interviews were also been conducted with the two concerned ward councilors (WCs), two community development workers (CDWs), and the project coordinator in Rajshahi. Secondary data was collected from various published books, journal articles, unpublished academic thesis papers, various LPUPAP documents and relevant web materials.

4. A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE TWO COMMUNITIES

Baze Kazla (west) was composed of two types of inhabitants holding two different identities. The eastern part of this community was populated by the migrants coming from different parts of the country—normally were known as *Gristho* or *Bengali*. The other part (western part) of this community was populated by the people who were originally migrated from Murshidabad, a District of India, were known as *Mohaldar*. The term *Mohaldar* means fishermen. These people were distinct

from the *Bengalis* in terms of cultural practices. During an informal discussion with the researcher regarding various community related issues, one of the inhabitants from *Mohaldar* portion divided up the community by giving stress on "we" and "they". Although identity difference between *Bengalis* and *Mohaldar* was difficult to trace at the surface level, it was powerful and dominant in determining local power structure at the community level. Unlike Baze Kazla (west), Khulipara Mohaldarpara (from this point in this paper this has been termed as Khulipara) was mainly populated by *Mohaldar* people, had been living in that locality since long time. Therefore, the community was relatively homogeneous in terms of ethnical identity.

The total number of household in Baze Kazla (west) was about 500 and the total population was 1,968 (543 were children). In Khulipara there were about 370 households with 1,968 members (469 were children) and was less densely populated than Baze kazla (west). The overall socio-economic condition of the inhabitants in both communities was almost the same, and most of them belonged to the poorest of the poor. However, the overall socio-economic condition in Khulipara was found better in comparison to Baze Kazla (west) due to the presence of various job opportunities since the locality was very close to the city center (about 1 km.). The entire community of Baze Kazla (west) was under the constant threat of river bank erosion as it was outside the Rajshahi city protection dam. During the field research, inhabitants informed that just fifteen years ago the river bank was almost one and half kilometer away from now where it is. Besides river bank erosion, the community also had to face the plight of flood at regular intervals. On the contrary, Khulipara had relatively better infrastructural facilities. The community was under the city corporation's water supply coverage. However, the community had severe water logging problem mainly during the rainy season.

From the collected data it was found that 74% of the total residents in Baze Kazla (West) lived below the subsistence level as their monthly household income was less than TK. 3,000, with the average household size of 4.73. Although the economic condition of the inhabitants was relatively better in Khulipara, majority of the households' income (53%) were below than BDT 3000 per month with an average household size of 4.8. In both communities generally men were the main wage earners and women were mainly involved in reproductive activities with few exceptions. Most people were engaged in informal sector activities, like rickshaw pulling, vegetable vending, petty trading, retail fish trading etc. Many of such jobs were seasonal and irregular. However, in Khulipara, majority were somehow related with fish mongering since it was their traditional occupation, and their income was relatively stable as compared to Baze Kazla (west) and it was found that 60% of the total

households in Baze Kazla (west) did not have regular income .

The overall literacy rate was 77% and 83% in Baze Kazla (west) and Khulipara respectively. However, about 27% among them could only sign their names in Baze Kazla (west) and the figure was 17% for Khulipara. The relatively lower socio-economic condition of the inhabitants lived in Baze Kazla (west) was manifested in their housing facilities: About 47% houses were *Kancha*[1], 47% were *Semi-Pucca* and only 7% houses were *Pucca*. Furthermore, about 60% of the total inhabitants of this community lived in rental houses. On the contrary, in Khulipara, about 17% houses were *Pucca* and 53% were *semi-Pucca*. Majority of the residents (70%) lived permanently in their own houses.

