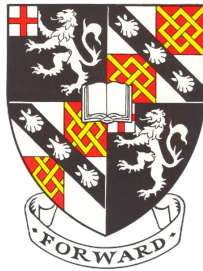




# THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL PROTECTION IN BANGLADESH: The making of the National Social Security Strategy

Nabila Idris



Churchill College

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This thesis is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

## **Declaration**

This thesis is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my thesis has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It does not exceed the prescribed word limit for the POLIS Degree Committee.

Nabila Idris  
Cambridge  
March 31, 2021

## **Abstract**

Social protection has gained rapid prominence in the global development agenda in the past two decades. Numerous countries across the global South have enacted national social protection strategies in a bid to build state of the art programme portfolios. Bangladesh joined their ranks in 2015 with its National Social Security Strategy (NSSS). This study takes the NSSS as its point of departure to open the 'black box' of policymaking in Bangladesh. It particularly focuses on the politics of the food vs. cash debate, the targeting vs. universalism debate, and the role of bureaucrats, donors, NGOs, and labour in Bangladesh's social protection politics.

The thesis aims to critically understand how the wide-ranging, historically-entrenched political contestations in the country underpin the seemingly apolitical decisions in the NSSS. It is based on over sixty in depth qualitative interviews with key informants, weeks of participant observation in meetings and organisations, as well as analysis of hundreds of internal government documents. First, the study finds that labour has fallen victim to the institutional machinations of neoliberal global capitalism, which deliberately and systematically excludes it from policies of social protection. Second, the persistence of colonial era institutions and the power imbalance between producers and consumers in the rice market is shown to tilt the NSSS in favour of food transfers in the short term and cash transfers in the long term. Third, whilst Bangladesh is lauded for the strength of its NGO sector, this study finds NGOs to be a weak actor dependent on idea transfer to protect rental streams. Fourth, the study reveals how donors employ both coercive and ideational means to promote their favoured policies but succeeds where there is a receptive domestic political environment that supports the donors' ideas, such as by favouring targeted programmes over universalism. And finally, national bureaucrats are seen to be powerful actors engaged in rent-seeking for both personal and organisational gains.

The key contribution of the thesis is its critical analysis, which reveals the political nature of several significant social protection debates in Bangladesh, with potential lessons for other developing countries. At the theoretical level, it contributes to a growing body of political settlements analysis of social protection policies by proposing that the unit of analysis be narrowed down to the issue-level. At the methodological level, the thesis brings the vantage point of the state's bureaucratic machinery to the fore, thereby providing a counterpoint to many studies on Bangladesh that centre non-state actors.

*to*

*Ammu-Abbu & Nana-Nani*

*who taught us how to live for faith and family*

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The person who deserves the biggest thanks for being a rock throughout this exhilarating journey is my husband, Asad. Honestly, thank you. Reader, in order to understand my ideas better, he has been known to actually take notes when I periodically unleash my ‘streams of consciousness’. What more can a girl ask for!

My mother, grandfather, and mother-in-law passed away during the course of my doctoral degree whilst my father and grandmother acquired debilitating disabilities post-Covid. They have always been endless wells of support and guidance, and I miss them every day. My debt to them cannot be expressed with mere words. Alongside them, my little (!) brothers—Zubair, Zaid, and Khalid—have kept me sane, laughing, and loved for which I am grateful. Also, welcome to the family, Raiha, and a pre-emptive welcome to everyone who will be joining us in the future.

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## ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ADAB	Association of Development Agencies
AL	Awami League
ASID	Agency, Structures, Institutions, and Discourse
AusAid	Australian Aid
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BIDS	Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies
BKMEA	Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BNP	Bangladesh Nationalist Party
BRAC	Formerly Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CMC	Central Monitoring Committee
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CUP	Coalition for the Urban Poor
DCCI	Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
DFID	Department for International Development
EII	Employment Injury Insurance
EPRI	Economic Policy Research Institute
ESID	Effective States and Inclusive Development
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
FBCCI	Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industries
FPMU	Food Planning and Monitoring Unit
GB£	Pound Sterling
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GED	General Economics Division
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GO	Governmental Organisation
IDRA	Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPC-IG	International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth
MOA	Ministry of Agriculture
MOCHTA	Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs
MODMR	Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOEF	Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

MOFd	Ministry of Food
MOFn	Ministry of Finance
MOHFW	Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
MOLGRDC	Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives
MOLWA	Ministry of Liberation War Affairs
MOPME	Ministry of Primary and Mass Education
MOWCA	Ministry of Women and Children Affairs
MP	Member of Parliament
MSW	Ministry of Social Welfare
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NGOAB	NGO Affairs Bureau
NSIS	National Social Insurance Scheme
NSPS	National Social Protection Strategy
NSSS	National Social Security Strategy
ODA	Official Development Assistance
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDR	People's Democratic Republic
PFDS	Public Food Distribution System
PKSF	Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation
PMO	Prime Minister's Office
PPRC	Power and Participation Research Centre
PRI	Policy Research Institute
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RDRS	Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service
SANEM	South Asian Network on Economic Modelling
SP	Social Protection
SPS	Social Protection System
SSS	Social Security System
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
US	United States
US\$	US dollar
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
VGF	Vulnerable Group Feeding
WFP	World Food Programme

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*“...political questions are not mere technical issues to be solved by experts. Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives.”*

Chantal Mouffe, 2007, p. 2

In August 2017, the Myanmar military launched a deadly attack on Rohingya Muslims, a group the UN calls the world’s most persecuted minority. As the murders, rapes, and destruction escalated, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled the genocide in Rakhine state to shelter in neighbouring Bangladesh. I was in Thailand at the time, conducting fieldwork for this thesis. At a training event attended by, amongst others, UN agency officials and Myanmar civil servants, I saw the Myanmar delegates being repeatedly lauded for including a ‘universal’ maternal and child cash transfer programme in their National Social Protection Strategic Plan that was about to be rolled out in Rakhine.<sup>1</sup> I enquired whether the cash transfer included Rohingya mothers and children. It did not. Bewildered, I asked why we were clapping for Myanmar having a universal cash transfer programme when it clearly was not universal. Discomfited UN agency officials privately explained to me that since the Myanmar government does not regard Rohingyas as citizens, a cash transfer available to all citizens but nonetheless systematically denied to an entire ethnic group

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, Myanmar in partnership with UNICEF Myanmar report titled *Country-Led Formative Evaluation of the Maternal and Child Cash Transfer Programme in Chin and Rakhine States in Myanmar*, January 2020

undergoing slaughter *is* indeed universal, and therefore should be seen as a progressive development to be lauded.

The above incident encapsulates one of the many contradictions that lie at the heart of the national social protection strategies being rolled out across the global South. This rollout has been impressive. Since 2010, thirty African countries have adopted a national social protection strategy; today almost two-thirds of African nations have a social protection strategy, up from zero countries with such a strategy in 2000 (Devereux 2020).<sup>2</sup> Numerous countries in Asia have adopted similar strategies too, including Myanmar, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Lao PDR (IPC-IG and UNICEF, 2019; UNICEF, 2009). Bangladesh followed suit and adopted its National Social Security Strategy—henceforth, NSSS—in 2015 and its Action Plan in 2018 (GED, 2018). The strategies aim to institutionalise government commitment to provide social protection by coordinating many programmes, reducing fragmentation, and undertaking necessary reforms (Drucza, 2015). Across the board, the national social protection strategies are framed as progressive developments that can help countries achieve up to 14 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (OECD, 2019).

However, social protection—encompassing social insurance, social assistance, and labour market policies (Barrientos and Pellissery, 2014)—is inherently political, concerned with “consolidating and reinforcing entrenched power structures” (Midgley, 2013, p. 14). For example, in many European countries today, social protection is used as a wedge issue in anti-immigration debates (Ferrera, 2005). Conversely, the post-war Keynesian consensus chose to increase welfare expenditure to stimulate demand instead of increasing arms manufacture or building infrastructure, which could have also stimulated demand (Gough, 1978). These choices are ideological, and hence political. Beegle et al. (2018) argue that the adoption and scope of a social protection programme are contingent on political will, which depends on domestic factors. Similarly, the introduction and design of a programme modify the interests and ideas of stakeholders, creating a political feedback loop that affects future programmes. Therefore, whilst the national social

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<sup>2</sup> There are multiple variations in the names of these strategies. Myanmar’s is called National Social Protection Strategic Plan whilst Ethiopia’s is National Social Protection Policy. Bangladesh’s is called National Social Security Strategy. In essence, they are all part of the same family of strategies.

protection strategies of the past two decades in the global South can indeed be regarded as progressive, they can also be—as the Myanmar incident, among many, demonstrates—deceptively regressive. As a result, judging the actual nature of the national social protection strategies and their effects on different groups in the population requires critical investigation into the dynamics of their development and the interplay of power relations among different actors and institutions involved in their production.

Whilst there is a need to critically interrogate what forms the different national social protection strategies takes and who benefits from them, there are also questions to be asked about where the strategies originate and what that means for their design and implementation. Not only has social protection been enthusiastically promoted by donor agencies in recent years (Deacon, 2013; Devereux, 2011; Schmitt, 2020), all national social protection strategies in the global South have been developed with the active involvement of Western donor agencies (Devereux, 2020). These were the same donors who, in previous decades, strongly promoted structural adjustment programmes and poverty reduction strategy papers, with famously deleterious effects on poor countries (Easterly, 2006). The sight of the donors who enforced debilitating cuts to public expenditure suddenly promoting egalitarian policies about social welfare is perplexing and naturally raises suspicions about their intent among many critics and domestic actors (Schmitt, 2020).

Nevertheless, the role donors play in influencing national policies can often be overestimated. Barrientos (2020), for example, argues that the effect of aid donors may have been overstated and the current social protection wave may be more driven by domestic than foreign politics. National governments often have a range of tactics that they regularly use to withstand donor pressure and enact their preferred policies (Whitfield, 2009). Thus, two major reviews of national social protection strategies—encompassing ten countries from sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and North Africa, and South and South-East Asia (Ornnet, 2020) as well as ten West African nations (Pino and Confalonieri, 2014)—find that the strategies these countries have adopted involve a wide range of local actors and reflect their national contexts. In fact, by condensing a majority, if not all, of a country's social protection programming into a

single document, the strategies can provide crucial insight into the features of a country's wider social welfare politics (Kwon, Cook and Kim, 2015).

However, the possibility of authentic national ownership of these strategies is by itself not enough to ameliorate concerns about their potentially regressive or exclusionary nature. Collier (2007) argues that the national arena comprises both 'heroes' and 'villains' – whilst the heroes may indeed be interested in helping the poor, the villains may operate merely out of self-interest. It is possible for the villains to feature more prominently in the policymaking process, making the social protection strategies less than ideal for the poor and the vulnerable they are intended for. This language of 'villains' and 'heroes' is, of course, simplistically portraying a naïve binary where power relations, actor interests, and institutional histories are clearly separated. Again, only critical and detailed empirical analysis can reveal the complexities of social protection politics and the dynamics of drawing national social protection strategies. This thesis, therefore, uses Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy as a lens with which to examine the interplay of different actors and institutions in social protection policymaking processes in the global South.

## **1.1 Research questions and audience**

Bangladesh's NSSS is a comprehensive document over a hundred pages in length (see GED, 2015). It covers a very wide range of issues, encompassing social protection for children, those of working age, the elderly, and people with disabilities. It addresses programmes to deal with the fallout of climate change, urban poverty, and minorities who suffer from social exclusion. It recommends administrative reforms, results-based monitoring and evaluation of programmes, and the introduction of government-to-people cash transfers, allowing the central government to bypass local government. It also directs over twenty ministries to operationalise the strategy and involves several donors and NGOs to variable extents.

Given the breadth and depth of the strategy, it provides an excellent lens with which to understand the broader political underpinnings of Bangladesh's social protection policies. Therefore, the overarching research question is *What are the political dynamics behind Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy?* The choice of the



word ‘dynamics’ is intended to reflect the fluid nature of the complex processes and mechanisms by which politics impacts social protection. Two subsidiary questions further guide the research for this thesis: one approaching the policymaking arena at the issue level while the other focuses on the level of actors involved. The two questions incorporate a concern not only for ‘what’ happened but also about the reasons (‘why’) and mechanisms (‘how’) that lie at the heart of the contestations.

With regards to issue-specific analysis, Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2007, p. 1) argue that many of social protection’s “ideological battles are being fought out around basic and seemingly technical choices in social protection policies”, such as targeting vs. universalism or food vs. cash transfer. Whilst these may seem like simple technical questions, the debates mask political and philosophical positions adopted by many actors. These two debates appear at the heart of the NSSS as well. Therefore, the first subsidiary research question in this thesis asks: *What political considerations animate the universalism vs. targeting and food vs. cash transfers debates in the NSSS?*

The second subsidiary question focuses on key interest groups and their role in shaping the NSSS. Four major groups of actors warrant particular focus either for their prominent role in or for their surprising absence from the policy formation: donors, national bureaucrats, NGOs, and labour. First, this study analyses donor involvement in social protection policymaking in Bangladesh. The country has been historically acquiescent to donors, who have at times freely dictated policies to the country (Faaland, 1981). Several donors—particularly the World Bank, UNDP, and DFID—were highly involved in the NSSS. Second, the thesis investigates NGOs’ role in social protection policymaking because Bangladesh famously hosts one of the world’s most mature NGO sectors, which have had a demonstrable impact on the country’s development in general (Lewis, 2011). Third, the bureaucracy in Bangladesh has long been involved in the policymaking arena and was particularly so in the NSSS. Finally, since the NSSS alludes to social insurance for formal sector workers, this study scrutinises labour’s involvement in social protection policymaking as well. Whilst most workers are in the informal sector in the country, Bangladesh has 4m workers in its readymade garments sector who form the backbone of the economy (Mahmud, 2008; Khan, 2017). Welfare state development theories suggest working-

class political mobilisation plays a key role in institutionalising social protection in many countries, including developing countries in Latin America (Esping-Andersen, 1985; Huber and Stephens, 2012; Korpi, 1989). This is a claim this thesis aims to investigate. Therefore, the second subsidiary question is *What political concerns shape the role of donors, civil society, bureaucrats, and labour in the country's social protection system?*

## **1.2 Research contribution**

This thesis makes two overarching contributions to the research on social protection policies. The first is a contribution to the 'behind the scenes' politics of the national social protection strategies, which is an area hugely missing from social protection policy research in the global South. The second contribution the thesis makes is the development of the concept of 'issue-specific' political settlement analysis. Most available research tends to focus on national-level elite settlements, whilst this study conducts issue-specific analysis to examine outwardly apolitical design contestations.

The academic literature on national social protection strategies is still exceedingly sparse on empirical analysis of the political contestations that are unfolding 'behind the scenes' as the wave of national social protection strategies engulfs the global South. The only detailed study is Kwon, Cook and Kim's (2015) research on Cambodia's national social protection strategy formation. Similar to this thesis, their study uses the strategy as a lens with which to reflect on developments that affected social protection politics in the country. They reveal how China's involvement as a major foreign investor has empowered the Cambodian government vis-à-vis Western aid donors. Both Western aid donors and the government were catalysed by the experiences of the global food and financial crises of 2007-08 to jointly formulate the country's national social protection policy, which was finalised in 2011. Another study by Kaltenborn et al. (2017)'s reveals how Ghana's electoral calculus has impacted its social protection policymaking. Two studies were conducted before the national social protection strategies were completed – in Tanzania, inter-ministerial infighting caused delays in policy development (Ulriksen, 2016) whereas, in Nepal, the delay was due to donor fragmentation, bureaucratic disinterest, and lack of civil society involvement (Drucza, 2015). Finally, Gazdar (2011) finds Pakistan's strategy

merely provided ex post justification for increased social protection expenditure after the reinstatement of civilian rule. Given the sheer number of social protection strategies enacted worldwide, this literature is strikingly limited. The gap in the literature is unsurprising though because policymaking in the global South is a highly understudied field in itself, let alone studies of the wider political dynamics affecting policy development (Ascher, 2017). The detailed analysis of power relations, institutional histories, and interest contestation which this thesis offers in scrutinizing the ‘behind the scene’ politics of the NSSS will contribute to answering several questions about the politics of social protection policies in the global South.

The second contribution of this research concerns the issue-specific political settlement analysis of what ostensibly appear to be technical design debates. The thesis uses the NSSS’ policymaking process as a lens with which to study the politics of social protection policies in Bangladesh. Specifically, it carries out political settlements analysis, which suggests power and institutions interact to generate rent for the dominant coalition of actors in a way that is stable and reproducible (Khan, 2018a). This study builds on the ‘adapted political settlements’ framework—which added ideas to the constellation of power and institutions (Lavers and Hickey, 2016)—to propose an *issue-specific* political settlements approach that narrows the unit of analysis from elites and domains to specific policy issues. Political settlement analysis of social protection is a relatively recent development and has largely focused on sub-Saharan Africa (Hickey et al., 2020). Political settlement analysis of Bangladesh has covered economic growth (Khan, 2013), corruption (Khan, 2017), readymade garments industry (Ahmed, Greenleaf and Sacks, 2014), education (Hossain et al., 2017), political violence (Hassan and Nazneen, 2017), and social safety nets implementation (Rezvi, 2020). There is a single political settlement analysis of social protection policies but it is conducted using national-level elite settlements (Hassan, 2013). Recognising the difficulty of reconciling national elite settlements with all types of settlements in the country, it recommends a ‘lower-level’ political settlement analysis that differentiates between competitive politics, the economy, and social welfare. This thesis argues political settlements can be used to study even more detailed issues than the ‘lower-level’ settlements that have been identified for Bangladesh. The findings of issue-specific settlements in this thesis reveal the political nature of several significant social protection debates in

Bangladesh, which masquerade as apolitical technical decisions, providing potential lessons for other developing countries. This study is therefore a first of its kind in two ways. The particular policy it investigates has not been studied before, and the approach it takes is modified for use in a novel way.

The thesis makes its contributions to two epistemic communities. The first is that of academic researchers and students interested in the politics of social protection in the global South. Bangladesh provides an interesting juxtaposition of several national and international forces that are difficult to find elsewhere and therefore can provide insights beyond its immediate borders. The second community this thesis speaks to is that of professionals involved in welfare policymaking, particularly in Bangladesh but also in countries in the global South where such strategies are being enacted. A key informant from a UN agency I interviewed acknowledged that he was interested in my findings because, due to a lack of clarity on how social protection policymaking happens in Bangladesh, his team was struggling to position themselves for advocacy purposes.<sup>3</sup> The study's early findings also resonated with bureaucratic circles. At the start of the pandemic, I wrote two opinion pieces in a national newspaper outlining some of my findings and explaining how they can provide some solutions to the rollout of emergency food transfers Bangladesh was struggling with during lockdown (Idris, 2020a, 2020b). I was approached by bureaucrats from two separate agencies commending the articles for clarifying to them wider issues they had overlooked from within their ministerial silos.

### **1.3 The case selection of Bangladesh**

Case studies allow detailed examination of a social phenomenon to develop explanations for it that may be generalisable to similar contexts (George and Bennett, 2005). Given the scarcity of research on national social protection strategies, there is insufficient data to determine *ex ante* whether there is enough similarity between Bangladesh and other countries that warrant a study with a larger sample (Gerring, 2007). As a result, this thesis conducts a single case study analysis to generate thick descriptions well suited for exploratory research (Geertz, 1973). Bangladesh provides a complex national environment wherein many actors, institutions, and ideas have the

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with UN agency official 10 (2018, 2019)

power to influence policymaking. The case of the NSSS is particularly salient in this regard as it is the first strategy in Bangladesh's history to attempt to cohesively regulate all of the country's social safety net provisions.

Bangladesh is further interesting as a case because of the various political and socio-economic changes the country underwent in the last decades, some even as the policy itself was being drafted. Although it was launched in 2015, the NSSS first appeared in the policy arena in 2005 (Rahman, 2006), offering a whole decade of transformations that shaped the policy as it unfolded. For example, in 2015, Bangladesh rose to a lower middle-income country status from that of a least developed country (World Bank, 2015a). This points to major changes in the country's financing structure, which may be reflected in its social protection provisions. Similarly, another major shift in the country occurred around 2014 with a decisive move from what was regarded as a 'vulnerable multiparty democracy' to the current semi-authoritarian regime (Riaz, 2019). Since social protection is intimately connected to electoral politics (Hickey, 2009), studying the NSSS offers a chance to examine how social protection policy is shaped by the change in regime types.

The choice of the NSSS in Bangladesh's policy landscape is especially suited as a case study for two reasons. First, the country has a nearly half a century-long history of providing social protection to its citizens, at times by designing innovative programs (GED, 2015). The NSSS consolidates all these pre-existing policies to propose a path forward.<sup>4</sup> An influential advisor to the donors and the government who was instrumental in shaping the NSSS argued, "The fundamental drivers of social protection were already in place... NSSS has not suggested any [new] programmatic direction... it's more of a conceptual, intellectual reference point."<sup>5</sup> In doing so, it renders visible contestations that had been simmering under the surface for decades and thus have had time to mature. As such, studying the dynamics of the NSSS' development makes it possible to inspect how historical forces interact with contemporary pressures in policymaking. Second, the NSSS was drafted through the joint effort of donors and bureaucrats, with some input from NGOs (GED, 2015). The

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<sup>4</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 1 (2017), 2, 3 and 4 (2018)

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Consultant 9 (2018)

case, therefore, presents an opportunity to study the interplay of global and local forces that dictate policy trajectories.

The NSSS further offered an excellent opportunity to avoid problems often involved in studying policymaking in Bangladesh. It is commonly established that bureaucrats involved in policy decisions are frequently transferred from ministry to ministry during their careers, a fact which exacerbates the loss of institutional memory in Bangladesh (Aminuzzaman 2013a). However, although the NSSS was published in 2015, its Action Plan was only finalised in 2018. Since I conducted the majority of the data collection for this thesis in 2017-18, the policymaking arena still had people who were involved in forming the policy in 2012-2015, ameliorating institutional memory loss. A second practical advantage in studying the NSSS was the ostensibly ‘benign’ nature of the policy, which made it relatively easier to access data related to its formulation compared to other policies, such as those on national security, for example, or even trade. The NSSS was a source of pride for many who were involved in its drafting. Many stakeholders were keen to share their opinions with me because they took pride in the country’s enviable achievements in poverty reduction. The NSSS, for example, states (GED, 2015, p. xviii):

...[the] record of progress with poverty reduction, human development and living conditions of the poor constitutes a major achievement and as a nation has made Bangladesh proud. It is also a reaffirmation that the development strategy is appropriate and on track.

Despite these advantages, the focus on the NSSS also has a major limitation, which is the policy timeline. Grindle (1980) argues that conflicts—which can be analysed to reveal political dynamics in policymaking—arise at the implementation stage in developing countries rather than at the policymaking stage for two reasons. First, developing countries lack the institutions necessary to aggregate the demands of the wider population; any existing institution is usually under elite control. Second, elites actively discourage popular participation in policymaking, further narrowing the avenues for demand aggregation. Consequently, distributional conflicts materialise at the implementation stage when policies interfere with existing rental streams. Given this study only analyses the political dynamics evident at the policymaking stage, it does not cover the political dynamics visible only at the implementation stage.

Additionally, the study only explores political dynamics at the central government level. It is likely policies are interpreted differently when they travel down to the local government level. However, since the strategy has still largely not been implemented (Razzaque et al., 2020), waiting till the implementation stage would have risked losing the institutional memory of involved actors. Whilst this is therefore a necessary compromise, I am conscious that local level implementation dynamics are missing in the analysis.

## **1.4 Methodology**

This thesis adopts a critical realist position. The fundamental tenet of this position is that a reality independent of our perception of it exists but—since we are constrained by our social and historical location in accessing the reality—our pursuit of knowledge is a continuous attempt at describing reality, where each new attempt builds on previous ones (Cruickshank, 2003). Three aspects of critical realist thinking were particularly useful for this study. First, critical realist authors have argued scholarship is not value-neutral but neither does it have to be ideologically biased (Sayer, 2011). Given the case study is from my home country, and depends on a detailed understanding of its politics and history—both the subject of extreme contention (Hossain, 2017)—claiming value-neutral objectivity from the start would be mendacious. Instead, being continuously and critically aware of my biases, repeatedly questioning my pre-existing and newly formed assumptions, and ensuring that I “record—and record often” throughout the process was helpful (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020, p. 3). For instance, I had begun the project expecting to see NGOs playing a major role in the NSSS and when my findings showed them to be largely absent, I began to question not just my findings but also my own statist bias, which privileged the role of the state. It was only after I read another author, Karim (2018a), who showed that there are indications NGOs are now less powerful in the country than before that I was more comfortable with my own analysis. Although I still make no claims to complete objectivity on the grounds that this is impossible, the reflexivity suggested by the critical realist approach arguably helped me provide a closer analysis of reality than I could have otherwise.

Second, since all researchers tend to instinctively view the world with pre-set theories in mind, critical realism encourages openly approaching the data through theory to make explicit these instinctive processes (Cruickshank, 2003). I had read about the theories of welfare state development and the political settlements framework in the first year of my PhD, and had been exposed to the theoretical debates surrounding targeting/universalism and food/cash transfers at ILO during the first phase of fieldwork. It is only when available theories fail to explain the data that “puzzles emerge” (Decoteau, 2016, p. 65). When I encountered several puzzles in the NSSS (see section 1.5), it was clear they only seemed puzzling to me because I was familiar with particular strands of literature that made them seem as such. For my interlocutors in the policymaking arena, these ‘puzzles’ were simply ‘the way things are’. A key lesson from this is that it is possible other decisions in the NSSS require further analysis too but since I did not detect a theory-data mismatch, they may have been overlooked.

Third, critical realist scholarship expresses a keen interest in identifying causal mechanisms, or ‘how’ and ‘why’ aspects of the research (Gorski, 2013). It intends to shift away from assuming that correlation is causation, and to instead look for processes, hidden or expressed, to explain why certain relationships between agents and structures are observed. This mode of thinking was especially helpful in exploring ‘ideas’ as a key variable of analysis since they are not always articulated explicitly in the raw data. As a result of the drive to explain ‘why’, different chapters in this thesis harness a broad range of data from multiple sources to explain the reasons decisions were made, instead of simply outlining the decisions. This proved time-consuming, requiring what Falleti (2006, p. 12) calls the “sociological or political imagination” of the researcher and what Decoteau (2017, p. 68) considers “theoretical intuition” when solving puzzles.

### **1.4.1 Data collection and analysis**

Critical realism is not methodologically prescriptive, allowing the research question to dictate the choice of the most appropriate method (Danermark et al., 2002). For this research, I followed in the footsteps of more recent scholarship on the politics of social protection, which rely on a combination of research methods including key



informant interviews, document analysis, and participant observation (Abdulai, 2020; Bukenya and Hickey, 2020; Ouma and Adésinà, 2018; Pruce and Hickey, 2020). Table 1.1 lists the details of each tool for this research. During fieldwork, I spent six months in Thailand (July-December 2017) interning with the ILO and six months in Bangladesh (April-September 2018). The ILO internship was crucial in providing me with access to key informants. By becoming embedded within the development system and its prominent organisations, I gained legitimacy in the eyes of many interviewees. I chose Thailand instead of Bangladesh for the first phase of my research because it is the regional hub for many multilateral agencies that work on social protection policies. Thus, many stakeholders—particularly non-Bangladeshis but also Bangladeshis—who had moved away from Bangladesh after the NSSS was finalised in 2015 visited Thailand regularly, where I could interview them.

<b>Data collection tools</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Details</b>
Document analysis	2017-2020	Internal memos, reports, meeting minutes, books, etc. sourced from interviewees and online
61 key informant interviews	August-December 2017; May-October 2018; January-February 2019	In-person: Bangladesh, Switzerland; Skype: UK; In-person and Skype: Thailand; see Appendix A
Participant/Observer in 6 settings	See Table 1.2	

TABLE 1.1: Data collection details

### ***Document analysis***

Document analysis was one of the main tools of data collection. This is because document analysis is particularly useful for producing thick descriptions of single events, which this study aims to do (Yin, 1994). Two major advantages of document analysis are that documents are stable, meaning they remain unchanged throughout the research process, and they provide a source of exact data in terms of names, dates, and past events (Bowen, 2009). These advantages proved true for this research as well. On the other hand, documentary analysis is often considered inferior to interview data because documents arguably represent the ‘official’ versions of events instead of interviews, which provide more uncensored versions (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004). This was not the case in this research for two reasons. First, I collected and analysed multiple iterations of the same document – including, crucially, multiple iterations of the NSSS (see Table 4.1 for a summary of the evolution of the NSSS).

The changes between the iterations were indicative of contestations and provided some of the most accurate descriptions subsequently explored during interviews. Second, most documents were contemporaneous. They recorded versions, albeit official versions, of what happened at the time, without the superimposed meanings that can get attached to events in hindsight. This sometimes provided a clearer perspective than interviews.

I amassed nearly 15 kilograms of documents covering the period between 2005 to 2020, with the majority falling between 2011-2015. My inclusion criterion was whether the document related to the NSSS in any way. They contained ministerial meeting minutes, reports produced by various consultants and agencies, published books, and internal memos written by various agencies. I sourced most of these documents from interviewees, who gave me those they had access to and were willing to share, and many from the internet where several organisations routinely upload documents. The documents were coded multiple times (see the analysis section below). The resulting information was used to reconstruct the timeline of the NSSS' development and chart the positions taken by the relevant organisations and individuals with respect to the contestations addressed in this thesis.

The documents in the public domain did not prove ethically challenging to use but I considered the use of internal memos that were not in the public domain more carefully. Since, as a rule, these memos set out organisational positions (rather than personal positions) and documented events (rather than personal contestations), the question of anonymity was irrelevant. In the rare instances where people, such as bureaucrats, became relevant to the contestation at an individual level, I have chosen to anonymise the identity of the person. The only exception I made is with the identity of the Prime Minister. First, it is because I believe she is powerful enough to weather any very unlikely fall outs from this doctoral study, and second, because knowing her views about the poor and social protection are sufficiently in the public interest to warrant discarding anonymity.

### *Participant/Observer*

Participant observation was a valuable tool for this study. Mason (2017) argues that for a researcher, there is a continuum between being a full observer and a full participant. Since in this study I occupied various parts of the continuum depending on the setting – I have chosen the term ‘participant/observer’ to describe my activities. Being a participant/observer can create an ethical dilemma regarding how much to share with the event participants about why the researcher is in attendance and, thus, receive their informed consent (Bryman, 2012). Since I did not wish to conduct covert ethnography, I was always frank about my reasons for attending any event, especially with the organisers. Nonetheless, given some of these were large, well attended events, it is possible my identity was not clear to all the participants (Table 1.2 details the six settings where I was a participant/observer). This is why, except in cases where the information was already in the public domain, I have anonymised the participant/observer data so that individuals are not identifiable.

<b>Participant/Observer settings</b>	<b>Details</b>
Two-week Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI) course <i>Designing and Implementing Social Transfer Programmes</i> , Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 1-14, 2017	A sizeable Bangladeshi government and non-government delegation attended. The government delegation consisted of mid-level bureaucrats.
Two-day high-level UNESCAP conference <i>Strategic Dialogue on Building Inclusive Social Protection Systems in Asia and the Pacific</i> , Bangkok, Thailand, November 14-17, 2017	Although the Bangladesh delegation comprised mostly NGO officials, several of the non-Bangladeshi speakers had previously been involved with the NSSS.
During key informant interviews, May-September 2018	Interviews almost always took place at the interviewees’ offices, providing an opportunity to briefly observe their organisational culture.
Local Consultative Working Group on Poverty meeting, Planning Commission, Dhaka, Bangladesh, May 30, 2018	Attended by high ranking bureaucrats and senior donor officials overseeing their agency’s social protection portfolio.
Cabinet Division, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, and UNICEF’s <i>Stakeholder consultation on Policy options and operational design of a child benefit programme in Bangladesh</i> , Dhaka, Bangladesh, September 12, 2018	Attended by donors, bureaucrats, think tanks, international consultants, NGOs, and UN agency officials.
Three-day ILO, UNICEF, and ODI joint <i>International Conference on Universal Child Grants</i> , Geneva, Switzerland, February 6-8, 2019	Bangladesh delegation consisted of several senior bureaucrats and country-level UN agency officials.

TABLE 1.2 Details of participant/observer settings

Notwithstanding the ethical dilemma, there were two major advantages of using this data collection tool. First, besides the observations made during the interviews, all the other settings included both local and foreign stakeholders, allowing an interesting albeit brief insight into the dynamics between the two groups that I refer to in the later chapters. Second, since the NSSS' Action Plan development was still ongoing when I conducted fieldwork, I was able to observe meetings and take part in courses that were very similar to what took place during the NSSS' development, involving many of the same actors and organisations. This proved to be an unexpected but welcome insight into the day to day affairs of policymaking. Neither document analysis nor key informant interviews were able to capture similar insights, demonstrating the unique value of the researcher's physical presence in the research settings.

I took copious observational notes in the six settings that helped me contextualise the documentary data, much of which was produced in similar settings. Subsequently, the observational notes were coded in the same fashion as the documents and the interview data, and analysed alongside them (see the analysis section below). These events were also useful in meeting officials involved with the NSSS whom I later interviewed.

### ***Key informant interviews***

A major data collection tool was key informant interviews. Since policy negotiations happen behind closed doors, learning about the contestations directly from the people who participated in them help to gauge their beliefs and ideologies (Beamer, 2002) as well as get a thorough account of events not readily available from other sources (May, 2001). These were certainly advantages that the key informant interviews brought to this study. However, although such interviews can answer 'why' questions very well, problems with recollection, overstating one's importance, subjective disagreements, and biases can make the data unreliable (Beach and Pedersen, 2013). I countered this by triangulating each interview data with the data from other interviewees as well as with documentary evidence. In many instances, I was able to find two interviewees who had clashed on an issue during the policy negotiations. By checking one interviewee's version of events against the other, and then against the

‘official version’ in the documents, I was able to get a more complete picture than if I had to rely on only account.

I conducted 61 key informant interviews with bureaucrats, donor officials, NGO actors, labour activists, factory owners, UN agency officials, consultants, and experts (see Appendix A for a breakdown). The sampling was conducted in several ways. Prior to the PhD, I worked as a researcher for an international NGO in Bangladesh. In the course of my professional work, I had met a bureaucrat and a UN agency official who were heavily involved with the NSSS’ development. At the very beginning, I interviewed these individuals. Since the policy arena is a closed system, I depended on snowballing from them and from subsequent interviewees to find new people to interview until I felt data saturation was reached. Every interview ended by asking ‘Who else do you think I should talk to?’ and interviewees not only suggested names, many took the additional step to introduce me to others. Without their selfless generosity, this research could not have been completed. I also constructed lists of people who appeared in the documents I collected and interviewed several of them. Finally, in participant/observer settings, it was relatively easy to find people involved with social protection policies in Bangladesh and interview them.

However, an influential group of actors, politicians, is absent from my sample as I had no access to political circles. This is because, in Bangladesh, politicians are not accessible to the public. Although the social cachet of being a University of Cambridge student stood me in good stead with bureaucrats (see section 1.4.2), it was not enough to make politicians accessible to a mere graduate student like me, and no one I asked even entertained it as a possibility. Therefore, for information on politicians, I depended on documentary evidence and the testimonies of interviewees who had had direct dealings with them. Whilst politicians are missing, I paid particular attention to include bureaucrats in the sample since—given the dearth of policymaking literature on Bangladesh—the vantage point of the state is often missing from studies of social protection policies.

The interviews were semi-structured, usually beginning with the broad question ‘What are your memories of the NSSS’ development?’ or, for interviewees who were not directly involved, ‘What do you know of the NSSS?’ Subsequent questions would

stem from the interviewees' response as well as my understanding at the time about what the contestations around the NSSS involved (Appendix D lists the preliminary list of questions I would start with). However, I was not limited to these questions, and instead took my cue from the direction the interview was going. In terms of length, the interviews were an hour-long on average but a few lasted up to 3 hours. A minority of the key informants were interviewed twice in successive years when I felt they could provide more updated data. I have only included the substantial interviews within the 61 and discarded some which were too irrelevant or too short.

Most interviews took place in the interviewees' offices but some were conducted at more neutral venues like cafeterias. In his ethnographic study of the development of ILO's social protection floor, Deacon (2013) describes collecting data over lunch with key individuals. I found such 'strategic' lunches a valuable tool as well because sharing a meal diminished the power differential between the outsider and the insider – 'breaking bread' together has a long history of fostering communitarian feelings (Asadullah, 2020; Purnell and Jenkins, 2013). At lunch, interviewees were less self-conscious and more willing to share their views and recollections.

I provided all interviewees with details about myself and my project as well as my supervisor's contact details. I also sought their consent to audio record them. Whilst most gave written consent, a minority refused. In these cases, I took notes during the interviews and recorded my recollections in voice notes immediately afterwards. Nonetheless, I have been careful about anonymising the interview data when writing up the thesis, frequently referring to interviewees using generic terms like, "a donor official", "a senior bureaucrat", etc. In instances where an individual is identified by name, it is because that information is already available in the public domain and, therefore, I felt I was not violating any ethical commitments. Even in these cases though I have maintained a distinction between what is known publicly and the data the person gave me in interviews, choosing to anonymise the latter.

I had begun the research concerned about the loss of institutional memory – for reasons discussed in section 1.3, this did not prove a major challenge with Bangladeshi interviewees. For non-Bangladeshi interviewees, the problem was exacerbated by a terrorist attack on an upscale café in Dhaka in 2016. Soon after,

many international donor staff were evacuated and relocated. Staff members of one donor agency, for instance, were noticeably inexperienced and therefore very hesitant to speak. A senior official from the agency explained that it was an outcome of hasty staff turnover in response to the terrorist attack, “Handovers were not perfect... you get the sense that there was a fair bit of attrition.”<sup>6</sup> Whilst my preference was in-person interviews, where I found it easier to build rapport, in cases like these, where the interviewees and I could not meet, I resorted to Skype interviews. The interviews were subsequently transcribed, coded, and analysed.

### *Data analysis*

I adopted a blend of narrative and thematic analysis for this study. Thematic analysis, wherein the data is coded topically with emphasis placed on repetitions and theory-related content, is the one of the most common methods of qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2012). However, I quickly realised that fragmenting the data in this thematic fashion was also creating significant loss of meaning. In answer to my open-ended questions about their recollections of the NSSS’ development, for example, interviewees had shared stories that made sense as a whole, rather than in fragments. This is when I incorporated narrative analysis in my analytical toolkit.

Narrative analysis approaches the interview and documentary data as parts of a whole, where the event and its contexts are both given equal weight (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). To this end, I rearranged the data into several broad categories to help build clarity from the outset. The documents, for instance, were arranged in chronological order so I could understand how the concepts and contestations built up over time. Alongside, given the sheer amount of interview data, the interviews were divided into topics (such as ‘food’, ‘labour’, etc.) based on what the interviewee had mostly talked about. This is because not all interviewees had addressed all the topics, with many interviewees providing answers related to their niche fields. This helped to divide the data from the 61 interviews into manageable chunks.

In qualitative analysis, coding is constantly in a state of “potential revision and fluidity” (Bryman, 2021, p. 568). This was definitely the case in this study; the

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with Donor 3 (2018)

documents, in particular, were coded multiple times since my understanding of what the data meant changed over time in an iterative process. To ensure I retained a sense of the broad picture that narrative analysis advocated, I opted to hand code the hard copies of most of the documents I had collected (see Appendix E for a sample photo) and followed a similar strategy of colour coding the soft copies of the interview transcripts, my observation notes, and a minority of the documents. The visual representation helped me understand the sequence of events in NSSS' development far better than the fragmented codes did. However, the fragments from thematic coding subsequently proved to be useful in understanding the particularities of contestations that were not easily parsed from just the narrative analysis.

### **1.4.2 Positionality**

Whilst the problem of access in Thailand was managed by my privileged position as an ILO intern, it was a greater challenge in Bangladesh since I was a complete outsider to the policymaking arena in the country. As I discovered when interviewing bureaucrats, getting physical access to the Secretariat buildings, let alone the bureaucrats within them, is an extremely onerous task.<sup>7</sup> Without a personal introduction or important professional affiliations, securing an appointment is almost impossible. The only officials allowed to issue invitations to the ministry buildings, for example, are those with ranks between Joint Secretary and Secretary, so meeting with more junior bureaucrats meant they had to request their superiors for an invitation, something many juniors were reluctant to do. On days I got an appointment, in most cases I was ushered in quickly and granted about an hour on average to conduct the interview. Had I not been associated with an elite institution like Cambridge, like most others, I too would have had to wait outside the office for hours in order to get a short perfunctory meeting. This has made me reflect often on the question of positionality.

Positionality impacted my research process in multiple ways. Primarily, it helped gain access to closed policymaking spaces. As mentioned above, the connection to an elite institution like Cambridge carried social cachet within the elite development circle at the UN office in Thailand as well as in Bangladesh. When I cold-called a prominent

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<sup>7</sup> Observations during interviews in Dhaka, May-September, 2018



bureaucrat and explained I was a Cambridge PhD student researching the NSSS, he specifically mentioned my university as the reason he acceded to my request for an interview.<sup>8</sup> Another bureaucrat described he had proudly shared with his colleagues that “our NSSS” was being “studied at places like Cambridge!”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Putnam (2012) argues social capital involves a relationship of reciprocity. I had been involved in community organising in Bangladesh before my PhD and, unbeknownst to me, had gained some relevant social capital through those activities. At the end of a long and detailed interview, a senior bureaucrat shared he had agreed to speak to me only because his son had worked with me during my community organising days.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, whilst age and gender can be a barrier in some instances (Manohar et al., 2017), I found being a woman and younger than my mostly male interlocutors particularly helpful. This is because I appeared ‘non-threatening’, which put interviewees at ease even when discussing sensitive political issues. Another way I built rapport was by fluently shifting between English, high Bangla, and colloquial Bangla, as the situation demanded. Whilst colloquial Bangla helped some interviewees feel more comfortable, I found that speaking English established my class credentials.

During and after data collection, I grappled with the question of class identity. When speaking for a class identity to which one does not belong, the literature recommends care and caution (Milner, 2007). I especially considered this issue when interacting with labour activists. However, since I was exercising care and caution across all my interviews, I could not decide on any special steps I could take just for them. Mellor et al. (2014) argue ‘class matching’ engenders empathy in interview settings. When many Bangladeshi interviewees realised I was on a scholarship at the university, it signalled to them that—just like them—I was a middle class Bangladeshi, which further solidified their desire to help me. Since positionality can create biases (Takacs, 2003), I have had to be reflexive to ensure my gratitude for the trust they placed in me did not blur my critical lens.

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Civil servant 10 (2018)

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Civil servant 2 (2018)

<sup>10</sup> I was unaware of who his son was until he mentioned him.

### 1.4.3 Ethics

I sought and received approval from the university's ethical approval process where I clarified that the research participants would not be paid, the study's aims would be explained to them, and their informed consent would be obtained in writing. Nonetheless, arguably the most challenging aspect of this research has been its ethical considerations. The conundrum wholly stems from Bangladesh's authoritarian turn in recent years (Riaz, 2019), which has created a climate of fear in the country. Among other issues, criticisms of the liberation war hero and the father of the nation—also the Prime Minister's father—can now land Bangladeshis in jail for 7-14 years; the law is used ruthlessly to police even social media posts (Hasan and Wadud, 2020).

A tactic that authoritarian states, such as China, rely on is uncertainty. People self-censor because a “combination of subtly shifting political winds and the absence of detailed rules for every situation” means it is difficult to predict when one might cross an arbitrary red line manufactured by the state out of thin air (Stern and Hassid, 2012, p. 1236). To survive, people err on the side of caution by treating everything as suspicious. Otherwise, there is no logical reason to suppose a study on a benign topic such as this one could be considered politically sensitive. Nevertheless, many interviewees were afraid. After talking frankly with me—some used euphemisms to refer to sensitive issues, whilst others were more straightforward—several expressed concerns for their safety: “You will protect my identity? Or I will lose my job.”<sup>11</sup> In these moments, I acutely felt a shift in the balance of power between these elite actors and myself. I suddenly held more power than them, and thus more responsibility (Lancaster, 2017).

These considerations have impacted how I have written and talked about political issues in my research. I freely admit to self-censoring in certain areas, without it affecting the thrust of my argument. I have also diligently discarded data where I felt the interviewee might be identifiable. This has included instances of the interviewee recounting conversations where there were only two people in the conversation. I considered these potentially identifiable. For the same reason, Appendix A does not include which organisation any particular interviewee works for or on which date I

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

interviewed them, although it does provide a list of the organisations as well as the year of each interview. Furthermore, like Hossain (2017, p. 18), I am keen to protect myself and my scholarship from charges of partisanship: “It is true that as a study of politics this is necessarily a political book. But I refuse a partisan position.” This is particularly difficult in the hyper-partisan Bangladesh of today. One tactic I have veered towards is ‘over citing’ to demonstrate that historical and political details I write about are not my opinions but that of respected authors. I have also tried to ensure that before accepting any statement any interviewee attributed to the Prime Minister, I checked they were describing incidents they witnessed first-hand instead of offering their opinion or sharing hearsay. I still believe none of my research findings is particularly controversial or even sensitive, and I hope my precautions will prove unnecessary.