5. PATRON-CLIENTELISM AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY AREA

Historically Bangladeshi society is hierarchical and a considerable power distance between higher and lower classes exists. Although the majority of the population is Muslim, the culture is heavily influenced by the Hindu caste system. In addition, the culture has also been shaped by the colonial heritage, which was principally based on master-slave rapport (Rahman, 2000). Therefore, as Rahmna (2000) argues, one of the manifestations of such hierarchism is the presence of patron-client relationship between the advantaged (patrons) who have control over resources, and the disadvantaged (clients) who always seek their favour to get access to the resources. This type of power relation is also dominant in urban poor communities through the relationship between community leaders (CLs) and the poor. In both communities, under the study, there was the existence of such CLs who played a crucial role as patrons for the poor in getting various services from government agencies (i.e. police, power supply department, City Corporation etc.), settling community level disputes, getting access to local elected representatives and getting government relief during natural calamities. The influence of the CLs on the community people's life can be better illustrated by the following Table 1 (field visit, 2006).

Table 1
Relationship Between Community Members and CLs

Question	Baze Kazla (west)		Khulipara	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Visited local CLs for solving personal problems	73%	27%	50%	50%

Note. Question: Have you ever visited anyone of the leaders in your community to solve any of your problems? Please give your answer by saying "Yes" or No.

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[1] It includes *Jhupri* and *Tin-shed* type houses.

The socio-economic and political profile of these CLs varied enormously. Some were influential due to their family reputation (at least in one case in Baze Kazla), although the majority were mainly influential due to their strong ties with political parties. Unlike Indian slums (de Wit, 2001; Desai, 1995), their leadership was seldom rooted in CBOs. In fact, in these two communities there was no such CBO of their own representing the entire community. However, there was *"Shomaj"*, an informal body of *Mohaldar* [2] people, in each of these two communities which was mainly responsible for settling internal disputes and arranging for various religious and social festivals. Besides this, there were some women groups formed under various NGOs intervention to run credit programs. But, none of the groups were active in other communal affairs.

It was observed that many of the poor community people were tied with CLs through long-term reciprocal relationship. Almost every leader had a group of people who were loyal to him and for getting services they used to go to him. This long-term relationship was mainly based on kinship, friendship and political ideology. Besides kinship, the political ideology was also very important because of the prevailing competing political culture in Bangladesh. Generally the whole nation has been divided in favor of the two major political parties—Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Bangladesh Awami League (AL)[3]—with an ideological and emotional attachment. In this context, it was unlikely that supporters of one party will seek help from a CL who was a supporter of another party. Alternatively, CLs were also reluctant to provide services to those who had different political ideology and attachment, since usually they provided services without getting direct personal monitory benefit. Instead, they used the perceived loyalty in different ways.

The CLs could manage taking benefits of such relationship in various ways. Generally, CLs were the linking agent between ward[4] level politicians (mainly WCs and their lackeys) and the community people. Besides, some had direct link with the city level politicians (for example, with the mayor). These CLs were important to the ward and city level politicians as they (CLs) were in a great help to secure community support in favor of these politicians during local and national elections. Moreover, CLs were the key persons in mobilizing community people for mass political meetings, political precessions, or supplying picketers during *Hartals* (strikes). In exchange of receiving such services from the CLs (clients), the local politicians (patrons) usually supported their power as well as economic bases in many ways, for example: giving money, helping in getting various government contracts, and providing and facilitating their access to and dominance over various political and social associations. There had been a tendency in both the study communities that leadership and membership of the PGs and CDCs were mostly held by the CLs and their family members, or by such persons who had a good rapport with the CLs. It became understandable by observing answers given by the respondents in response to the question: "do you have any close relation with any of them (community leaders)?" Whereas 40% of the total respondents (*n*= 60) answered positively, the figure was about 75% in the case of the office bearers (6 out of 8 office bearers).

Patron-client relationship can also be better understood by the way LPUPAP groups were formed. Most of the group members informed that they heard about the project for the first time from the LPUPAP group leaders/members, which indicates that instead of relying on adequate information sharing among the community people, the project officials mainly depended on key persons to form groups. One of the OBs described her experience in this way:

> One day the ward commissioner called me upon his office and introduced me to the project worker (CDW). Then she informed me about the project and encouraged me to form a group. He also assured me that in return I will be offered the position of group leader. (field visit, 2006).