## 1.5 Thesis structure

The thesis is divided into nine chapters, including this introduction. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a conceptual framework and introduce the political, economic, and historical contexts of the NSSS’ development. Chapter 4 is the first of the findings chapters, which zooms out to provide an overview of the NSSS’ policymaking process. Chapters 5 through 8 are the remaining findings chapters that zoom in on four key contestations that occurred during the NSSS’ formation, with each chapter explaining a specific puzzle in order to uncover the reasons behind the decisions, and the processes through which the decisions were reflected in the NSSS. The conclusion synthesises the findings to draw some wider conclusions. Throughout I argue that the seemingly apolitical, technical decisions encoded in the NSSS are, in fact, the outcomes of wide-ranging, historically entrenched political contestations that need to be studied at the issue level.

Following this introduction, **Chapter 2** draws on several strands of literature to outline a conceptual framework for this study. The first section discusses the particularities of developing countries’ political and welfare milieu to explain why existing theories of welfare state development, whilst important to the analytical toolkit, are insufficient to explain social protection expansion in these countries today. The second section introduces the adapted political settlement framework and

explains the concepts of power, benefits, institutions, and ideas largely through its lens. An important contribution made to the framework is the concept of *issue-specific settlements*, arising out of prior descriptions in the literature of lower-level political settlements that undergird an overarching elite settlement. In the third and final part of the chapter, two seemingly technical debates are discussed—universalism vs. targeting and food vs. cash transfers—to reveal their inherently political nature.

**Chapter 3** provides a primer on Bangladesh's context. The first section covers an analysis of Bangladesh's achievements on economic and human development indicators despite governance failures. The political history of the nation since independence is discussed next, and important sectors such as the garments industry, agriculture, and the NGOs are introduced. A survey of the country's social protection portfolio is presented before the concept of a '*pro-poor settlement*' is problematised as a vague term requiring clarification from issue-specific settlements.

The first of the findings chapters, **Chapter 4**, zooms out to trace the NSSS' development from 2005 to 2015. It argues that whilst international donors were more prominent in the early stages, they slowly ceded ground to state actors—particularly bureaucrats—as the policymaking process unfolded. The insertion of state actors, bureaucrats as well as politicians, ensured that four key contestations arising from reform proposals were resolved in line with issue-specific settlements in Bangladesh. This chapter questions the degree to which the NSSS is *home grown*.

**Chapter 5** explores the puzzle of why the NSSS and a subsequent effort arising from the NSSS ignored calls to instate universal policies and instead chose targeting under the guise of the oxymoronic term 'targeted universal'. It finds that on the donor front, the World Bank used coercive pressure by threatening to withdraw aid if targeting was not adopted. On the domestic front, a combination of ideas, electoral politics, and bureaucratic pressure ensures an issue-specific '*targeting settlement*' remains strong.

**Chapter 6** introduces the puzzle of how the relatively weak Ministry of Food was able to defend food transfers in the short term whilst pledging to shift to cash transfers in the long term against unified opposition from the World Bank and the powerful Ministry of Finance, who were rooting for a complete and immediate shift to cash

transfers. The explanation lies in a subsistence crisis contract between the elites and the masses that protects rice consumers, and the relative weakness of rice farmers in the *settlement on provisions*.

**Chapter 7** discusses the twin puzzles of why NGOs are mostly missing in the NSSS despite donor exhortations to include them, and how—given their absence—random NGO- and donor-linked programmes eventually managed to find a place in the NSSS. In the last decade, the Bangladeshi state has gained power vis-à-vis the donors and NGOs, which has marginalised the latter in the policymaking arena. In response, NGOs and donors are using ideas as an entry point to exert influence in policymaking, resulting in a particularly weak *settlement on donors and NGOs*.

**Chapter 8** explains the puzzle of why the NSSS and an effort arising from the NSSS both failed to instate social insurance for the workers in the readymade garments industry despite the international pressures generated by the Rana Plaza factory collapse. The *labour exclusionary settlement* arises from the weaknesses of the labour movement, the presence of a state-business nexus, and the hegemony of hypermobile global capital. The key contribution of this chapter is it uncovers the *exclusionary processes* by which the settlement is maintained during policymaking.

I conclude the thesis in **Chapter 9** by revisiting the research questions and summarising my arguments. I also synthesise the findings from all the chapters and situate three significant contributions from this thesis within the broader literature. I end by discussing the limitations of the study and areas of future research.

# CHAPTER 2

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

*“Governments not only ‘power’ (or whatever the verb form of that approach might be); they also puzzle. Policy-making is a form of collective puzzlement on society’s behalf; it entails both deciding and knowing.”*

Hugh Heclo, 1974, p. 305

Although social protection programmes have existed in developing countries since at least colonial times, there has been renewed interest in them in the past two decades (Schmitt, 2020). This has resulted in a wave of developing countries adopting social protection programmes, including national social protection strategies (Bender, Keller and Willing, 2014; Hanlon, Barrientos and Hulme, 2010). This thesis analyses the political dynamics of social protection policymaking in the global South by examining the unfolding process of drafting the NSSS. By focusing on the case of the NSSS in Bangladesh, it traces the complex interaction between the local and global political factors that influence the uptake of these programmes at the country level. In this chapter, I draw on literature from political sociology, theories of welfare state development, politics of development, and development studies to build a conceptual framework to help in answering the overarching research question: *What are the political dynamics behind Bangladesh’s National Social Security Strategy?* This question and the research for this thesis offers a critical analytical lens through which to understand the changing landscapes of social welfare politics in developing countries in the era of neoliberal global capitalism.

A challenge of studying social protection is that a universal definition of the term remains consistently elusive. On the one hand, there is the relatively straightforward: “public actions taken in response to levels of vulnerability, risk, and deprivation which are deemed socially unacceptable within a given polity or society” (Conway, de Haan and Norton, 2000, p. 5). On the other hand, there is the far more complex (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2008, p. 70):

...all initiatives that transfer income or assets to the poor, protect the vulnerable against livelihood risks, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized; with the overall objectives of extending the benefits of economic growth and reducing the economic or social vulnerability of poor, vulnerable and marginalized groups.

For this thesis, the schema in Figure 2.1 is used. It divides social policy into basic service provision and social protection. The broad heading of social protection encompasses social insurance, social assistance, and labour market policies. The difference between social insurance and social assistance is primarily the source of funding (Barrientos and Pellissery, 2014): social insurance is contributory and covers life-course and work-related contingencies whereas social assistance programmes are tax-financed and publicly administered to target poverty and deprivation. The former is more common in developed nations, the latter in developing nations. These divisions are markedly porous and countries adopt different variations as their own (Ornert, 2020). Bangladesh’s National Social Security Strategy mostly deals with social assistance and, to a smaller extent, labour market policies and social insurance.

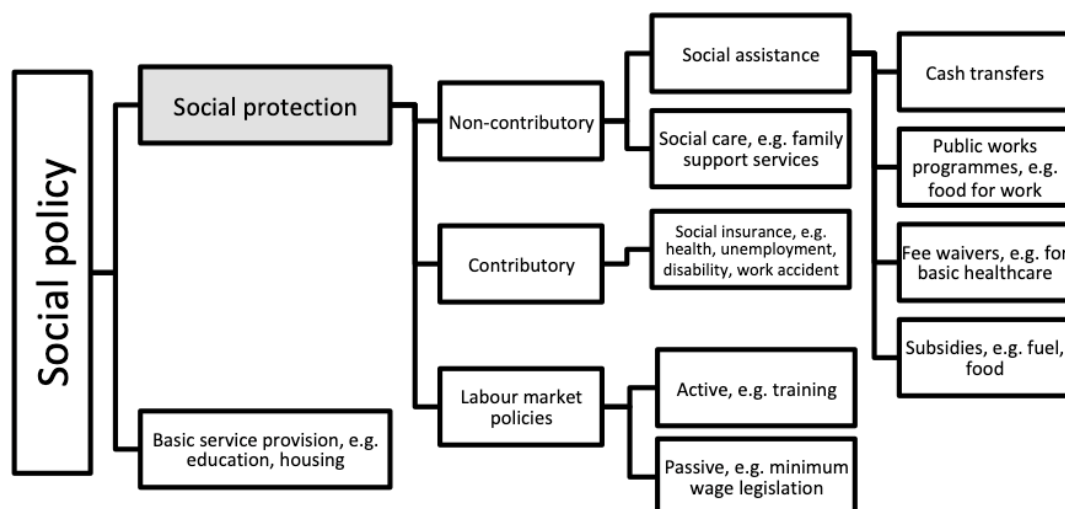


FIGURE 2.1: What is social protection? (adapted from Barrientos and Pellissery, 2014 and Carter et al., 2019)

The rest of the chapter is broadly divided into three parts. In section 2.1, I discuss the theories of welfare state development. I argue that these theories, whilst insightful for understanding significant aspects of social protection politics, are difficult to translate fully to developing country contexts today. Section 2.2, therefore, draws on the political settlements framework as an approach—in fact, an “art” form (Khan, 2018a, p. 640)—that is substantially more developed and sensitive to the particularities of developing countries. The political settlements approach argues that policy trajectories can be explained by a constellation of power and institutions in society, undergirded by ideas, that enable stable forms of rent distribution amongst powerful actors. The four pillars that hold up this framework are power, institutions, ideas, and benefits. In order to accommodate the heterogeneity of social protection politics on the ground, in this thesis, I propose making policy issues the unit of analysis, as opposed to the current focus on elites and policy domains, which has been critiqued for being overly reductive. Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2007) point out that deeply ideological debates are being fought out over ostensibly technical questions about social protection programme design, such as whether programmes ought to be ‘targeted or universal’ or transfers ought to be ‘food or cash’. Therefore, in section 2.3, I discuss these two debates in details. Whilst most of the literature has primarily focused on philosophical and technical justifications, I contend this line of argumentation obfuscates the political nature of the questions.

## **2.1 Theories of welfare state development**

Studying the wave of social protection expansion in developing countries since the 2000s requires understanding the existing theories of welfare state development to gauge their applicability to the new contexts. Mkandawire (2005, p. 16), who advocates merging social policy and developing studies literatures, explains this is necessary to avoid “a lot of reinvention of the wheel, and wasteful and socially costly experimentation with ideas that have been clearly demonstrated to be the wrong ones”. A valid critique of the major welfare state development theories is they are based on early industrialising country contexts (Schmitt, 2020). A key difference between welfare state development in early industrialising countries and the expansion of social protection in developing countries today is early industrialisers built their welfare states before neoliberalism became the dominant economic and



political ideology. Harvey (2005) argues the neoliberal turn can be traced to the 1970s, strengthening by the 1980s, when fiscal austerity, free market, privatisation, deregulation, and free trade were presented as necessary for human and societal flourishing. Whilst neoliberals demand a withdrawal of the state, it is a particular form of withdrawal. The state must withdraw from providing social welfare but must be actively involved in protecting private property, and creating and protecting new markets (Chang and Rowthorn, 1995). In this section, I discuss the most influential welfare state development theories with an eye to the difficulty of translating them to developing country realities that are intertwined with neoliberal orthodoxies. I argue social protection expansion in developing countries is an under-theorised field studying which requires novel frameworks.

Class politics is arguably the most influential explanation for the development of welfare states wherein the power resources theory is particularly prominent (Korpi, 1980, 1989). The main argument is the different classes in society draw on various types of power resources—like the right to vote, the right to organise, access to capital and economic resources (Cousins, 2005)—to form coalitions that further particular policy agendas. Welfare states arose because labour unions and leftist parties organised in social democratic regimes to create successful pro-welfare electoral coalitions (Esping-Andersen, 1985; Korpi, 1989). The degree to which labour can decouple social welfare from the market dictates the nature and extent of state social welfare (Quadango, 1988). Huber and Stephens (2001) proposed the power constellations model, which wove class power along with the structure of the state, state-society relations, historic institutionalism as well as the country's integration into the global economic system to explain the politics of the welfare state; they also considered class politics as the key factor. Evidence from countries in Africa, however, show that class politics is not a convincing thesis to explain the expansion of social protection in developing countries (Kpessa and Béland, 2013; Seekings, 2020a). This is possibly due to two factors. First, developing countries do not yet have a large enough capitalist class to enable vigorous class politics to develop (Sandbrook et al., 2007). Second, the differential effects of global capitalism on the middle and lower classes inhibit cross-class solidarity from forming, with social protection being denied particularly to the poor and informal workers but not to

white-collar or urban workers (Deacon and Cohen, 2011; Seekings and Natrass, 2015).

A functionalist explanation for the rise of the welfare state is that the structural transformation of the economy as a result of industrialisation and modernisation creates a set of conditions that catalyse welfare state formation (Flora and Alber, 1981; Kerr et al., 1960; Rimlinger, 1971; Wilensky, 1975). The logic of industrialism is a popular thesis. It posits that as more people undertake rural-urban migration in response to new modes of production, existing family support networks weaken. To tackle rising social pathologies in industrial centres, governments are forced to roll out welfare programmes that attempt to replace the pre-industrial familial systems of care. Modernisation and industrialisation, however, does not explain variations in the adoption and growth of social welfare in developing countries (Midgley, 1986). Many nations newly independent from colonial powers, for example, adopted ambitious welfare programs despite their impoverished economies (Kpessa and Béland, 2013).

An alternate stream of functionalist explanation from Marxist scholars views the welfare state with suspicion for lulling revolutionary tendencies (Gough, 1979; Offe, 1984). O'Connor (1973) argues welfare states further the capitalist state's accumulation and legitimisation functions. By subsidising workers' social welfare through state coffers, the state excuses capitalists from their duty to maintain their own efficient workforce, which in turn contributes to accumulation. In terms of legitimisation, social security payments pacify workers and increase their contentment with the status quo. However, these accounts are belied by a substantial body of literature that shows workers and leftist parties were at the forefront of demanding state welfare (Esping-Andersen, 1985; Korpi, 1983). Even in the relatively advanced varieties of welfare states in the global South, it is the strength of the leftist parties in Latin America and their weakness in East Asia that explain the spread of basic universalism in the former and the delayed expansion of welfare in the latter (Huber and Niedzwiecki, 2015).

Although older structural accounts have mostly fallen out of favour, newer ones have arisen, chief amongst which is neoliberal global capitalism. The literature is divided on whether global capitalism is a positive, negative, or mostly neutral force in social

welfare spending. Some argue it leads to compensatory social spending as governments respond to increasing economic insecurity amongst domestic workers by buttressing social security (Cameron, 1978). A minority, like Iversen and Cusack (2000), argue it isn't global capitalism per se that impacts welfare expenditure, but the structural changes in the make-up of the economy, like deindustrialisation. Finally, whilst studies do not directly link global capitalism to welfare state retrenchment in industrialised nations (Garrett and Mitchell, 2001), the idea of neoliberal global capitalism can condition governments to act in ways that make welfare retrenchment a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ferge, 2001; Hay, Watson and Wincott, 1999).

However, as mentioned before, many of these studies investigate countries where welfare states developed before neoliberalism became dominant. Rolling back welfare is a fundamentally different political exercise than introducing welfare (Pierson, 1996; Starke, 2006), so countries like Bangladesh with a nascent to non-existent welfare state may indeed be facing the pressures of global capitalism in a profoundly different fashion. Rudra (2008), for example, demonstrates that social welfare expenditure is very sensitive to international market pressures in developing countries, but the effect is stratified – low skilled, low-income workers suffer disproportionately in comparison to their white-collar, middle-class counterparts. Thus countries with high proportions of low skilled workers, like Bangladesh, spend less on welfare due to global capitalism (Rudra, 2002). She attributes this difference to the large surplus labour in poor countries, the fragmented nature of the labour market, domestic politics, and pre-existing institutional configurations (Rudra, 2002, 2008). How a country integrates into the global economic system is also significant. Rudra (2007) argues countries that pursued an export-led industrialisation strategy, such as countries in East Asia, faced cost containment pressures. As a result, they focused on producing market-oriented productive workers—through health and education provisions—with limited social protection, treating employer interests superior to the employees'. Conversely, countries following protectionist import substitution industrialisation strategies, like those in Latin America, were better shielded from international cost competitions. So they could extend social protection to interest groups with greater mobilising power, like the urban working and middle classes, but excluding peasants and workers in the informal sector (Haggard and Kaufman, 2008). It is, in fact, unclear whether labour can act as a unified class in countries, like

Bangladesh, where labour fragmentation is endemic, and exacerbated by local and global capitalists (Ashraf and Prentice, 2019). To understand these dynamics, Chapter 8 addresses the role of labour in Bangladesh's social protection system.

Institutionalist scholars argue that how actors, both within and outside the state, act depends on the institutional rules and norms within which they operate (Immergut, 1992; Skocpol, 1992). Historical institutionalists have also drawn attention to the temporal aspects of welfare state development, where path dependence and sequencing affects their final design (Pierson, 2004). Whilst illuminating, in terms of applicability to developing countries, these accounts have two weaknesses. First, informal institutions are not well integrated into existing welfare state theories. The focus on formal institutions and processes, although salient, conceals crucial informal mechanisms, like clientelism, that drive policymaking in developing countries (Grindle and Thomas, 1989). Second, the existing accounts do not centre supranational institutions, like international financial institutions, whose influence has been pivotal on welfare provisioning in developing countries (Cammett and Sasmaz, 2016). Any attempt to understand social protection expansion in developing countries must take into account informal institutions as well as supranational institutions that many existing theories of welfare state development do not clearly account for.

## **2.2 Political settlements**

Given the above limitations of existing theories, recent literature on social protection expansion and politics in developing countries has adopted the political settlements approach. Political settlements developed as an analytical framework out of Mushtaq Khan's critique of new institutionalism in the mid-1990s (Khan, 1995). It is used both in peace and conflict studies and development studies (Bell and Pospisil, 2017; Hickey et al., 2020; Pospisil and Menocal, 2017; Gray, 2019). A political settlement is defined as (Khan, 2010, p. 20):

...an interdependent combination of a structure of power and institutions at the level of a society that is mutually 'compatible' and also 'sustainable' in terms of economic and political viability.

A political settlement allows the distribution of benefits amongst contending factions to reflect the underlying power relations and institutional arrangements present in society (Khan, 2018a). Subsequently, Lavers and Hickey (2016) expanded the remit of political settlements beyond domestic politics to include transnational actors and also added ideas as a variable to propose their ‘adapted political settlement framework’. In section 2.2.5, this study proposes adding *issue-specificity* to the adapted political settlements framework to better accommodate heterogeneity in analysis. Incorporating these updates, this study’s understanding of political settlement is it is *a stable and interdependent constellation of power relations, institutional arrangements, and ideas centred on a specific policy issue that generates rents for national and international actors*. Therefore, there are four pillars of political settlements (see Figure 2.2): distribution of holding power, formal and informal institutions, distribution of benefits, and ideas. All four are discussed below.

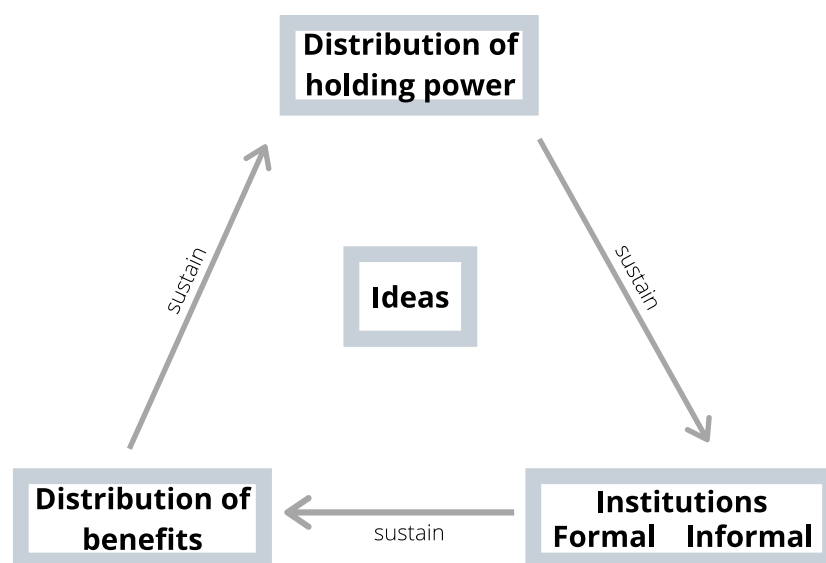


FIGURE 2.2: Political settlement (adapted from Khan, 2010, p. 25)<sup>12</sup>

Since its introduction, the concept has been used across a variety of policy domains in developing countries, covering such diverse issues as economic and industrial policy (Gray, 2013; Kjaer, 2015; Whitfield and Buur, 2014), gender (O'Rourke, 2017), education (Hossain et al., 2017; Languille, 2016), urbanisation (Goodfellow, 2018), and housing (Croese, 2017). For a long time, however, political settlements literature

<sup>12</sup> Since the politics of creation can differ from the politics of sustaining a policy (Hickey, 2007, 2008), unlike Khan's diagram, the figure focuses on processes of sustaining not creating. This is because this study is about the NSSS, which concerned existing programmes, not creating them anew (GED, 2015).

did not provide much insight into why elites may extend social protection to the non-elites. Some early explanations are that social protection should be considered as surplus spoils that the elites do not need, or that social protection is extended to ensure regime survival (Hickey, Sen and Bukenya, 2015). Whilst recently there has been a proliferation of political settlement analysis of social protection, it has largely focused on sub-Saharan Africa, with South Asia, and certainly Bangladesh, remaining largely understudied (Hickey et al., 2020). Instead, the literature on political settlements in Bangladesh covers diverse topics like economic growth (Khan, 2013), ready-made garments industry (Ahmed, Greenleaf and Sacks, 2014), education (Hossain et al., 2017), political violence (Hassan and Nazneen, 2017), and social safety nets implementation (Rezvi, 2020). Admittedly, the broad range of research areas the concept has been used in has created significant confusion about its core concepts and their usages (Behuria, Buur and Gray, 2017; Gray, 2019). Some of these debates are outlined below to explain how the framework is used in this study.

### **2.2.1 Power**

A political settlement is a durable distribution of holding power and institutions that is reproducible over time. Power is an “essentially contested” concept (Lukes, 2005, p. 14). This section argues the political settlement framework considers power as domination, power to be relational, and power to be visible through contestations. The power of international as well as national actors is considered relevant to settlements.

Power is conceptualised in political settlements as ‘domination’ or ‘power over’ others (Haugaard, 2012). Scott (2008) differentiates between holding and exercising power. In that vein, Khan (2010) argues it is the distribution of holding power of organisations that is key to political settlements, as opposed to the exercising of it, which is incidental. Holding power is “the capability of an individual or group to engage and survive in conflicts” (Khan, 2010, p. 6). How actors deploy power in the arenas of conflict is fundamental to understanding how political settlements work because the constellation of winners and losers arising out of the conflict dictate the contours of the settlement (Gray, 2019). In fact, one of the recommended ways of conducting a political settlement analysis is to chart historical political contestations a group has been involved in order to gauge their actual holding power in conflict

(Gray, 2018). In this study, the negotiations surrounding the NSSS form the arena of conflict amongst a range of actors that allows us to study social protection politics in Bangladesh. Thus the political contestations that actors in the NSSS negotiations were historically involved with have been charted in the following chapters to gauge their holding power.

Power resources, found unequally distributed in any given setting, are leverages used to influence the outcomes of conflicts. What constitutes a power resource is subject to debate. Korpi (1980) divides the power resources in capitalist democracies to the control of the means of production and the organisational capacity of workers; Khan (2018a) argues power resources are the effective mobilisation capacities of any group. Behuria, Buur and Gray (2017) consider ideology, rents, capacity to commit violence, and economic structures as resources. Veto powers gleaned from institutional configurations are resources too (Tsebelis, 2002). The most convincing articulation, however, is Dahl's (1966, p. 639) who argues "almost anything that possesses value" to help an agent prevail in a conflict is a power resource, including "money, wealth, social standing, honor, reputation, legal status, knowledge, cognitive abilities, information, coercive capacities, organizations, means of communication". From this vantage point, power is always relational – being able to leverage more resources than the opponents is what makes an actor more powerful than others.

International actors were not originally included in political settlements (Khan, 2010). However, Lavers and Hickey (2016) argued developing countries are subject to the whims of international powers that impact settlements. The power of aid donors is visible in their decades of interventionism in developing countries – sometimes openly using coercion, sometimes in the guise of national ownership. For instance, starting in the early 1980s, international financial institutions forced structural adjustment programmes on to poor countries as a condition for receiving aid (Whitfield, 2009). The failure of the donors' neoliberal policy prescriptions resulted in the immiseration of vast swathes of populations across developing countries (Harrigan, Mosley and Teye, 1995; Easterly, 2001). To tackle the spectre of coercion, donors then began encouraging a particular form of 'national ownership': aid receiving governments would control which policies they enacted but would also be committed to implementing policies that were externally imposed (Whitfield,

2009). An example is the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which were superficially drafted in a participatory fashion with civil society involvement but wholly reflected donor priorities (Lazarus, 2008). Given today it is again aid donors who are vigorously promoting social protection across the developing world, debates about donor coercion vs. voluntary and participatory adoption of national social protection policies are inevitable (Adesina, 2020). This study thus addresses aid donors in Chapters 4-7.

A major debate in political settlement literature centres on how to identify the moment when the distribution of power solidifies or, in other words, when a settlement has been reached (Kelsall, 2018; Khan, 2018a, 2018b). Keen to retain a commonsensical understanding of the term, Kelsall (2018) suggested the definition of political settlement should be limited to formal bargains that the actors ‘intend’ to honour – agreements that subsequently endure an arbitrary period of five years can be labelled as political settlements. Given the arbitrariness of this definition, Khan (2018b) suggests that reaching a point in time when an arrangement of power distribution has become ‘reproducible’ should be the key criterion that decides whether a settlement has been reached. A political settlement thus is “a stable distribution of power across organizations” (Khan, 2018a, p. 653) that “reproduces itself over time” (p. 641). As long as the power distribution is durable, an identifiable formal pact leading to it is irrelevant. This is because complex disputes among multiple agents may not necessarily deliver any overt pacts; instead, settlements may simply reveal themselves as path dependent ‘ways of doing things’. Furthermore, overt agreements themselves are no guarantees of compliance, nor are they guarantees against informal distortions of the agreed-upon rules, so they may not yield any consequent distributional regime reflecting the agreement (Khan, 2018b). In such instances, fixating on a formal pact may prove to be a red herring.

The ‘reproducibility’ and ‘durability’ aspect has important methodological implications. Political settlements on social welfare in developing countries are influenced by, among other factors, donor caprice (Hickey and Seekings, 2020), domestic electoral calculus (Jacob and Pedersen, 2018), and prevailing ideological fashions (Lavers, 2018), which continually reshape them. Therefore, it is important to differentiate between the transient and durable types of changes to the constellation of



power and institutions since only the latter is a change in the political settlement. A political settlement changes if changes in the constellation of power and institutions create “significant changes in economic or political outcomes” (Khan, 2018a, p. 641). This can happen either through a sudden crisis, such as the end of Apartheid in South Africa driving the extension of pension to the black population (Hickey, 2009) or as a result of a long process of incremental change (Lindblom, 1959). The latter implies a political settlement is necessarily dynamic, and can even incorporate violence, as long as the violence does not substantially disrupt the institutions necessary to reproduce the settlement (Khan, 2018b). Individual policies that seem to run counter to the logic of the political settlement must therefore be monitored to see whether they reproduce over time and if they are implemented faithfully (Khan, 2018a). Methodologically, this suggests that a political settlement analysis is best done by combining a snapshot of the policy milieu at a particular time accompanied by tracing a broader panorama of the policy’s historical development and subsequent trajectory. As a result, in the latter four findings chapters, I provide the historical development of each settlement as well as, where available, the related policy developments arising out of the NSSS to demonstrate the existence of the four settlements that impacted the NSSS.

### **2.2.2 Institutions**

Alongside power, the other major pillar of the political settlements framework is institutions. An institutionalist perspective posits that the structure within which decisions are made have considerable staying power, and change is neither immediate nor without trade-offs (Krasner, 1988). Institutions carry out this function by establishing the rules of the game, which limit the choices available to agents (North, 1990). Along with giving important insights on why informal institutions are created, a political settlement approach draws on both rational choice and historical institutionalism to explain how actors respond to institutions.

Formal institutions are more efficacious in the developed world and include rules that dictate how organisations operate as well as rules about how the formal rules can be changed (Khan, 2010). In contrast to formal institutions, informal institutions are shaped by rules that are not strictly codified but are, nevertheless, followed systematically enough to be analytically identifiable (Khan, 2011). In developing

countries, informal institutions are enormously important, at times even shaping formal institutions (Casson, Giusta and Kambhampati, 2010). The crucial insight the political settlements framework provides is that informal institutions develop in response to the failure of formal institutions to divide rents amongst actors in a way that reflects the actors' organisational power (Khan, 2010, 2018a). The stability of an institutional arrangement, therefore, is dependent on its ability to reflect the power distribution of interest groups that can potentially benefit from the arrangement.

Behuria, Buur and Gray (2017, p. 511) argue clientelism in developing countries is a result of the "misalignment between the formal institutions of the state and the ways that powerful groups organize to make claims on the state". This can happen in both democratic and authoritarian regimes. In democracies, clientelist institutional forms can develop when voters expect elected representatives to deliver patronage (Cheeseman, 2015). Clientelism can also exist in competitive authoritarian regimes where patronage helps secure the consent of the citizens in favour of the ruler (Desai, Olofsgård and Yousef, 2007). Once a rental stream is established, interest groups seek to institutionalise it so they can continue to amass the rents in perpetuity (Rothstein, 1996). However, if the power constellation changes, these new institutions will also stop being effective and a new round of contestations will create a new institutional arrangement. This is why, Khan (2010) argued, the donor-imposed good governance agenda failed in the early noughties.<sup>13</sup> Externally imposed formal institutional arrangements, however well intentioned, will inevitably be modified on the ground unless they match existing power structures. The importance of informal institutions is particularly addressed in Chapter 6.

Two major strands in the literature theorise about the relationship between agents and institutions: rational choice and historical institutionalisms. From the rational choice perspective, self-interest motivates agents to create institutions (Eriksson, 2011). In contrast, historical institutionalists believe agents act in response to the constraints presented by institutions, which are outcomes of prior historical contestations (Skocpol, 1995). Since the political settlements framework argues that agents disrupt formal institutions to establish informal institutions to protect their rental streams, there is an element of rational choice institutionalism in it (Whitfield et al., 2015).

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<sup>13</sup> For detailed treatments of the good governance agenda, see Doornbos (2001) and Grindle (2017).

However, by incorporating power, time horizons, and path dependence, insights from historical institutionalism also contribute to the framework. Political settlements draw on both strands to suggest that even though agents create institutions to serve their interests, their ability to benefit from the institutions will depend on their relative power at that specific point in time, which is an outcome of historical political developments (Gray, 2019).

Agents, according to rational choice theorists, cooperate benignly and voluntarily to construct institutions to solve collective action problems (Shepsle, 2006). This view, however, does not take into account the structural milieu inhabited by agents that render some agents more powerful than others (Moe, 2005). It is likely more powerful agents impose their preferences to create institutions favourable to themselves. Given political settlement analysis is supremely conscious of power and how historical processes shape power, historical institutionalism's focus on temporality and sequencing contributes significant insights to it (Pierson, 2016). Historical institutionalism also accommodates a much longer time horizon than rational choice institutionalism, which deals with specific, time-limited events (Katznelson and Weingast, 2005). Khan's (2018b) argument that a constellation of power and institutions is a settlement only if it is durable specifically requires a long time horizon to test for durability. He insists on charting the historical evolution of power and institutions, going as far back as the colonial era, to identify political settlements (Khan, 2010). Seekings (2020b), for example, explains the political settlement shaping the conservative nature of Botswana's welfare regime by tracing its origins to the ideas circulating amongst elites during colonialism that subsequently evolved through several iterations of drought relief programmes.

Unless there is a sudden disruption at a critical juncture, change is a relatively slow process in political settlements, which can accommodate small changes at the margins without an outright change in the settlement (Khan, 2018a). The phenomenon demonstrates a degree of stickiness of the outcomes of contestations, which is explained by historical institutionalist scholars as path dependence. Path dependence posits that once a policy goes down a particular path, the benefits of keeping on that path progressively increase, even as the costs of shifting to an alternative route soar (Pierson, 2000). An example is the establishment of early welfare states following

fierce contestation amongst interest groups (Huber and Stephens, 2001). The welfare states encoded new rules of the game, which affected politics downstream because welfare recipients formed new interest groups that, over time, become entrenched. New entrants to the political arena faced fundamentally different rules, with different rewards and penalties, than older entrants who did not have to deal with welfare recipients as an established interest group. This is why welfare states successfully resisted retrenchment at the turn of the neoliberal era (Pierson, 1996). Winners of early contestations have an advantage in winning subsequent contestations due to institutional advantages they build into the social fabric, as Huber and Stephens (2012) find for Latin American welfare systems. However, if the power structure of society changes, this stable pathway becomes brittle (Khan, 2018a). Therefore, the latter four findings chapters all pay close attention to historical processes to explain the power of interest groups as well as the institutional milieu in which they operate.

### **2.2.3 Ideas**

Although ‘ideas’ are a new addition to the political settlements framework, the variable is now treated on par with power and institutions. Lavers and Hickey (2016) and Lavers (2018) introduced ideas to the framework to explain how political settlements develop, endure, and influence policy choices. This section addresses the utility of ‘ideas’, whilst noting the methodological challenges of studying them.

Ideas are “causal beliefs” that are products of cognitive understandings of the material world that guide agents’ actions (Béland and Cox, 2011, p. 3). In Khan’s (2010) original conceptualisation of political settlements, agents acted to increase their rents bound by the institutional configuration they operate in and their relative holding power in the face of contestation. Ideas, if they mattered at all, were merely tools the elites cynically deployed to further their interests. This conceptualisation did not consider that at any given time in any given institutional setting, an agent can make a range of possible choices since, lacking certainty about the future, a degree of conjecture is inevitable. Therefore, a settlement is not deterministic (Lavers, 2018). It is, in fact, logical to argue that the agent’s final decision is mediated by her understanding of her available choices and their potential outcomes, i.e. her ideas of what to do and what will happen if she does (Parsons, 2007). Unlike constructivists

(Hay, 2011; Schmidt, 2011), I do not claim that the agents' material interests are socially constructed. As I argued in Chapter 1, a critical realist position accepts that a reality exists independent of our perception of it—therefore the agent's material interests exist—but her understanding of what they are and how to further them is subject to her ideas at a given point in time. Adopting this position helps curtail the excesses of postmodernist thought—where “‘text’ appears without context” (Schmidt, 2011, p. 60) and reality simply becomes a figment of one's imagination—without veering into the over-determinism of structural and institutional explanations.

Several typologies of ideas have been proposed. Schmidt (2008, p. 306), for example, divides ideas into cognitive (“what is and what to do”) and normative types (“what is good or bad” and so “what one ought to do”). For this study on policymaking, Mehta's (2011) disaggregated typology, going from the particular to the abstract, is more useful. He draws on Hall (1993) and Kingdon (1984) to divide ideas into: policy solutions, which attempt to solve pre-defined problems; problem definitions, which are used to frame social issues and, in doing so, prioritise some problems and solutions, whilst excluding others; and, overarching paradigms or zeitgeist that provide a “coherent set of assumptions” about economic, social, and political institutions in a society (Béland, 2005, p. 8).

A methodological challenge of using ‘ideas’ as an analytical variable is the difficulty inherent in separating ideational causality from institutional and structural forces. Parsons (2007, p. 116) argues that charting the historical development of a decision and demonstrating, amongst a range of available options within the institutional rules, the fact that the agent chose a particular one is robust proof of their “adherence to one interpretation... that led them to a certain action”. This can be illustrated using Rwanda's introduction of the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme, a social protection bundle comprising public works, cash transfers, and financial services. Lavers (2020b) finds the government proactively pursued the policy because the elites subscribed to the idea that rising poverty and inequality could threaten their rule. To safeguard regime stability, the government chose social protection as the policy with which to reduce poverty and inequality. Here, the elite's assessment of their interest was driven by an idea of existential threats in the form of poverty and inequality, which could be solved by the idea of social protection. It is possible to imagine that

were different ideas to take hold amongst the elite, they would make different choices, as is the case in countries that do not decide social protection is the cure to social ills or, indeed, view poverty and inequality as existential threats to the ruling order.

A second limitation of ideational scholarship in policy studies is that only ideas which have been actualised get studied since they tend to be most visible in decision-making outcomes (Mehta, 2011). Simply studying the outcomes of policymaking, as opposed to their development process, do not allow us to identify failed ideas that did not pass into policy documents. I mitigate this challenge by studying how several pre-existing debates unfolded in Bangladesh, allowing me to chart both failed and successful ideas in the contestation. Nevertheless, I am conscious there are must be other ideas that did not enter the policymaking arena at all, not even as failed ones. Since it is impossible to account for infinite ideational possibilities, I consider my attempt to chart overtly failed ideas along with successful ones to be a practical compromise.

Another common concern about ideas is where to place them in the policymaking narrative (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993). On one end of the spectrum, ideas only matter once interest-based explanations have been exhausted (North et al., 2007). Ideas can also have an intermediate influence. For example, when policymakers choose between competing policies, they may be guided by ideas, especially expert opinions from epistemic communities who are “professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge” (Haas, 1992, p. 3). Members of these communities have the same principles and causal beliefs, weigh facts using similar notions of evidentiary validity, and share a common policy enterprise. On the opposite end of the spectrum, ideas have primacy, i.e. actors coalesce around ideas (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). Since each policy area is different, the relative importance of ideas in a setting is an empirical question, which needs to take into account specific power and institutional constellations (Lavers, 2018). This is why, in Figure 2.2, I did not draw any connecting lines between ideas and the other pillars of political settlement. Sometimes, ideas will operate in the background, subtly lending legitimacy to the agent’s actions, whereas at other times, ideas will directly guide an agent’s actions.

A novel argument I suggest is that it is the interplay between the ideational forces and structural factors that introduces a dialectical process of change to the original theorisation about how change happens in a political settlement. Khan (2010, pp. 4-5) argued that change can be incremental, happening at the margins due to gradual endogenous processes of “growth, institutional change and political mobilization”, as well as discontinuous, when incompatibility between power and institutional configurations create a crisis during critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007) or windows of opportunity (Kingdon, 1984). To this we can add that since an agent’s perception of her self-interest is mediated by her understanding of contextual factors, and the pursuit of her interest changes the contextual factors, the interplay between the two can change the settlement too. This dialectical process was considered by Adler and Haas (1992) who maintained that just as agents could create structures, structures could influence agents’ ideas as well. Therefore changes to ideas in society can impact institutions, which can, in turn, affect the ideas in a dialectical process. I explore this possibility in Chapter 6.

An important point to highlight in examining the role of ideas in creating settlements is how ideas travel to affect policy formation. Within countries, interest groups engage in lobbying and advocacy to transmit their ideas to the policymaking arena (Besley and Coate, 2001). Whilst a range of actors engages in idea transfers in Bangladesh—from business (Kochanek, 1993) to NGOs (Haque, 2002)—access to the policymaking arena is limited by their individual organisational power. Idea transfers between countries happen through policy transfer and policy diffusion (Dolowitz and Marsh, 1996; Lee and Strang, 2006). Whilst the two processes are studied methodologically differently—the former through large-N quantitative studies and the latter through small-n qualitative studies (Newmark, 2002)—the overlaps between the two are considerable (Evans and Davies, 1999). Both essentially study the mechanisms through which policy ideas, administrative arrangements, and institutional structures travel between countries through voluntary and coercive means. In recent years, the prevalence of coercion has fallen (Whitfield, 2009), which has brought voluntary mechanisms of transfer, like learning, emulation, and competition, to greater prominence (Obinger, Schmitt and Starke, 2013). In learning, governments take lessons from best practices in other countries when drawing their own policies whilst in emulation governments enact policies in order to conform to

international norms. Studies of social protection policy development in Ghana (Abdulai, 2020; Foli, 2016) and Kenya (Ouma and Adesina, 2018) find that international actors flex their soft power by using epistemic communities to transfer ideas. Across sub-Saharan Africa, donor agencies provide technical assistance, commission studies, and facilitate study tours to promote policy uptake (Davies, 2009). What is interesting to consider is how the transferred ideas interact with domestic ideas to support a distribution of benefits that is in line with the power distribution amongst organisations in the political settlement.

#### **2.2.4 Benefits**

The interaction between power, institutions, and ideas in a political settlement helps create benefits concomitant with the power of the interest groups (Khan, 2011). Khan (2018a, p. 650) conceptualises the benefits as rents, with the political settlement delivering a “rent management system”. Usually, rents are understood to be material gains for the rent-seekers, which are not reciprocated in the form of productive gains for society (Tollison, 2012). However, in the political settlements approach, rents have a dual function – whilst they are accumulated as incentives, they may also be used in a productive fashion (Gray, 2018). In this reading, rents are better characterised as benefits actors attempt to gain from a system through various rent-seeking behaviours. This is why I have used benefits and rents synonymously throughout this document since the usual pejorative meaning does not apply here. Nevertheless, in many cases, these material gains are achieved through political machinations. In the Zambian political settlement, for instance, Pruce and Hickey (2020) report that agricultural incentives, which reduce the budgetary allocation for cash transfer programs, are actually rents to reward political loyalty amongst the ruling party’s voter base. Even seemingly altruistic programmes, such as a now-defunct aid programme for mothers in the US and tied foreign aid to poor countries, have been analysed from a rent-seeking perspective – with the former treated as generating “scarcity rents” for union members (Anderson, 1987, p. 385) and the latter generating rents for the donor countries’ domestic producers (Jones, 1996).

Given this study’s inclusion of ideas in its analysis, it is possible to imagine the rents as both material and ideological, with the actors’ preferences concerning other actors



running the gamut from malign to altruistic, putting self-interest in the middle (Abell, 2014). Ideological rent-seeking occurs when ideologues use the government apparatus to impose their values on society (Vallier, 2019). From this perspective, the utility gain for the rent seeker is not only material but also the imposition of her ideological order on society. Given attitudes towards welfare form fundamental political cleavages in many societies (Esping-Andersen, 1990), I take both ideological and material rents seriously in this study. A possible critique of this argument can be that what Vallier calls ideological rent is merely a matter of the rent-seeker gaining ‘soft power’ from the settlement, which in turn gives her the power to affect ideas and thus mould self-serving institutions in society. This, however, does not do full justice to the concept. ‘Soft power’ is definitionally “indirect and non-coercive”; in fact these are its key difference from hard power (Gallarotti, 2011, p. 28). Ideological rents, in contrast, are gained by coercion. Whilst it is indeed rare for a single individual to impose any idea on society, the possibility of individuals applying coercion to establish hegemonous ideas, such as neoliberalism, on society is not as difficult to comprehend. The burden of proof on the researcher studying ideological rent-seeking then would be to demonstrate that coercion has been used to impose hegemonous ideas where—crucially—the imposition does not yield any personal material benefit for the rent-seeker, leaving ideological rent-seeking as the only explanation. The benefit of this line of argumentation is that it would provide a possible explanation for why, in the absence of personal gain, individuals use coercion to impose ideas at all.

Within a political settlement, rents flow to the powerful organisations in the settlement. A large part of the literature, and indeed Khan (2010) as well in his original explanation, consider the elites to be the sole rent-seekers in a settlement, and political settlements to be synonymous with elite settlements (Behuria, Buur and Gray, 2017; Di John and Putzel, 2009). Elites are a very small group of people who control a country’s major material, symbolic, and political resources (Mills, 1956). In practice, elites have been identified as those who occupy key positions in politics and policymaking (Reis and Moore, 2005). Recently, Khan (2018a) has distanced himself from the concept of elites. A political settlement in this view eschews elite pacts to become “a stable distribution of power across organizations” (Khan, 2018a, p. 653). Organisations are structured groups of people who engage with other organisations within institutional bounds (Khan, 2018a). Insofar as elite power distribution reflects

organisational power distribution, elites are relevant, but they should not be a discrete analytical category per se. Kelsall (2018, p. 661) argued against the new definition, instead suggesting political settlement analysis should focus on organisations that can disrupt the “peace and stability” in a country. This criterion is very vague though – for instance, does disruption of peace mean starting a war or does it simply mean organising street rallies? For our purposes, it is also not apparent that a political settlement on social protection only rests on organisations that can threaten peace and stability irrespective of how the terms are defined.