It is quite evident that instead of forming the groups first, the project workers mainly identified the key persons in the community with the help of CLs as prescribed by the ward level politicians (mainly the WCs). These key persons then took initiatives to form PGs and eventually they were offered the position of group leaders; and finally, these PG leaders formed CDCs.

As a result, it is clear that the selection of group members as well as OBs were heavily influenced by the logic of patron-clientelism, where the local politicians and CLs acted as patrons and the group members as clients. Subsequently, the CDC office bearers also appeared as patrons to the general LPUPAP group members. It was also found that some of the office bearers were using their positions for personal political gain, especially in Baze Kazla (west) where BNP had absolute dominance at the time of field investigation. For example, one of the office bearers in Baze Kazla (west)—who was also the president of the women wing of BNP of the concerned ward and had a good rapport with the concerned pro-BNP WC (had been elected for three terms consecutively)—informed me that she was going to be a candidate in the next local election. She

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[2] The term *Mohaldar* means fishermen who are originally migrated from Murshidabad, a District of India. These people are distinct from the *Bengalis* in terms of cultural practices. In both communities *Mohnaldar* people are marginalized in terms of socio-economic status.
[3] When the field investigation took place in 2006, BNP was the ruling party, and AL was the main opposition party (2001- 2006).
[4] Ward is the lowest electoral and administrative unit according to the present urban local government structure in Bangladesh. Accordingly, Rajshai City Corporation is divided into 30 Wards.

also mentioned that her position in the CDC had given her an opportunity to build good rapport with community people and city level politicians as well. The use of group leadership position for her own political gains became apparent when the researcher went for a walk with her within the study community and some people demanded a walkway on their side of the settlement. She answered: "if I wins the upcoming local election, I will allocate budget for the work otherwise not". In this way, project resource distribution was more politicized in Baze Kazla (west). It was found that the more socio-economic status and strong political ties of an office bearer had, the more she/he would have been able to use the group leadership position for personal gains. Thus, some of the office bearers' leadership position in the project groups helped to reinforce the pre-existing patron-client relationship. Moreover, the LPUPAP groups were also been used for political purposes in another way. When the respondents were asked the question: "Are you or anyone of your family member a member of any political party, or do participate in any political activities or, did campaigning for any candidate in national or local elections?" a good number of respondents in Baze Kazla (west) expressed that when asked by local politicians, it was obligatory for them to attend major political mass meetings in exchange of their membership in the groups. However, the situation was somewhat different in Khulipara—although not in a greater extent.

Unlike Baze kazla (west), in Khulipara there was strong influence of AL besides BNP. The office bearers took their office during the period of the previous WC, who had attachment with BNP. Therefore, the present WC (at the time of the field investigation in August 2006) who was a supporter of AL could not exert a great deal of influence on LPUPAP groups. Thus, the co-existence of multi-party domination provided greater room for fair distribution of resources (less politicised and need based) in Khulipara. As Desai (1995, p.228) observes:

> If another party is alongside the party in power is presented in the area in some strength, the situation does not change fundamentally, but the capacity of the slum dwellers to manipulate and maneuver between the two is somewhat increased.

On the contrary, in Baze Kazla (west) the participatory process had merely been used as a control mechanism. This situation contradicts with the opinion of Mukhopadhyay (1993, p.341), who argues for the homogeneous local political power situation for effective community participation and collective action which induces more development.

CONCLUSION

Patron-clientelism plays a crucial role in shaping the extent and the nature of participation and collective action in community development projects. It is seen from the case study that the long-term patron-clientelistic relationship has been more dominant than short-term brokerage type relationship due to the existing typical socio-political culture in Bangladesh. This contradicts the findings of de Wit (2001) in Indian urban slums that patronage/brokerage type relationship has gradually been replacing patron-clientelistic relationship. This study paper suggests that the level of dominance of patron-client relationship depends mainly on the community specific socio-political contexts. The presence of multi-political parties' influence in a community reduces the influence of patron-client relationship, which in turn contributes to more meaningful participation. This finding contradicts the view of Mukhopadhyay (1993) who is an opinion that the presence of homogeneous political power leads to more effective community participation.

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