The reason for discarding elites from the definition of political settlements is the difficulty in trying to identify elite actors (Khan, 2018a). Groups commonly recognised as elites, such as highly educated professionals, may in fact have little substantive effect on policies unless they mobilise specifically for the purpose. Conversely, individuals like rural political activists may have considerable ability to mobilise the masses, and therefore impact policy, without being considered elite. This difficulty in conceptualising elites is not limited to developing countries (Dahl, 1958). Even in the US and UK, the elite research project struggled to agree on a consistent definition of elites that could be applied uniformly, with the term being used to describe “such diverse groups as politicians, bishops, intelligent people, aristocrats, lawyers, and successful criminals” (Scott, 2008, p. 27). In studying Bangladeshi national elites, Hossain (2005, p. 968) sampled political leaders, civil and military bureaucrats, business leaders, NGO leaders, intellectuals, media personalities, religious leaders, and social influencers whilst acknowledging that it is “difficult to establish the precise outer boundaries of any elite”. Given this difficulty, a focus on organisations instead of elites is prudent.

An interesting feature of political settlements analysis is it takes into consideration rent-seekers who are weak or otherwise excluded from the settlement. Weak organisations can join more powerful organisations to form coalitions that influence the settlement (Khan, 2018b). The relative strength of organisations is also important for the stability of the settlement (Behuria, Buur and Gray, 2017). If excluded organisations are weaker than the ruling coalition, the ruling coalition acts with a longer time horizon, whilst if excluded organisations are stronger than the ruling coalition, the ruling coalition faces greater challenges and is, therefore, more focused

on survival strategies in the short term. Even within the ruling coalition, if factions higher up in the coalition are stronger than those lower down the coalition, the ruling coalition will have higher implementation capacity.<sup>14</sup> Whilst the focus on excluded and weak organisations is a useful addition to the analytical toolkit, I argue in the next section that for political settlement analysis to reflect ground realities, eschewing its current focus on ruling coalitions is essential.

## 2.2.5 Critiques of political settlements

Although political settlement analysis has moved into the “epicentre of political economy analysis in developing countries”, its rising prominence has also attracted convincing critiques (Oppong, 2020, p. 676). These critiques, however, rather than undermine political settlement analysis and its relevance to the study of policy and politics, have in fact helped hone the framework by introducing new and more dynamic analytical dimensions. This thesis draws upon a more critical reading of the political settlements framework, particularly with regards to the introduction of *issue-specificity*.

The first critique of political settlements, which this thesis concurs with, focuses on Khan’s (2010) original conceptualisation of political settlements, which did not differentiate between different policy domains. Khan’s argument was that the ruling coalition would affect policy outcomes—all policy outcomes—in a way that was concordant with the holding power across dominant organisations in the ruling coalition. Many researchers, including Hassan (2013), have struggled to reconcile the concept of one homogenous elite political settlement that impacted different policy domains in exactly the same way with the realities on the ground. Instead, Hassan argues that domain-specific settlements or “lower-level” elite settlements should be the focus of analysis. While these “lower-level” settlements are still shaped by the overarching elite settlement, they can be distinct in nature as well as function from the larger elite political settlement. I return to Hassan’s arguments in Chapter 3.

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<sup>14</sup> Khan (2010) uses these variations to suggest a four-part typology of political settlements: potential developmental coalition, vulnerable authoritarian coalition, weak dominant coalition, and competitive clientelism. This is one of the earliest political settlement typologies in the literature. Later iterations have been suggested by, among others, Levy (2014). Whitfield et al. (2015) find the typology’s predictive claims misleading. Since my proposal of issue-specific political settlements eschews a dependence on ruling coalitions, the typologies do not have any utility in this study.

Khan's conceptualisation of political settlements also displayed an inordinate focus on material interests (see section 2.2.3). In contrast, authors such as Lavers (2018) have argued that the failure to include 'ideas' makes it difficult to understand the processes by which settlements endure and how settlements shape particular policy choices in certain policy domains. As a corrective, Hickey (2013) and Lavers and Hickey (2016) proposed what they termed the 'adapted political settlements' framework, which incorporated ideas as a key variable in the analysis. Since the authors argued that particular ideas were influential within particular policy domains, they concluded that political settlements needed to be studied in a domain-specific manner, such that the settlement for social protection would be different from the settlement on the economy, or on governance, and so forth. These domain-specific settlements, nevertheless, remained clearly nestled within the overarching elite settlements and were thus "strongly informed by the priorities of the ruling coalition" (Lavers and Hickey, 2016, p. 393).<sup>15</sup> In their adapted framework, Lavers and Hickey (2016) also expanded the scope of political settlements to include international actors, which Khan (2018a) endorsed, and this study incorporates (see section 2.2.1).

Following from the above, Kelsall (2018) and Khan (2018a, 2018b) engaged in a debate over whether political settlements were merely settlements amongst elites (see section 2.2.4) or amongst more specific groups. In his later work, Khan convincingly argued that what we need to understand is the settlement amongst *relevant* organisations and not just elites. But relevant to what? Khan (2018a, p. 640) continues, "relevant for analyzing a specific institutional or policy problem". This signals a major shift in the unit of analysis: from national-level elite settlements (Khan original) to domain-specific ruling coalition settlements (Hickey, Lavers, Hassan) to settlements amongst organisations relevant to a policy problem (Khan later). Whilst today there is a growing recognition that non-elites are also important for our analysis, the political settlement research agenda has still not fully incorporated the essence of Khan's argument. Khan also still does not explain 'how' specific the policy problem being studied ought to be. Instead, he argues that what analysts need to chart are the "macro-political organizational characteristics of

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<sup>15</sup> That Hassan, Lavers, and Hickey made similar arguments in favour of domain-specificity is unsurprising because they were all part of the ESID collective at the University of Manchester which used the 'adapted political settlements' framework to study multiple policy domains across countries.

societies” (Khan, 2018a, p. 652). Given the lack of alternative direction, almost all the focus still remains on the dominant elite or ruling coalition settlements (Gray, 2019) and analysts continue to contort the elite settlements in increasingly laboured ways to explain progressively narrow policy decisions.

Consequently, the analysis of political settlements has become dissonant from ground realities. Oppong (2020, p. 683), for instance, forwards a particularly convincing critique wherein he argues that unlike the predictions of political settlement scholars who have set “the focal point of analysis on the reflexes of those who wield the balance of power”, the politics of oil governance in Africa is heterogeneous, multi-scalar, and pluralistic. In several cases, it has become clear that the policy decisions regarding oil governance do not always align with the inclinations of the ruling coalition. The problem here is that political settlement analysts are superimposing the ruling coalition’s interests—broadly defined—on specific policy areas, even though individual policy areas might well have a balance of power different from the ruling coalition’s. Furthermore, reducing the ruling coalition to a homogenous group with one set of interest is also fundamentally inaccurate. The ‘coalition’, by definition, comprises many actors who may well have their individual interests.

This thesis, therefore, adopts a revised political settlement framework that is sensitive to ‘issue-level’ analysis. In this reading, *the balance of power of actors interested in a specific policy issue has the ability to shape the institutional framework in such a way that it allows powerful organisations within that policy issue area to benefit from the rents extracted from it.*<sup>16</sup> Crucially, what distinguishes this approach from the previous approaches is that the balance of power at the policy issue level is independent of the ruling coalition’s balance of power, as long as it does not present a threat to the ruling power structure. Thus, whilst this thesis’ approach takes the work of Hickey, Lavers, and Hassan on domain identification a step further by narrowing the focus to issues rather than domains, it differs from their adapted political settlements framework by eschewing the connection to the ruling coalition. The ‘issue-specific’ conceptualisation employed in the thesis also uses power, institutions,

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<sup>16</sup> The actors interested in a specific policy issue could be similar to actors in Hecló’s (1978) ‘issue networks’ who coalesce around particular policy issues to influence policy. However, whilst Hecló’s actors are primarily motivated by emotional and intellectual commitments, actors in issue-specific political settlements are primarily rent-seekers.

ideas, and rents in the same way as current scholarship, except the unit of analysis is a specific issue at a specific time and place untethered from the ruling coalition. This approach enables us to not only to definitively shift away from one overarching elite settlement but also accommodates the heterogeneity that Oppong finds woefully absent in the current approach. The NSSS, which encompasses all social protection programmes in Bangladesh, gives ample opportunity to develop the issue-specific approach. For example, some of the issues that the policy gives rise to, such as debates over food vs. cash transfers, targeting vs. universalism, labour and social insurance, and the role of NGOs in policymaking, show interesting variations in the power of actors, organisations, and the role of particular ideas and rents.

Adopting a political settlements approach, albeit modified to be issue-specific, is particularly suited for the focus of this thesis for three reasons.<sup>17</sup> First, Holden (2005) argues that social policy under current global capitalism is best analysed from a political economy lens that incorporates the study of power from a multidisciplinary approach, which the political settlement framework offers. Second, the framework is particularly suited to the study of developing countries because it incorporates informal institutions and excluded groups that other frameworks do not sufficiently include. Finally, the thesis adopts a critical realist methodology, which means that critical causal mechanisms or ‘why’ questions are of importance in the analysis (Gorski, 2013). The political settlement framework encodes a theory of how different variables are dynamically connected and why.

In summary, this study considers a political settlement to be a stable and reproducible distribution of power and institutions centring on a policy issue, undergirded by ideas, where the rents generated from the institutions reflect the distribution of power. Unlike previous conceptualisations of political settlements, the domestic and foreign rent-seekers in issue-specific settlements are the stakeholders surrounding a specific policy issue as opposed to the elites, the entire ruling coalition, or stakeholders in a

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<sup>17</sup> Alternative frameworks could have been Gough and Therborn’s (2010) five I’s for developing countries: Industrialization, Interests, Institutions, Ideas/Ideologies, and International Influences or Deacon’s (2013) ASID for studying social protection policymaking: Agency, Structure, Institutions, and Discourse. For the reasons described here, however, an issue-specific political settlements approach is more suited to this study.

policy domain. In the event that rents from formal institutional arrangements are dissonant with power distribution, informal institutions are created to bridge the gap.

## **2.3 Programmatic debates in social protection**

Although settlements on social protection are outcomes of intense political negotiations, they do not always appear as such. There is a long history of political debates being rendered apolitical and technical in developing countries (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007). Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2007) argue this process is underway in social protection where long-standing ideological battles are being fought out over ostensibly technical debates, like the choice of instruments and the choice of programme design. For the remainder of the chapter, I discuss two dominant programme design debates that were particularly important to the NSSS: universalism vs. targeting (Chapter 5) and food vs. cash transfers (Chapter 6).<sup>18</sup> The literature on these debates draws on philosophical and theoretical argumentation, as well as empirical impact evaluations, but does not reveal how, why, and through what processes a government chooses between the options.

### **2.3.1 Universalism vs. targeting**

Two paradigmatically different approaches to social welfare are the residualist and the institutionalist approaches (Wilensky and Lebeaux, 1965). The residualists advocate a rolled back state which limits welfare to those who need it the most whereas the institutionalists conceive of the state as more comprehensively involved in all aspects of its citizens' welfare (Titmuss, 1974). The target of the residualist approach is to provide a temporary form of safety net, available only when the market and traditional forms of welfare, such as the family, have failed. In contrast, the institutionalist approach aims for redistribution, where extensive universal coverage attempts to reduce inequality amongst all citizens and, in some conceptualisations, all residents. Table 2.1 outlines the major distinctions between the two approaches. In short, while the residualist model targets beneficiaries, the institutional model is universal.

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<sup>18</sup> Although in previous decades conditional vs. unconditional transfers would have been included in this list, Hickey and Seekings (2020) argue that as the evidence against conditions in cash transfers have grown more robust, such programmes have receded from the global agenda.

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Residual model</b>	<b>Institutional model</b>
Proportion of national income devoted to social purposes	Low	High
Level of benefits	Meagre	Adequate
Range of statutory services and benefits	Limited	Extensive
Population covered	Minority	Majority
Importance of programmes preventing needs	Non-existent	Substantial
Dominant type of programme	Selective	Universal
Type of financing	Contribution/Fees	Taxation
Role of private organisations	Large	Small
Ideology of state intervention	Minimal	Optimal
Need-based distribution as a value (ideology of distribution)	Marginal	Secondary

TABLE 2.1: Dimensions of variation between the residual and the institutionalist models (Sainsbury, 1991, p. 4)

Debates on welfare policies have been marred by considerable semantic confusion about the use of the terms ‘universalism’ and ‘targeting’, which conceals the complex and often contradictory methodological and ideological orientations of the different actors involved in policy formation. The basic principle of universalism is that everyone in society is equally entitled to receive welfare benefits. In contrast, targeted welfare programmes impose different eligibility criteria on different groups (Thompson and Hoggett, 1996). Titmuss (1976) acknowledged that within targeting there exists negative selectism, where beneficiaries are means-tested, as well as positive selectism, where certain groups are given extra advantages due to their needs. So targeting can happen within universalistic welfare systems as well (Skocpol, 1991). Categorical targeting, such as targeting old people, children, mothers, school-goers etc., is an example of positive selectism that happens within universalism.

In contemporary discussions, positive selectism and general universalism are conflated under the heading of universalism, leaving targeting to refer to only means-tested programmes (Devereux, 2016). The justification for differentiating between ‘means-testing’ and ‘needs-testing via categorical targeting’ is that the consequence of failing a means-test and the consequence of failing a category test are significantly different (Rothstein, 1998). An individual who doesn’t receive a universal child grant because he is not a child is not the same as a child who doesn’t receive a means-tested child grant because he is deemed to be above an arbitrary poverty line. Furthermore, if positive selectism or categorical targeting is considered separate from universalism,



it considerably narrows the scope of the discussion to merely basic income grants or a food subsidy for all as the truly universal programmes. Given the proponents of categorical targeting and general universalism both speak from the same anti-residualist position, such a reduction in scope appears unnecessarily restrictive.

However, some aid donors have leveraged the semantic variations to further their own visions of welfare. The World Bank, in particular, has used ‘coverage’ or ‘access’ as its arbiter for gauging universalism instead of the nature of the provider or the source of financing (Fischer, 2018, 2020). In their view, as long as everyone has access to a service, even if that access is via a fragmented system of private providers, it can be called ‘universal coverage’ of services. Politically, from the Bank’s residualist perspective, it is useful to incorporate private providers into the definition of universalism because even privatisation can then be hailed as proof of successful progress towards the ‘universal’. If the function of social welfare is to protect beneficiaries from the vagaries of the market though, relying on private providers is an exceptionally odd and logically incoherent strategy for achieving universalism. The performance of commercial welfare provisions has long been questioned on the grounds that they reproduce the inequalities of the free market (Abramovitz, 1986), and their pro-cyclical nature has had deleterious welfare impact both in the global North (Katrougalos, 2007) and South (Adejumobi, 1999). Therefore, I use Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea’s (2016) definition of universalism that is sensitive to the needs of developing countries. Paying close attention to coverage, generosity, and equity, they argue social policies are universal when they extend generous transfers and services to the entire population in a country without depending on the market.

The ascension of targeting in the 1980s as the preferred form of welfare policy of different governments and international organisations dovetailed neoliberalism’s rise as the dominant economic paradigm worldwide. The roll back of the state left in its wake reconfigured welfare systems in the global North, where means-testing helped separate the ‘deserving poor’ from the undeserving masses, replacing erstwhile notions of rights-based universal social solidarity. Mkandawire (2005) argues these transformations were mirrored in the global South through two pathways: international and domestic. Donor countries and international financial institutions imposed residualist conditions on aid-dependant client nations; and the national elites

failed to honour their universalistic social contract with the citizenry, turning instead to liberal ideologies with limited social protection. To mitigate the worst of the resultant poverty and deprivation, development aid became intractably tied to poverty alleviation, placing poverty and the consequent imperative to find and target ‘the poor’ at the centre of the new order (Mkandawire, 2005).

Beyond the ideological justification, the key pragmatic defences for targeting are fiscal constraints and efficiency (Devereux, 2016). Since countries, especially developing ones, have limited budgets, a degree of prioritisation in policy decisions is inevitable. It can be argued that if the state could target the poor and give to them directly instead of wasting resources on the non-poor, poverty alleviation could happen more efficiently (Goodin and Le Grand, 1987). There are three counterarguments to this that centre politics at the core of the disagreement.

First, whilst national budgets are undoubtedly finite, the choice of what to spend on is invariably political. High-income countries spend nearly 20% of their GDP on social protection as opposed to the meagre 2-4% spent by developing countries (ILO, 2014, p. 126). Ortiz, Cummins and Karunanethy (2017) discuss eight financing options developing countries have employed to increase fiscal space for social protection, including reallocating public expenditures, controlling illicit financial flows, higher taxation etc. They recognise that whether countries choose to avail of these options is a political question. Therefore, the logic of targeting does not immediately follow from budget constraints, although it is shaped by the constraints.

Second, the efficiency argument is undercut by concerns about the administrative costs of targeting itself and the degree of targeting errors. Targeting errors cover both inclusion and exclusion errors, where, respectively, ineligible households are included in and eligible households are excluded from receiving benefits (White, 2017). Devereux et al.’s (2017) meta-analysis covering 41 countries shows at present there are no error-free targeting mechanisms. The poor are not a static group. Therefore poor people continuously jump above and descend below the poverty line, which makes targeting databases fast obsolete (Kidd, 2017). Studies show Bangladesh’s targeting efforts remain significantly flawed, with high inclusion and exclusion errors allowing rent-seeking clientelism to continue apace (Kamal and Saha, 2014). Given

means-testing is especially difficult in developing countries due to the high degree of informality in the economy, targeting mechanisms need to be incredibly fine-grained to avoid errors. This is not only unfeasible—for example, the World Bank’s preferred targeting tool, the proxy means test, retains high degrees of errors (Kidd, 2017)—it is also administratively very expensive. Devereux (2016, p. 174) notes that since the “trade-off between targeting errors and targeting costs is unavoidable: the level of ‘acceptable error’ is a political choice”. In contrast, universal policies, by definition, cannot have inclusion errors and the administrative cost to prevent exclusion errors in the categorical variant is relatively low (Devereux et al., 2017).

Third, studying welfare programmes in developed countries, Korpi and Palme (1998, pp. 681-82) pointed out the paradox of redistribution: “The more we target benefits at the poor only and the more concerned we are with creating equality via equal public transfers to all, the less likely we are to reduce poverty and inequality”. The paradox exists because a country’s welfare budget is not fixed and there is a trade-off between means-tested targeting and the size of the welfare budget. The budget is determined by existing institutions in the country, which are a product of class coalitions that act as interest groups in the development of the welfare state. In universalistic welfare systems, the middle-class allies themselves with the poor, since they receive benefits as well as pay into the system (Korpi, 1980; Rosenberry, 1982). In contrast, in targeted welfare regimes, the middle class merely contributes to the system, receiving no welfare benefits in return. As a result, an anti-welfare alliance develops between the rich and the middle class, against the poor. The poor, Sen (1995, p. 14) argues, are “quite weak politically and may lack the clout to sustain the programs and maintain the quality of the services offered”. Therefore, not only are modest benefits offered at programme inception, but the programmes also erode over time. Freeland (2018) finds evidence for this when comparing Malawi’s targeted social cash transfers with Lesotho’s near-universal old-age pensions. Malawi’s programme remained donor-funded, had low coverage, exhibiting a progressive decrease in the real value of transfers over time. In contrast, Lesotho’s programme is domestically funded, has high coverage, and the real value of the transfer has increased consistently over the years.

Although the literature presents strong arguments in favour of universalism, it is not without its detractors. The supporters of residualist models who believe in small government are, of course, ideologically opposed to universalism. However, even proponents of universalism acknowledge that its early iteration in developing countries was not without significant problems. Politically powerful groups, such as the civil service and the military, captured the ostensibly universal benefits, in the process excluding large sections of the disgruntled populace (Mkandawire, 2005). Instead of building social solidarity, these benefits came to be seen as rents appropriated by the powerful. Consequently, residualist arguments found traction in postcolonial developing countries' political imagination.

Mkandawire (2005) suggests two potential responses to this objection against universalism. First, he says the problems of benefit capture can happen in targeted schemes as well so this is not a weakness of universalism per se. Although his assertion rings true, it does not explain why, when targeted transfers are necessarily small in value, the national elite would en masse bother to directly capture these paltry sums.<sup>19</sup> Instead, I would posit the capture occurs through social protection transfers being used to set up patron-client relationships. So targeted transfers shore up the political fortunes of the nation's powerful as opposed to their personal wealth. Although universal policies can also serve electoral purposes by activating certain interest groups and classes in opposition to others, it is more rules-based than clientelism. Irrespective of the mechanism, the original contention that capture is a feature of both targeting and universalism, and therefore not a weakness of universalism per se, holds true.

Second, Mkandawire (2005) notes that stratified universalism, whereby groups deemed powerful and indispensable to the state are afforded social protection before others, was the norm for late industrialising nations as well which then proceeded to afford universal social protection to the excluded groups. So early stratification may not be a threat to the future potential of genuine universalism. Whilst this is historically correct for developed countries, whether similar conditions exist today in

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<sup>19</sup> Elite capture of transfers is conceptually different from the misappropriation of many targeted transfers by the non-poor. The latter, which is more ad hoc than the former, is described in the literature as 'leakage' (Carter et al., 2019).

developing countries is an open question. As discussed earlier, neoliberal global capitalism has fundamentally weakened the power of labour in developing countries and the notion of targeting has a firmer hold in the realm of policy ideas than it did before. Therefore, stratified universalism, or capture of benefits by powerful groups, may not necessarily lead to genuine universalism in the future. However, this argument cannot be used to advocate for targeting. For the reasons described above, the solution to problems created by stratified universalism is genuine universalism that treats all equally, not more targeting. In this section, I have surveyed the literature on universalism and targeting to argue that instead of being a simple technical debate about programme design, the debate, in fact, is a political one.

### **2.3.2 Food vs. cash transfers**

The second major debate in the NSSS was between food and cash transfers. Whilst in-kind transfers—a major subset of which is food—remain popular, especially so in humanitarian assistance where they occupy 94% of the portfolio, cash transfers are expanding rapidly across the developing world (ODI, 2015). Nearly 130 low and middle countries now have at least one unconditional cash transfer programme, including 40 out of 48 sub-Saharan nations (Bastagli et al., 2016).

Cash transfers provide beneficiaries with the purchasing power to acquire goods at their discretion whereas in-kind transfers endow them directly with the goods the government has purchased on their behalf (Narayanan, 2011). The literature leans strongly in favour of cash, to the extent that Thurow (1974, p. 195) declared, “the general economic case for cash transfers is strong enough that the burden of proof should always lie on those who advocate restricted transfer”. The most pressing reason for this is the question of personal autonomy – the idea that individuals best know what is good for them and their expenditure will be most efficient should they be allowed to spend unrestricted. This makes cash the more utility-maximising option with the accompanying assumption that households would spend the same amount on food irrespective of whether they’re given food or cash, as long as the transfer is infra-marginal, i.e. below the amount needed for buying food (Southworth, 1945). By shifting the decision-making power from bureaucrats to citizens, cash limits the

discretionary power of the state machinery, thereby empowering even the most marginalised citizens (Standing, 2012).

A key concern with in-kind transfers is that, in the absence of choice, beneficiaries may instead sell their sub-par transfers in the secondary market at a reduced price, as is the case in Bangladesh where, in one study, nearly 50% of beneficiaries sold their wheat transfers to buy rice due to a cultural preference for rice (Ahmed et al., 2004). The government thus ends up subsidising private traders who buy from the beneficiaries. At times the market-distorting effects of food transfers can be even more insidious. Poorly planned international food aid delivered to famine-hit Ethiopia in 2000 travelled across the border to Somalia where it caused the local sorghum market to collapse during vital harvest months, exacerbating chronic poverty (Barrett and Maxwell, 2005). In contrast, cash can actually boost the local market through the multiplier effect since beneficiaries buy from local producers (Gentilini, 2016b). The concern that cash injection will lead to inflation is considered misplaced because the supply of basic goods, which is what people buy with cash transfers, is elastic (Standing, 2012). Food transfers are also logistically unwieldy because large losses and leakages happen in the process of handling, transit, and storage of food.

Despite these compelling arguments for cash transfers, the empirical evidence is mixed. Gentilini's (2016a) meta-analysis of food vs. cash transfer impact evaluations across ten developing countries, including Bangladesh, reveals no consistent advantage of one modality over the other in terms of effectiveness. Even beneficiaries do not unequivocally favour cash over food. In India, Khara (2014) finds that when public food distribution channels operate efficiently, recipients prefer food. Conversely, Berg, Mattinen and Pattugalan (2013) report evidence from eight countries, including Bangladesh, that beneficiaries overwhelmingly favour cash, not least because it affords them dignity. However, whether cash renders more dignity is contested (Moffitt, 1983) – Stuart (1975), studying recipients in the US, found many view in-kind assistance as more dignified out of a belief that cash welfare is more stigmatising. Thus, on the empirical front, the verdict is divided and context-specific.

However, the technical and empirical aspects of the debate conceal its political core. Food transfers can prevail over cash transfers because of the strong influence of

paternalism at the domestic political level, and food aid politics at the international level. Paternalism is the most influential theoretical explanation for food transfers (Currie and Gahvari, 2008). Paternalism occurs when a public body prevents a citizen from making certain choices for herself with the aim of benefiting the citizen (Weale, 1978). The choice to be paternalistic can stem from viewing the poor both in negative and positive lights. When the poor are viewed negatively, taxpayers may seek to limit the choices of the poor. Taxpayers are willing to help the poor access merit goods, like food and shelter, but do not want to subsidise demerit goods, like alcohol (Tobin, 1970). Handa et al. (2018) use evidence from six sub-Saharan African countries to show that even when the overall spending on food increased, unconditional cash transfers did not increase spending on alcohol and tobacco, and, in Lesotho, such expenditures actually fell. Nonetheless, governments may make a political decision to protect taxpayer sensibilities by choosing food transfers instead of cash.

If we consider the government's decision incorrect though, the logical next step would be to question why we find only the public provision of food to be paternalistic, as opposed to social housing or healthcare (Weale, 1978). By limiting housing and healthcare options through public provision, the government also makes the citizens unfree to choose. Sankowski (1985), therefore, criticises paternalism for being an inconsistently applied concept. In this regard, decoupling paternalism from personal moral failing may allow us to be more consistent. Thus paternalism in food transfers may be justified if the government suspects the recipients have inadequate market information to make the most efficient choices (Weale, 1978) or that they will under-invest in the service for various structural reasons (Gentilini, 2016b). In Ethiopia, for example, beneficiaries in areas with high food price volatility—which brings structural uncertainty to their decision-making—demand food over cash, demonstrating justification for paternalist policies (Hirvonen and Hoddinott, 2020). In these instances, it would be in the government's political interest to respond paternalistically, whilst being entirely sympathetic to the poor.

Besides the domestic political calculus, international politics also force countries to choose food transfers. The earlier arguments about the market distortionary effects of food transfers only apply if there is a functioning market in the food insecure locale. During emergencies, areas without working markets may need food aid in the short to

medium term (OECD, 2005). Throughout the 1960s-70s, the vast majority of this aid came in the form of tied food aid, whereby the food had to be procured from the donors' domestic markets and even transported via their shipping lines (Schnepf, 2016). Excess food produced in donor countries was dumped on reluctant recipient governments (Riley, 2017). On the other hand, widespread food insecurity and famines in this period made food aid a necessity too. For instance, when the US cruelly withheld food aid from Bangladesh during the 1974 famine—to punish it for trading jute with communist Cuba—1.5 million people starved to death (Sobhan, 1979).

By the 1990s though, faced with mounting criticism, most major donors, barring the US, moved away from tying food aid and towards procuring food from local or neighbouring markets (Gentilini, 2016b). Even US tied aid now increasingly comes in the form of monetisation – NGOs sell food procured from donor countries in recipient markets to raise funds for their activities (Schnepf, 2016). Despite recognising the inefficiency of procuring food from the donors' markets, which raises costs by about 30% on average (OECD, 2005), the practice continues due to the donors' economic and political priorities (Uvin, 1992). Interest groups, in the form of the donors' domestic agricultural and shipping industries, rely heavily on the subsidies generated by tied food aid, creating formidable resistance to change (Riley, 2017). Due to their budgetary dependence on monetisation, NGOs also form an influential interest group reluctant to shift away from food aid (Barrett and Maxwell, 2005). Thus, even in instances where cash proves a more superior mode of transfer, the political pressure within donor countries force food transfers to continue in developing countries, demonstrating again that the heart of these debates is more political than technical.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined a conceptual framework for the study in three broad parts. In the first part, I reviewed theories of welfare state development to argue that whilst they are illuminating for understanding aspects of social protection politics, in a time of neoliberal global capitalism, they are not fully transferable to developing country contexts. In the second part, I turned to political settlements as an alternative approach to understand the politics of social protection policymaking in developing countries.



A political settlements is achieved when a stable and reproducible distribution of power and institutions is established, which is underpinned by a supporting set of ideas, and characterised by a concordant distribution of rents. After discussing each of the four pillars of the settlement, I proposed an *issue-specific* political settlement approach to mitigate the limitations of the current approach, which insufficiently accommodates heterogeneity. I use these concepts across this thesis to study the politics behind Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy formation. Since political contestations are frequently masked as technical debates, in the third part, I surveyed the literature on two ostensibly technical debates in social protection programming to find they are, in fact, political disputes. Given the political settlement framework's strong emphasis on history, knowledge of Bangladesh's context is essential to conduct the analysis. The next chapter, therefore, introduces the country's context.

# CHAPTER 3

## BANGLADESH'S CONTEXT

*“If the problem of Bangladesh can be solved, there can be reasonable confidence that less difficult problems of development can be solved. It is in this sense that Bangladesh is to be regarded as the test case.”*  
Just Faaland and J. R. Parkinson, 1976, p. 5

Historical analysis is intimately linked to political settlement analysis because power, institutions, and ideas—the three key pillars of political settlements—are products of their historical origins and evolutions. In many cases, they are products of prior political mobilisations that leave behind not only institutional capacities but also symbolic and practical organisational capacities that act as power resources in subsequent contestations (Gray, 2018). Since the power of different organisations is shaped in different ways by history, the same types of organisation can act differently from each other in the same institutional setting (Khan, 2018a). These variations in power can sometimes have roots that can be traced as far back as the colonial era (Khan, 2010; Seekings, 2020b). Similarly, the institutions and ideas that uphold a political settlement are also subject to historical processes of development that serve to constrain the range of choices available to actors. As such, political settlement analysis has frequently been grounded in historical analysis since history reveals the continuities and ruptures in the evolution of power, institution, and ideas that shape the settlements in the present and point to their future direction. This type of historical analysis can be seen in Lavers (2020b) analysis of Rwanda’s political settlement, which traces the development of ideas that affect social protection over time.

Similarly, Seekings (2020a) offers an analysis of social protection programme development in Botswana, which traces the political effect of droughts over time.

To centre the analysis of social protection politics in Bangladesh, this chapter offers a historical reading of the political and socioeconomic context in which the NSSS has emerged. Since the historical analysis of power and institutions is crucial to the focus of this thesis, different actors, historical developments, and institutions will be given central stage in all the following chapters. This chapter aims to only provide the overall road map for reading social protection policymaking in Bangladesh. It begins by discussing the Bangladesh puzzle, which is that the country has made significant strides in economic and social development despite having chronically weak governance institutions. The chapter then traces the process of state-building in Bangladesh as well as the complexity of its political landscape since independence. It charts the progression from state socialism to economic liberalisation and introduces some key actors and sectors that were influential in the NSSS' formation. The adoption and growth of welfare programmes in the country are also discussed in order to introduce what the literature terms a 'pro-poor settlement' in social welfare. I argue this term obfuscates more than it reveals, and propose issue-specific settlements as a potential solution. I then conduct a brief review of the policymaking literature on Bangladesh to introduce its bureaucratic process of policymaking and to demonstrate that in an already sparse field, social protection policymaking is a notable absentee – a gap this study aims to remedy.

### **3.1 The Bangladesh puzzle**

Landlocked on three sides by India but opening on to the Bay of Bengal on its southern border, Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries on earth (Khuda, 2011). Over 168m people live within its 57,000 square miles (UNDP, n.d.); for comparison, about 67m people live on 94,000 square miles in the UK. The country has a high degree of racial, ethnic, and religious homogeneity where much of the population are Bengali Sunni Muslims (Hossain, 2017). Despite its tragic birth as a war-torn country in 1971, in recent decades, Bangladesh's improvements on the human development index have drawn laudatory attention in the literature (Sen, 2013). It is variously called the 'Bangladesh paradox', the 'Bangladesh conundrum',

and the ‘Bangladesh surprise’ (Asadullah, Savoia and Mahmud, 2014; Chowdhury et al., 2013; Mahmud, Ahmed and Mahajan, 2008). The paradox is that despite having substantial governance weaknesses, Bangladesh’s achievements on human and social development indicators far outstrip those of countries with comparable levels of economic development.

Poverty reduction has been one of the main areas where the country has shown impressive results. Although the rate of reduction has decreased in the past decade and about 1 in 4 Bangladeshis still live in poverty—which is 32 million in absolute numbers (World Bank, 2019)—the reduction in extreme poor poverty rates since independence has nevertheless been impressive. In many ways, Bangladesh’s performance was better than the average lower middle income country’s well before it attained that status itself (see Figure 3.1).

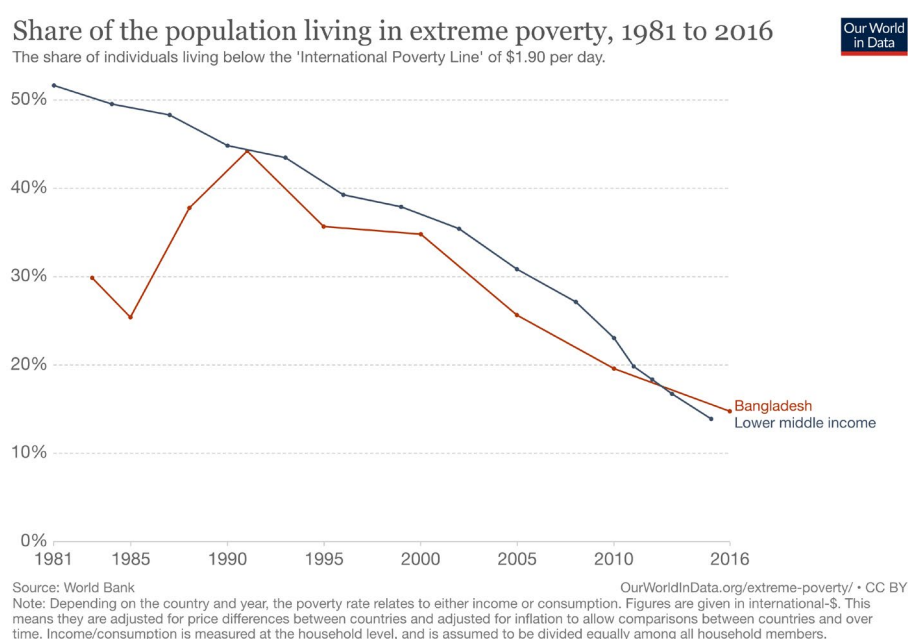


FIGURE 3.1: Extreme poor poverty reduction, 1981-2016<sup>20</sup>

On several indicators of human development, Bangladesh is markedly ahead of its larger and wealthier South Asian neighbours despite starting well behind them when it gained independence (see Figures 3.2). The country has excelled in gender parity in education, especially at the primary school level. Over the decades, multi-pronged

<sup>20</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on January 18, 2021 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-the-population-living-in-extreme-poverty?tab=chart&country=BGD~Lower%20middle%20income&region=World>

interventions from a variety of actors—mainly the state, but also the country’s world-famous development NGOs—has meant that the enrolment of girls outnumbers boys in the country’s primary schools. Maternal and child mortality have also fallen sharply after a post-independence spike (Asadullah, Mahmud and Savoia, 2014).

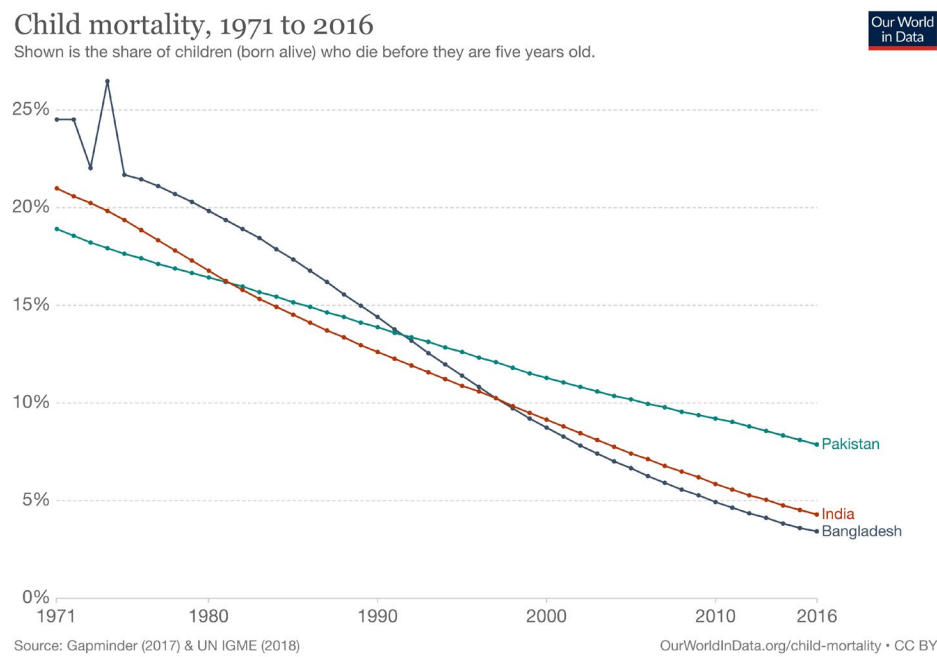


FIGURE 3.2: Child mortality, 1971-2016<sup>21</sup>

What is striking about the developments is that Bangladesh made these strides despite being poorer than India and Pakistan. Although the GDP per capita has grown steadily since the mid-2000s, it is still well below its closest neighbours (see Figure 3.3). These positive economic and social developments tend to be regarded as a puzzle by many academics and commentators because they have occurred in a situation of massive ‘governance deficits’ (Asadullah, Savoia and Mahmud, 2014). The country’s trajectory belied the claims of the ‘good governance’ orthodoxy, which insists that good governance institutions must precede development (Grindle, 2017). Or, put another way, Bangladesh’s trajectory confounded the claims that developing countries were underdeveloped for faults of their own – if only their institutions would function like developed countries, the aid donors had argued, they also would achieve similar levels of development. Instead, analysts who have drawn on political settlements to read Bangladesh’s curious paradox have argued that the way

<sup>21</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on January 18, 2021 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/average-real-gdp-per-capita-across-countries-and-regions?time=1971..2016&country=BGD~PAK~IND>

institutions have functioned in Bangladesh and the way they delivered human development gains reflect the underlying power structure in society (Hassan, 2013) and the ideas that animate the actors within it (Hossain, 2017), which are developmental in nature. Therefore, in the rest of this chapter, I provide the political, economic, and bureaucratic context that undergirds Bangladesh's political settlements on social protection policies. Special attention is paid to political power since its interplay with different institutions primarily affects the organisation of the polity (Khan, 2017).

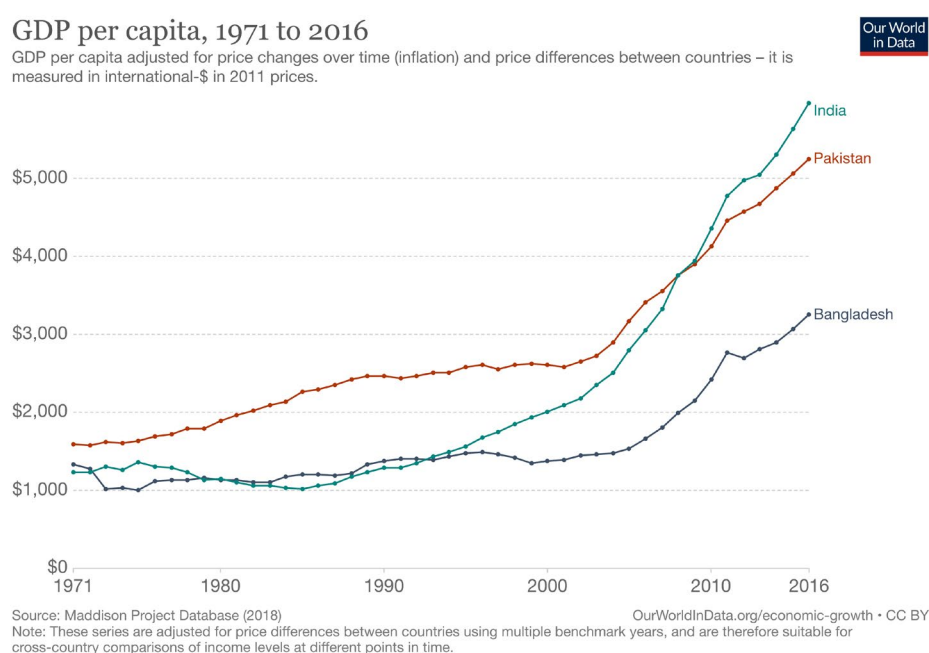


FIGURE 3.3: GDP per capita, 1971-2016<sup>22</sup>

## 3.2 The birth and rise of a nation

Before independence, Bangladesh existed as East Pakistan, the poorer but more populous counterpart of West Pakistan that had emerged as an awkward political alliance separated by the breadth of India after British colonial rule ended in 1947. The economic disparity between West and East Pakistan did not diminish over time, a situation that fuelled political aspirations in East Pakistan for a solution to such inequality (Alavi, 1971). When the then East Pakistani leader (subsequently the first Prime Minister of Bangladesh), Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, emerged victorious in the

<sup>22</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on January 18, 2021 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/child-mortality-mdgs?country=BGD~South%20Asia>

national elections of 1970, the West Pakistani leadership refused to relinquish power to him (Riaz, 2016). Instead, the West Pakistani military launched a bloody attack on civilians in Dhaka and Chittagong on the night of March 25, 1971, sparking a nine-month-long independence war that ended after innumerable deaths, countless rapes, and the displacement of millions of refugees (Mascarenhas, 1971).

At the end of the war on December 16, 1971, the collective trauma of the Pakistani army's brutality as well as the jubilation of freedom tied together a broad and disparate initial ruling coalition consisting of almost all significant political groups in the country. The larger the coalition though, the smaller the rents available to individual organisations, and the harder it is for the coalition to be maintained (Khan, 2011). As a result, widespread lawlessness unfolded across the country and the ruling party "plundered without danger" (Wood, 2007, p. 5). By 1974, reeling from the aftermath of the war, looting and infighting by political functionaries, and unable to cope with the global economic upheaval caused by the 1973 oil price shock, the Bangladesh economy nearly collapsed. A series of floods proved the last straw, sparking a famine that killed nearly 2% of the population (Hossain, 2017).

It is important to read these developments within the wider geopolitical context to which Bangladesh has always been vulnerable. In the early post-independence period, Western aid donors suffered from a measure of collective guilt for supporting Pakistan in its two decades of domination over the Bengali people and for ignoring the beleaguered nation during its incredibly bloody fight for independence. The feeling was that "the world owed Bangladesh a living" (Sobhan, 1982, p. 7). And yet, aid imperatives were dominated by Cold War calculations. For instance, the US withheld food aid shipments during the 1974 famine because Bangladesh was trading jute with Cuba (Sobhan, 1979). The combined effect of the ruling party's domestic failures and the international actors' callousness created severe discontent. Sheikh Mujib's subsequent declaration of a one-party state proved to be the last straw – just four years after independence, disgruntled military officers assassinated the founding father of the nation in 1975 (Maniruzzaman, 1976).

At this point, Bangladesh entered a long period of military dictatorships. After a series of coups and counter-coups, another liberation war hero, Major General Zia, assumed

power, and following his assassination in 1981, General Ershad took over. Zia<sup>23</sup> reintroduced limited multi-party competition in the country, albeit whilst keeping the top job—his job—out of bounds. As a condition for receiving foreign aid, he also began economic liberalisation, a process that would accelerate under Ershad who denationalised large numbers of industries (Kochanek, 1993). With violence mostly contained within the barracks where coup attempts continued sporadically, beneficiaries of the prior period of accumulation and older capitalists rebuilt political connections, and productive investments began to be made (Khan, 2017). As the distribution of power loci began to increase in society, rent management again became challenging, and Ershad found violence increasingly ineffective in suppressing competing coalitions (Khan, 2010). Following prolonged countrywide pro-democracy demonstrations, he was overthrown in 1990 (Blair, 2010).

Beginning 1991, Bangladesh became a vulnerable democracy that would last uninterrupted until 2006. Every five years, power alternated between Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party, commonly called BNP (Riaz, 2016). However, the deceptive regularity would prove to be the calm before the storm. The major parties had realised early on during Ershad's rule that an incumbent was impossible to dislodge if their party ran the election. As a result, all the parties arrived at a settlement to hand over the running of the elections every five years to a caretaker government that could neutrally oversee the process (Hassan and Nazneen, 2017). This fragile system lasted till 2006 before it broke under the strain of the outgoing BNP government trying to tinker with the composition of the caretaker government, and therefore its neutrality (Riaz, 2016).

In 2007, the military encouraged a new caretaker government to assume power. A former economist of the World Bank, who was also the erstwhile managing director of the country's apex body of microfinance institutions, headed the new government. The government attempted to install a raft of 'good governance' measures, including anti-corruption (Lorch, 2017). This period demonstrated that good governance institutions could not be externally imposed and still be expected to function

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<sup>23</sup> Henceforth, I will address them as Mujib and Zia. In Bangladesh, it is common to refer to political actors by their first names without it being considered disrespectful. Where possible, I will follow local naming conventions throughout this document.



normally. Instead of a smooth transition into a developed country's institutional landscape, anti-corruption cases collapsed, legitimate alternative political leadership refused to develop, and crucially, investor confidence collapsed (Khan, 2017). The military-backed government exited the scene quietly in 2009.

Awami League won the subsequent election by a landslide. Upon gaining power, it decided to tear up the rules of regime succession that, whilst imperfect, had given a measure of predictability and stability to the political arena (Hassan and Nazneen, 2017). The opposition parties, despite resorting to mindless violence that elicited heavy casualties, could not force the government to enter negotiations and the caretaker government system was abolished in 2011. With the opposition parties almost decimated through a combination of brute force and co-optation, the results of the 2014 and then the 2018 elections were foregone conclusions (Riaz, 2019). Today Bangladesh exists as a hybrid regime led by Awami League – “ostensibly democratic but essentially authoritarian” (Riaz, 2019, p. 1). In an ironic twist, a full fifty years after its independence, the country appears to be going full circle back to the post-independence period where intra-party squabbles over rent allocation supersede any threats from outside the party.

### **3.3 The political parties**

Despite the developments to the contrary in recent years, officially Bangladesh is a multiparty democracy led by the Prime Minister as the head of the government (Aminuzzaman, 2013a). Riaz (2016) argues there are hundreds of political parties in Bangladesh, but only a handful with any political relevance. Most are ‘name only’ entities. Political power is almost wholly concentrated in the hands of the two major parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Power has oscillated between the two since independence in 1971 and the national vote share is split between them almost evenly (Riaz, 2016).

Traditional, or rather Western, understanding of left-right ideological divisions is not always suited to explain party politics in developing countries (Kitschelt and Wilkinson, 2007). This is true for Bangladesh where ideological differences on economic or social welfare issues between the parties are largely non-existent today

(Blair, 2010; Islam, 2013; Rahaman, 2007). Both are centrist parties that support privatisation but also espouse pro-poor sentiments. The reasons the two parties clash—frequently violently—despite these synergies is because of personal enmity between the leaders of the parties, both of whom are products of dynastic politics (Blair, 2010), and deeply held contrasting beliefs about national identity (Khan, 2011). Both parties have cults of personality centred on their long-deceased heroes. Awami League, led by Mujib’s daughter, Sheikh Hasina, after his assassination in 1975, idolises Mujib. BNP, led by Zia’s wife, Begum Khaleda Zia, after his assassination in 1981, idolises Zia. The two espouse visceral hatred for each other, which colours the entirety of politics in Bangladesh (Blair, 2010).

Beyond personal enmity, the parties differ on the question of national identity.<sup>24</sup> Mamdani (2020) argues the nation and the state are inherently incompatible with each other because whilst the state’s job is to apply the law equally to all, the purpose of the nation is to uphold the superiority of the members of its nation. Griffiths and Hasan (2015) note that the establishment of Bangladesh as a nation-state planted the seeds of a contestation over national identity, which is underpinned by anxieties rooted in the contradictions of the nation-state Mamdani points out. On the one hand, considering its citizens as Bangalis (i.e. Bangla speakers) otherises minority ethnic non-Bangalis from the nation. It also raises questions about the justification for the country to exist separate from neighbouring West Bengal, also home to Bangla speakers, with consequent concerns about irredentism. On the other hand, treating the citizens as Bangladeshis, as opposed to Bangalis, entangles religious identity with national identity since the key distinction with Hindu-dominated West Bengal is that the vast majority of Bangladeshis are Muslims. This, in turn, otherises minority non-Muslims from the nation. Evidently, neither identity is free of polarising tendencies. In the stand off between language and religion, Awami League has adopted Bangali nationalism, and BNP Bangladeshi nationalism (Maniruzzaman, 1992).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Although not relevant to this study, the parties also differ on foreign policy. Awami League has always been pro-India, a geopolitical advantage that has helped it cling to power uninterrupted for the past decade with India’s blessings (Mannan, 2018). In contrast, BNP has always had an anti-India orientation, considering it to be the regional hegemon (Maniruzzaman, 1992).

<sup>25</sup> This is not to say Awami League is necessarily a secular party, although it has portrayed itself as such (Maniruzzaman, 1992). Hasan (2020) argues the party also promotes a version of political Islam, albeit one that is inimical to BNP’s ally, Jamaat-e-Islami. The decision to have a religious colour can

Despite the two major parties agreeing on key economic and welfare issues, the ideological cleavage on national identity is substantial enough to allow large and cohesive coalitions to form that compete in the political arena (Khan, 2013). The victor at any given time establishes hegemonic control over policymaking in order to generate rental streams for members of its coalition. Therefore—as I will discuss in the later chapters—party politics has had a significant effect on Bangladesh’s social protection trajectory over the years, which continues to impact decision-making today. These path dependent mechanisms were in evidence during the NSSS negotiations.

In the prior decades, the minor parties, like Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami, aspired to be kingmakers by forming coalitions with the major parties to tip the balance in their favour (Riaz, 2016). There are also leftist parties in the country but they command very low vote shares. None of these parties figured in the NSSS negotiations possibly for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, they are very weak—the former two commanded a combined vote share of only 12% by 2008 (Riaz, 2016)—with a consequently weak voice in the policymaking arena. Secondly, with an economic and social welfare agenda virtually indistinguishable from the two major parties (Islam, 2015; Riaz, 2016), it is doubtful they had any interest in articulating separate social protection demands. Thirdly, in the unlikely scenario that they had separate demands, they would not have had any opportunity to present them since they were in the opposition when the NSSS was negotiated. The party in power always denies politically ‘undesirable’ actors, i.e. the opposition, access to policymaking spaces (Aminuzzaman, 2013b).

### **3.4 From socialism to economic liberalisation**

Although Bangladesh is now considered a poster child for the neoliberal model of economic development, in its early years the country had taken a more socialist stance. The first post-independence constitution, for instance, promised the “high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism”<sup>26</sup> even though the

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be traced to as early as Mujib’s rule (Griffiths and Hasan, 2015). Nevertheless, it would be fair to characterise the party as more secular than its counterpart, BNP.

<sup>26</sup> Source: Ministry of Law, <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-details-367.html>, retrieved on February 24, 2021

socialism was more on paper than practice (Quadir, 2003). Contemporaneous accounts indicate sections of the government, particularly the Planning Commission, did try to construct a socialist path out of the economic quagmire the country was in but the effort lacked practicality (Kochanek, 1993). For instance, in 1974, the International Economic Association organised a conference in Dhaka titled *The Economic Development of Bangladesh within a Socialist Framework*. In the proceedings of the conference, the University of Cambridge's economist Sir Edward Robinson (1974, pp. xii-xiii) described that, beyond the wish to forge an independent way forward, the government's plans had limited viability:

The new government of Bangladesh had already decided that the framework of development was to be that of a socialist state... It was, nevertheless, very far from clear what exactly might be meant by 'a socialist framework'... When on the last day of the conference we were given the opportunity of discussing the problems of developing Bangladesh with the Prime Minister, Sheik Mujibur Rahman, he was asked what was meant by Bangladesh socialism. His answer was 'socialism as we shall practise it in Bangladesh'.

The principal opposition Mujib faced was thus from radical left parties who considered the liberation war an unfinished revolution (Maniruzzaman, 1975). After Mujib's assassination, radical Marxist groups in the army came close to attaining power through the sepoy mutiny of November 7, 1975, but a twist of fate brought the more right-leaning Zia to power instead. Whilst initially sympathetic to the mutineers, Zia was essentially a pragmatist who, upon recognising the risk of an armed but undisciplined military, saw the leader of the mutiny, a personal friend, hanged after a military tribunal (Lifschultz, 1979; Mascarenhas, 1986). Barring these two failed attempts, leftist politics never really established a strong hold in Bangladesh.

Instead, encouraged by Western aid agencies whose economic rescue packages for the country came with neoliberal conditions attached, a market-oriented growth model was adopted quite early during the military dictatorships (Kochanek, 1993; Parnini, 2009). The ideological shift from socialism to economic liberalisation substantially increased aid inflow to the country. In 1986, Bangladesh was one of the first countries in the world to borrow from IMF's structural adjustment funds and donor conditionalities would dictate the country's policies for decades to come (Rahman,

2012). In fact, the World Bank's first country representative in Bangladesh candidly argued (Faaland, 1981, p. 11):

...a country as heavily dependent as Bangladesh on foreign assistance, cannot escape continuous participation by donors in the formulation of its policies. It may prepare its five year and annual plans, its minister of finance may draw up his budget, the ministries may make their programmes, but all do so with the consciousness that dominant aid agencies are looking over their shoulders.

Donors continue being involved in Bangladesh today and their involvement in the NSSS is addressed in Chapters 4-7. Quadir (2000) argued that the donor-demanded pro-market reforms—started by military dictators and accelerated under civilian leaders—were undertaken neither to stabilise the economy nor to decrease poverty but to facilitate regime consolidation to serve political and business interests. Nevertheless, the roots of several sectors that have transformed Bangladesh can be traced to this period. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus below on the ready-made garments industry, the rice market, and civil society organisations.

The strength of Bangladesh's economy today rests primarily on the ready-made garments industry and the remittances from a large expatriate labour force mostly in the Gulf nations (Mahmud, 2008).<sup>27</sup> The garments industry arose from famously humble origins in the mid-1970s when a few small firms were set up under private ownership. The turning point came when South Korean manufacturer Daewoo entered into a collaborative agreement with Desh Garments in 1979, with the explicit support of the political leadership who were undertaking liberalising reforms and encouraging private industries to develop (Levy, 2014). The agreement allowed Bangladeshi entrepreneurs to receive technical managerial training, access to vital machinery, and marketing support from Daewoo in return for a commission on their exports (Rock, 2001). The first cadre of technical trainees would prove to be the future managers of most new garment exporting firms in Bangladesh afterwards. The firms benefited from a highly elastic supply of low skilled female workers made to work for a

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<sup>27</sup> Since remittances are not relevant to the thesis, I do not discuss them in detail. However, it is worth noting that remittances have had an enormous impact on economic growth in Bangladesh (Kumar and Stauvermann, 2014; Mahmud, 2008). Since low skilled blue-collar workers form the bulk of the migrants, their remittances have helped hundreds of thousands of poor families escape poverty (Barai, 2012). Hatemi-J and Uddin (2014) argue remittances and poverty reduction are bi-directionally linked in that as poverty falls due to the impact of remittances, migration increases, and so do remittances.

pittance as well as a global quota system that gave Bangladesh privileged duty-free access to Western markets (Siddiqi, 2016). It was, in fact, Bangladesh's place in the quota regime that attracted South Korea's Daewoo to Desh Garments (Rock, 2001). Since then, the industry has arguably become the most powerful industry in Bangladesh with enormous influence on policy, which is analysed in Chapter 8.

Although not as profitable as the ready-made garments industry, agriculture is a crucial sector for Bangladesh too, employing 43% of the total population and contributing 15% of the GDP (BBS, 2018). The rice market, in particular, is considered especially vital since rice is the staple food of the nation. Between 1975 and 1992, Bangladesh was the world's largest food aid recipient after Egypt (Atwood et al., 2000). This gave donors an outsize influence on the country's food policy, which they used to push for liberalisation. Liberalising the rice market took substantial effort because long-entrenched institutions and constituencies had to be neutralised at first. The key challenge for the reformers was to abolish the rice rations, a colonial inheritance, which had become a fiscal burden on the state. The rural rice rations were abolished in the early 1990s by the newly elected democratic government that followed the fall of the military dictatorships (Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). Given it was widely accepted by the public that rent-seekers allied to the military regime had captured the leakage heavy programmes, there was no popular pushback against the measure. The urban rations were also subsequently abolished due to two developments. First, as a result of productivity gains, the market price of rice decreased in Bangladesh (Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). Second, the ration prices increased because donors' convinced the government to set the ration prices higher than procurement costs (Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). From the point of view of the consumers, ration prices rose whilst rice prices fell in the market until rations lost their attraction and could be quietly abolished. By the time food grain imports were liberalised in mid-1992, there was no viable domestic opposition against the reforms. The verdict was that "Unlike many countries, Bangladesh has conducted its food market reforms without provoking violence or food riots. Rarely has a major food policy reform proceeded so smoothly" (Ahmed and Haggblade, 2000, p. 14). Rice provisioning played a major role in the NSSS and I return to it in Chapter 6.

Finally, the donors' neoliberal agenda extended into social welfare where they encouraged civil society organisations to provide for the poor instead of the state. I use the term 'civil society' in its liberal framing because that is in vogue amongst the aid donors who have shaped the debate in Bangladesh (Lewis, 2011).<sup>28</sup> In the liberal conceptualisation, civil society organisations are associational groups that lie outside the family and the state, and balance out the interests of the citizens against the state and the market (White, 1994). Donors went a step further to reduce civil society to only developmental NGOs, which have been defined as "self-governing, private, not-for-profit organizations that are geared to improving the quality of life for disadvantaged people" (Vakil, 1997, p. 2060). I use this definition as well in this thesis whilst being conscious that NGOs' role in improving the lot of the poor is heavily disputed (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015). By using these value-laden terms—civil society and NGO—I do not seek to endorse their uncritical characterisations but to engage with the debate in Bangladesh on the terms set by scholars before me in a rich body of literature (Karim, 2011; Lewis, 2011; White, 1999; Wood, 1997). The result of continued donor efforts in the past few decades has been that Bangladesh now has one of the most mature and sophisticated NGO sectors in the world (Fruttero and Gauri, 2005; Gauri and Galef, 2005). The world famous Grameen Bank is indigenous to Bangladesh as are numerous other influential NGOs. I address NGOs' role in the NSSS in Chapter 7.

### **3.4 Social protection and a pro-poor settlement**

Despite donor efforts to the contrary, the state has always been involved in extending social protection in Bangladesh, albeit by outsourcing the service delivery to the NGOs. Three factors have driven the development of Bangladesh's social protection portfolio: disasters, like floods, famine, and war; political competition; and international development discourse (see Table 3.1). The portfolio is substantial enough that Bangladesh's political settlement on social policy has been labelled 'pro-poor' (Hassan, 2013; Hossain, 2017). In this section, I give a brief overview of the

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<sup>28</sup> The liberal framing encodes normative assumptions about civil society as 'good' – Lewis (2004) has questioned the validity of such assumptions by pointing at 'uncivil' society organisations that are difficult to characterise as 'good', like corrupt NGOs. In contrast, a radical framing of the term 'civil society' draws on Gramsci (1971) to consider it a contested space where the liberal capitalist state exercises its hegemonic power to manufacture consent amongst the citizenry.

programme portfolio and discuss why the pro-poor characterisation does not fully explain the particularities of the scenario. To reveal the complexities of Bangladesh's settlement, I argue an issue-specific analysis is more appropriate.

In terms of natural disasters, floods and famines have always been a part of life for people in the region. Periodically, both have had devastating consequences for the population. As a result, Bangladesh inherited social protection programmes designed as food rations and disaster relief from British and Pakistani rulers (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). The 1974 famine and the destructive floods of the late 1980s underscored the continued need for state support to enhance food security. Thus programmes like Vulnerable Group Feeding and Food for Work were strengthened to smoothen out consumption shocks in post-disaster conditions (Khuda, 2011). Man-made disasters, like the plight of the millions of women raped during the war, spurred the formation of the Vulnerable Group Development programme for destitute women, later converted to Income Generating Vulnerable Group Development programme (Rahman, Choudhury and Ali, 2011).

In the 1990s, more universalistic programmes were rolled out, such as the education stipends targeting school children as well as food for education programmes. This was because the reinstatement of democracy encouraged populist political competition to court voters; some of that productive energy was channelled towards introducing various conditional cash and in-kind transfer programmes (Rahman and Choudhury, 2012). This was also the period when NGOs particularly flourished and would be used widely by the state for project implementation, a practice that still continues today (GED, 2015). Changes in family structure also meant informal familial social support decreased. As a result, old age and widows allowances were introduced for the vulnerable and destitute (Rahman, Choudhury and Ali, 2011).

In the 2000s, there were several discourse shifts in international development that was mirrored in social protection programme innovations. An increasing focus on promotional goals meant social protection was not just about protecting people from falling into poverty any more but also helping them build productive capabilities to enhance their livelihoods (Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2007). Graduation programmes became, and remain, popular (see Chapter 7). Poverty pockets in the



country that were still affected by seasonal hunger were especially targeted. The global 2007-08 food price shock, in particular, revealed there were still concerns of food insecurity in the country. As a result, large workfare programmes were rolled out (Rahman and Choudhury, 2012). Whilst originally they were food transfers, they are increasingly being converted to cash transfers. However, food transfer programmes still remain, particularly the Open Market Sales programme through which heavily subsidised grains are distributed in times of emergencies.

Alongside large-scale state-funded programmes, multiple small-scale donor-funded and NGO-implemented programmes have been introduced over the years as well with state support. By the time the NSSS was finalised, there were 145 variously sized programmes run by 23 ministries (GED, 2015). One of the key aims of the NSSS, therefore, was to consolidate the programmes to lend them some degree of coherence. For reasons discussed in Chapter 5, NSSS' aim has not yet been realised (Razzaque et al., 2020).

<b>Period</b>	<b>Innovations</b>	<b>Contextually relevant factors</b>
Mid- to late 1970s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vulnerable Group Feeding</li> <li>• Scaled-up Food For Work</li> </ul>	Innovations in response to the 1974 famine.
Mid-1980s	Vulnerable Group Feeding transformed to Vulnerable Group Development (and later to Income Generating VGD) to re-orient focus away from 'relief' to 'relief + development'	There were concerns that feeding the poor per se was insufficient to reduce chronic hunger. The civil society also offered criticisms that the poor were being made dependent on government hand-outs. As a result, new initiatives were designed to add training for income-generating activities and encourage NGO collaboration.
Late 1980s	Rural Maintenance Programme Workfare innovations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adding promotional goals to protection goals</li> <li>• extending workfare projects beyond earth-work e.g. social forestry, road maintenance</li> </ul>	Innovations in response to the devastation of the consecutive floods of 1987 and 1988, which saw new policy emphasis on all-weather infrastructure in place of seasonal earthen infrastructure.
Early 1990s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conditional Cash Transfers</li> <li>• Food for Education Program</li> </ul>	Food for Education was driven by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a political imperative with the return of parliamentary democracy in 1991 that saw elected politicians seeking new sources of political support;</li> <li>• an instrumental search for a new use for food aid due to rural rations being phased out.</li> </ul>

Period	Innovations	Contextually relevant factors
Late 1990s	Vulnerable Group Feeding Cards	The cards were an innovation spurred by the devastating flood of 1998 urgently requiring the rapid deployment of a food security program.
	Old Age Allowance Widows Allowance	The allowance programs were innovations driven by competitive populist politics.
Early 2000s	Graduation goals A series of successor programs to Rural Maintenance Programme and Vulnerable Group Development with a more explicit combination of protection and promotional goals	A discourse shift from ‘protection’ goals to ‘protection + promotion’ goals.
Mid-2000s	Geographic targeting of areas affected by seasonal hunger (monga) and chars	Greater recognition of poverty pockets.
Late 2000s	Employment Guarantee	Innovation in response to the food price hike of 2007-08, which introduced an employment guarantee element during slack seasons to workfare programmes.

TABLE 3.1: Social protection portfolio development in Bangladesh (adapted from Rahman and Choudhury, 2012, p. 27)

The long history of social protection programmes has built Bangladesh’s reputation as a country where elite sympathy for the poor has some concrete policy implications (Hossain, 2005, 2017). Hassan (2013), for instance, argues that there are three domain-specific, lower-level political settlements in Bangladesh – one for competitive politics, another for the economy, and the third for social policy; all three settlements are impacted by an overarching political settlement. He argues that the social welfare settlement, in particular, is pro-poor in its orientation. The pro-poor nature of the social welfare settlement is demonstrated by the almost automatic increase in budget for safety net programmes every year (see Figure 3.4),<sup>29</sup> successive governments retaining programmes initiated by previous regimes and scaling them up, and the elite determination to prevent famines (Hossain, 2017). The pro-poor elite consensus exists because social protection programmes allow patron-client relationships to be nurtured, party-building to continue unabated, vote banks to be strengthened, and political legitimacy to be bolstered amongst both the poor and the donors (Hassan, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

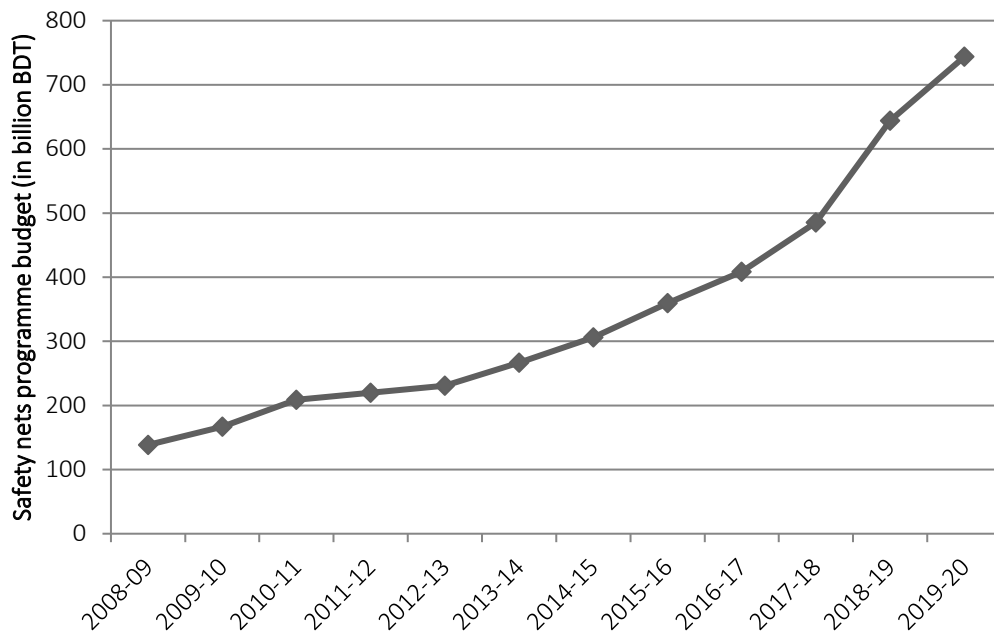


FIGURE 3.4: Allocation for social safety net programmes in the national budget, fiscal years 2008-09 to 2019-20<sup>30</sup>

Although Hassan's analysis is incisive, it demonstrates one of the limitations of domain-specific political settlement analysis I discussed in Chapter 2. Domain-specific analysis is insufficient to reveal the political intricacies of the issues nested within the domains (see Figure 3.5). Hassan's domain-specific contention that there is a pro-poor settlement only tells us that *some* form of social provisions will be available to *some* sections of the population irrespective of the party in power; it does not tell us what form the social protection programmes will take. For instance, although the budget for social protection programmes increases annually, that does not tell us which programmes within the portfolio get access to more funds and why. Similarly, food security to prevent famines is a foundational settlement in the country (Hossain, 2017). Food security can be ensured in a variety of ways – food transfers, cash transfers, active labour market policies, agricultural subsidies to enhance national food self-sufficiency, etc. Which direction the country will go depends on narrower issue-specific political settlements.

The boundaries between the economic and social welfare settlements are very porous as well. For example, although workers in the country's highly profitable ready-made garments sector suffer from a range of indignities (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004),

<sup>30</sup> Source: Social Security Policy Support, retrieved on January 1, 2021 from <http://socialprotection.gov.bd/social-safety-nets-in-bangladesh-budget/>

Ahmed, Greenleaf and Sacks (2014) argue Bangladesh’s political settlement does not accommodate labour. By treating the economic settlement distinct from the social policy settlement, domain-specific analysis leaves social welfare for labour in an ambiguous position in between the two domains. It is not clear which of the two domains will win out in the contestation. If the economic settlement wins, *poor* workers may be denied social protection in a *pro-poor* settlement. Evidently, the term ‘pro-poor settlement’ obfuscates more than it reveals. Therefore, in this thesis I argue that analysis at the issue-level is more appropriate as it better reveals the complexities of particular settlements that domain-specific settlements do not. Furthermore, as long as the issue-level settlements do not challenge the broader political settlement, they can be stable without the direct involvement of the ruling coalition, which dominates the broader political settlement. This is why in Figure 3.5, I have not shown any linkages between the issues and the broader political settlement except to make the issue-level settlements subordinate to the larger settlement.

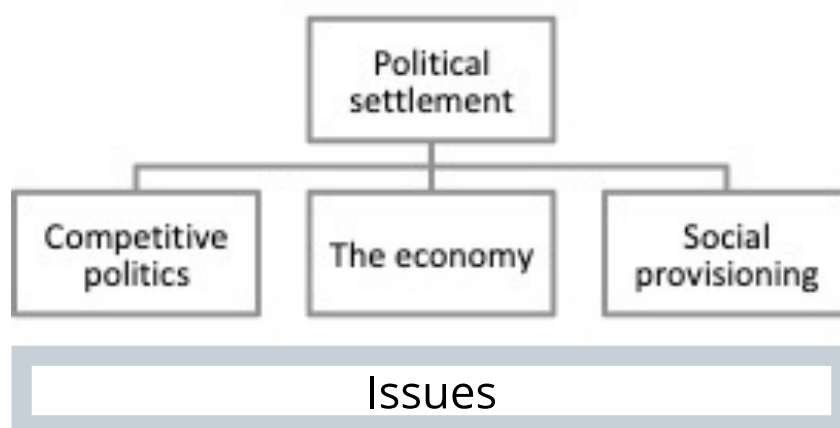


FIGURE 3.5: Levels of political settlement in Bangladesh

### 3.5 Policymaking in Bangladesh

In this thesis, I take the making of the NSSS as the lens with which to study issue-specific political settlements in social protection policies in Bangladesh. Since the contestations I study occur at the level of policymaking, as opposed to policy implementation, in this section I give a brief overview of the literature on policymaking in Bangladesh. The section also introduces the literature’s treatment of Bangladesh’s bureaucracy and its bureaucratic processes.

Whether policymaking in developing countries is substantially different from policymaking in developed countries has been the subject of some debate. Horowitz (1989) reminds us that whilst the content, character, and relationship amongst actors and institutions may be different in developing countries, common human frailties unite the developed and developing worlds. Consequently, issues like path dependence, unintended consequences, and windows of opportunity are common features of policymaking across the globe. Ascher (2017), on the other hand, argues the differences in economic, sociocultural, and political conditions between the two worlds are so enormous that developing countries operate under unique conditions. As evidence, he discusses the case of introducing cash transfers for children in Thailand where policymaking happened with the involvement of international development organisations in a milieu where informal rules superseded formal rules.

Khan (2010) addresses the issue of informal institutions by arguing informality is a predictable outcome when actual power distribution across organisations is not reflected in the formal institutions of rent allocation. The fact that these disparities in power distribution versus institutional structure are more prevalent in the developing world where indigenous institutions have been displaced by colonially imposed imperfect institutional structures would seem to indicate that Ascher's argument has merit. That is, policymaking in developing countries is different enough to justify studying it in a separate category, using methods and theories more suited to it than policymaking in developed countries. Mirroring the dearth in policymaking literature on developing countries as a whole, the literature on policymaking in Bangladesh is remarkably sparse. Consequently, in this section, I have drawn on a very small body of work that covers a range of policy sectors, and not only social policy.

Aminuzzaman (2013b) provides a thorough but general account of the bureaucratic administrative process of public policymaking in Bangladesh from which the parts relevant to the NSSS are distilled here. The NSSS was developed by the General Economics Division of the Planning Commission with input from almost all Ministries and was approved by the Cabinet (GED, 2015). The Planning Commission is the central planning body of the government that hosts many professionals with sector-specific specialisms. Within the Planning Commission, the General Economics Division (GED) coordinates, reviews, and evaluates policies. The Cabinet is a body of

parliamentarians that has the highest authority to approve policies in Bangladesh whilst the ministries conduct the business of government with different sector focuses. Each ministry is headed by a minister who represents it in parliament. Subordinated to the minister is the secretary who also officially heads the ministry and is charged with relevant administrative and disciplinary duties. The Cabinet Secretary, who leads the Cabinet Division, outranks all the other secretaries. Interestingly, Aminuzzaman (2013b, p. 224) notes the “role of Parliament in the policy process is peripheral” in Bangladesh – many important policies, like the five-year plans, are not debated there at all. His findings are supported by Rahman (2019), who believes the absence of parliamentary involvement negatively impacts public understanding and awareness of policies.

Nevertheless, political actors heavily impact the bureaucracy. Zafarullah (2013) argues a bureaucratic-political nexus exists in the country that erodes the bureaucracy’s ability to be neutral and objective. Rahman and Quadir (2018) blame the bureaucracy’s weaknesses in terms of low capacity and political will for giving donors free rein to dictate policies to the country. Aminuzzaman (2013a) also finds policy formation in Bangladesh at the central level is heavily dependent on the political will of the executive branch of the government as well as technical assistance from donors. Policy implementation, on the other hand, is affected by donor conditionality, managerial abilities of the bureaucratic team, and their control over resources. At the local level, contestation between central and local governments, and interference from local business and civil society elites impacts policymaking (Huq, 2015). Developmental NGOs are also posited to have a large influence on policymaking (Aminuzzaman, 2013b). Amongst other non-governmental actors, Rashid (2013) studied think tanks to find that they often exhibit partisan political connections, and have institutional weaknesses that limit their efficacy in the policymaking arena – findings echoed subsequently by Maïtrot (2016). Dodd et al.’s (2019) systematic review of the role of evidence in health policymaking in Bangladesh finds that evidence that helped achieve the Millennium Development Goals received political priority over other types of evidence, pointing to the power of global development’s discursive elements in the country’s policy milieu.

Finally, several studies have assessed the participatory nature, or the lack thereof, of policymaking in Bangladesh. Stock, Vij and Ishtiaque (2021) argue top-down policymaking in climate change adaptation policies have failed to address the needs of climate change victims at the local level. Nevertheless, Ahmed (2016) considers the top-down nature of policymaking has actually weakened in Bangladesh since democracy was instituted in the 1990s because groups other than the bureaucracy acquired the ability to influence policy. Hanchett's (1997) description of the development of Flood Action Plans in the early 1990s supports Ahmed's argument to an extent. However, she found it ironic that the donors, who commanded the government to be participatory, i.e. in terms of involving communities in the policymaking exercise, themselves took no attempt to involve the government in their own decision making processes. Kamruzzaman (2014) studied the holy grail of participatory policymaking—Bangladesh's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper—to argue participation was merely a cover for donor agencies so they could pass the blame on to the national government if the donors' policy recommendations failed.

## **Conclusion**

Bangladesh has made impressive strides in economic development and poverty reduction in recent decades. Despite this progress, the country still has a large poor population in need of social protection. The gains in poverty reduction have been countered by an increasingly chaotic political arena, and internecine partisan conflict has pushed the country into authoritarianism. Although the country moved from state socialism to economic liberalisation very soon after independence, it still developed a large social protection portfolio over the years. Social protection programmes were introduced as a result of contextual factors, including political regime changes and international development discourse. To bring some coherence to an unwieldy menu of over a hundred programmes, the government undertook forming a National Social Security Strategy, which serves as our point of departure to study the dynamics of social protection politics in Bangladesh. Given the dearth of research on policymaking in the country as a whole, the study fills an important gap in the literature.

# CHAPTER 4

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL SOCIAL SECURITY STRATEGY

*“NSSS is fully home-grown and based on the political, social and economic realities of Bangladesh.”*

GED, 2015, p. 2

Debates about national social protection strategies are divided over whether they are donor-imposed policies or national government-owned exercises (Devereux, 2020). Externally imposed reform agenda—like the ‘good governance’ conditionalities that mandated institutional changes to access aid—have historically been proven to be unsuccessful and frequently harmful for poor countries (Easterly, 2006; Grindle, 2017). On the other hand, exhortations for donors to ‘go with the grain’ of domestic politics have raised ethical concerns, such as whether it facilitates the uptake of regressive and clientelist policies (Levy, 2014; Hickey and Bukenya, 2019; Yanguas, 2017). The NSSS provides an opportunity to explore this debate because, amongst other stakeholders, it brought together two types of actors that made its political dynamics particularly interesting to study: donors and state actors (bureaucrats and ministers). As such, this chapter engages with the research question: *What political concerns shape the role of bureaucrats and donors in Bangladesh’s social protection system?* The chapter examines the process of NSSS’ development by dividing it into three stages: agenda setting, idea transfer, and policy formation. The objective of the current chapter is two-fold. First, it provides an in-depth account of policymaking in Bangladesh, which is a highly understudied field in itself. Second, it argues that the



question of donor imposition vs. national ownership cannot be resolved without studying contestations around specific policy issues, as opposed to the entire policy itself. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, this signals a need to understand issue-specific political settlements.

In general, the NSSS' policymaking process was a linear one. Most of the contestations amongst competing actors happened towards the very end of the process when several reform proposals were negotiated after the bureaucracy exercised their hitherto dormant veto powers over the strategy design. The first of five findings chapters, this chapter zooms out to examine the broader NSSS formation process and reveal some of the immediately visible political dynamics between donors and state officials. Then Chapters 5 through 8 zoom in to analyse the contestations surrounding four major reform proposals in NSSS that enable issue-specific analysis. This chapter reveals how social protection appeared on Bangladesh's agenda as a result of donor efforts: donors identified the haphazard proliferation of social protection programmes as a problem that required the NSSS, and then provided the government with a preliminary outline of alternative solutions. Bangladesh's experience in this regard is similar to the countries in Africa that have enacted national social protection strategies (Devereux, 2020). However, the chapter also shows the agency demonstrated by domestic actors in shaping the process of policy formation. Whilst donors were more influential at the beginning of the process, i.e. during policy genesis and idea transfer, the state was more prominent towards the end when the policy was being drafted (see Figure 4.2 at the end of the chapter for a timeline). The chapter is arranged in three parts – in the first part, donors introduce the idea of the NSSS and build a critical mass of necessary support; in the second part, ideas are transferred to bureaucrats; in the third part, state actors dominate policy formation. I conclude by discussing NSSS's claim that it is a home grown policy.

## **4.1 Policy genesis**

Kingdon (1984) argues the early phases of a policymaking process can be divided into agenda setting and alternative specification. Agenda setting is the process of identifying a specific problem to be the subject of policymaking. Alternative specification is the process of identifying alternative forms of solutions to the

problem. The reason the NSSS' policy process was linear is because the idea for it was generated external to the national political system. As a result, it was a relatively straightforward exercise of convincing a critical mass of influential local actors to subscribe to the idea.

#### 4.1.1 Agenda setting

The concept of a comprehensive framework for social protection was first floated at a World Bank, UK's Department for International Development (DFID), and World Food Programme funded national workshop in Dhaka on July 18, 2005 that fed into the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper under development.<sup>31</sup> The event was organised by an influential Bangladeshi think tank called Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC)—whose executive chair, Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, was the lead consultant for drafting Bangladesh's PRSP—with support from the Planning Commission's General Economics Division (henceforth, GED).<sup>32</sup> Amongst others, the workshop was attended by donor agencies, a Member of Parliament, bureaucrats from the Prime Minister's Office and GED, as well as academics from local and foreign universities, including the University of Sussex, and some NGO officials. At the workshop, the keynote speaker formally began the national agenda setting exercise by saying:<sup>33</sup>

PRSP has highlighted the importance of safety nets... There has also been a recognition that while many [safety net] programmes exist, these need to be consolidated within a comprehensive vision on social protection. This workshop is a step towards building such a comprehensive vision and identifies what tasks need to be undertaken to make a national social protection policy a reality.

Soon afterwards, however, national events would overwhelm all policy efforts. As discussed in the previous chapter, by the end of the BNP government's tenure in 2006, the settlement amongst the political parties on the rules of succession weakened significantly (Hassan and Nazneen, 2017). A military-backed technocratic

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Consultant 9 (2018)

<sup>32</sup> The published PRSP describes the national workshops in Chapter III, 3.B.1, p. 26 (IMF, 2005)

<sup>33</sup> Keynote presentation by Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, PPRC's executive chair. The details of the workshop, including the text of the speeches and comments, were published in a report titled *Safety Nets and Safety Ladders* (Rahman, 2006).

government grabbed power in 2007, where PPRC's Dr Rahman served as an advisor with the rank of Cabinet minister. It would not be until this government stepped down in 2009 that the idea of a national social protection strategy would be revived.

Think tanks have played a central role in the NSSS' development. Maïtrot (2016) argues that courtesy of personal connections that have historically developed between some influential think tanks and donor agencies, donors prefer to contract research work out to think tanks instead of universities in Bangladesh. Think tanks not only have the requisite expertise that helps them make successful bids for grants, but they are also considered to be less involved in partisan politics than universities in the country. It is thus apropos that in 2010, five years after the initial effort, when UNDP undertook a comprehensive assessment of social safety nets to provide the government with "the tools to undertake reforms necessary to build new policy framework", it approached PPRC.<sup>34</sup> The UNDP-PPRC study was published as a two-volume report titled *Social Safety Nets in Bangladesh: Review of Issues and Analytical Inventory* (Rahman, Choudhury and Ali, 2011) and *Social Safety Nets in Bangladesh: Ground Realities and Policy Challenges* (Rahman and Choudhury, 2012). The volumes detailed the social protection programmes operating at the time in Bangladesh and identified future areas, such as urban poverty, where more attention was needed. They highlighted the time had come for a national social protection strategy (Rahman and Choudhury, 2012, preface):

There is a growing momentum for strategic strengthening and scaling up of social safety net strategy. An increasing number of policy actors within government and the development community are embracing this enhanced focus. It is imperative that this policy opportunity is utilized...

To capitalise on the window of opportunity, on October 9-10, 2011, UNDP funded the *Scaling-up Social Protection in Bangladesh: Providing Ladders out of Poverty and Social Safety Nets* conference in Dhaka, organising it in collaboration with the government.<sup>35</sup> The well-attended international conference proved pivotal to the NSSS effort because Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who had come to power in 2009 after a

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<sup>34</sup> Then UNDP country director, Stefan Preisner, in the foreword of a report titled *Social Safety Nets in Bangladesh: Review of Issues and Analytical Inventory* (Rahman, Choudhury and Ali, 2011)

<sup>35</sup> DFID/AusAid report titled *Towards a Social Protection Strategy for Bangladesh: Discussion Paper on Key Issues for Development Partners* prepared by two international consultants in January 2012

landslide election victory, inaugurated it. Her presence was considered “the highlight of the conference” since it signalled the highest support from her government for a national social protection strategy.<sup>36</sup> The literature on social protection suggests democratic competition may be a driver for programme expansion (Bangura, 2007). This did not appear to be the motivation in this case. An advisor who worked closely with the government and the donors at the time argued the government’s utility gain from jumping on to the NSSS bandwagon was that “in the donor meetings, it is useful [for the government] to cite this document... then there is a sense that there is a planned approach [in the government’s activities].”<sup>37</sup> At any rate, at the end of the conference, the Minister of Planning issued a communiqué declaring:<sup>38</sup>

The government: resolves to have a comprehensive Social Protection Strategy finalized and ready to launch... and calls on Development Partners and Civil Society to contribute to the process of developing the social protection strategy...

#### **4.1.2 Alternative specification**

In this phase, in a bid to specify alternatives, potential designs of a social protection strategy were identified. Receiving approval from the highest echelon of the government at the conference was important for two constituencies: the donors and the bureaucrats. The donors because the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness had underlined that developing country government’s must ‘own’ donor-led policies (Whitfield, 2009). The Planning Minister’s communiqué appeared to be a good instance of ownership. More importantly, a foreign academic who attended the conference recalled, “international partners were more concerned about the financing” – government involvement would mean the burden of financing social protection programmes would be borne at least partly by the state and not exclusively by the donors.<sup>39</sup> The Prime Minister’s approval was also important for bureaucrats because it meant they could proceed with the NSSS effort confident about support from their ‘political masters’.<sup>40</sup> Several papers presented at the conference were published in a

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Consultant 5 (2017)

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Consultant 9 (2018)

<sup>38</sup> Communiqué issued by the Planning Minister at the end of the Dhaka Social Protection Conference, 2011 (p. 2)

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Consultant 5 (2017)

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Civil servant 2 (2018)

book edited by PPRC's Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Professor David Hulme of the University of Manchester, and two then PhD students of the University of Manchester. In it, the editors argued (Rahman et al., 2014, p. 352):

...it is the [government] that must be the prime mover behind establishing the basic institutional framework, strategy development and ultimately, in leading the social protection reform to ensure that the process is fiscally, administratively and politically sustainable.

International consultants commissioned by UNDP, DFID, AusAid, and WFP to advise on the NSSS effort made similar arguments.<sup>41</sup> As a result, on September 10, 2012, at a Cabinet meeting chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, GED was entrusted with drafting the NSSS under the guidance of a Central Monitoring Committee.<sup>42</sup> Whilst the “GED is the custodian of the intellectual part”, the Central Monitoring Committee is a crucial inter-ministerial body comprising senior bureaucrats from over thirty ministries that acts as the “custodian of implementation” of the NSSS.<sup>43</sup> Subsequently, the Action Plan for how the NSSS would be developed was finalised by the government on September 22.<sup>44</sup> At this stage, the NSSS’ policymaking effort appeared to have shifted its locus of activity away from the donors to the bureaucracy, who would presumably decide the content of the NSSS.

And yet, although the locus of policymaking efforts shifted *de jure* from the donors to the bureaucrats, the *de facto* changes did not materialise. For at least a year after the shift in locus, the government still took its cue from the donors: “The government came back to UNDP and said, ‘Yes, we’re going to do it, but can you please help us?’”<sup>45</sup> UNDP thus assisted GED to choose a consortium of consultancy firms comprising Policy Research Institute and the South Asian Network on Economic

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<sup>41</sup> DFID/AusAid report titled *Towards a Social Protection Strategy for Bangladesh: Discussion Paper on Key Issues for Development Partners* prepared by two international consultants in January 2012; UNDP/WFP/AusAid/DFID report titled *Action Plan for Building a National Social Protection Strategy* prepared by seven international consultants in March 2012

<sup>42</sup> Slide 4 of MS PowerPoint presentation by a senior GED bureaucrat at a CMC focal points meeting on August 9, 2015

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Consultant 9 (2018)

<sup>44</sup> Minutes of the first meeting of the CMC sub-committee overseeing NSSS’ development, January 23, 2013

<sup>45</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)

Modelling.<sup>46</sup> Whilst nominally hired by the government, the funding for the consultants' work was provided by UNDP. Consequently, when the government approved the NSSS' framework paper in July 2013, instead of a document reflecting the government's own position, the paper was almost identical to the recommendations made by the earlier UNDP-PPRC's study.<sup>47</sup>

Still, the early signs of state ascendancy were also evident in this period. On July 28, 2013, the NSSS' inception workshop was held at a luxury hotel in Dhaka. It was attended by a formidable group of three ministers and 19 senior- to mid-ranking secretaries, including the Cabinet Secretary, as well as several director generals, joint chiefs, and their subordinates.<sup>48</sup> Amongst others, high ranking representatives from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Department for International Development (DFID), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), World Food Programme (WFP), EU delegation, UNICEF, World Bank, and AusAid were also present, along with the media and consultants from the consortium. The event acted as an inauguration ceremony for the NSSS effort where the state's presence as a key actor was very clearly on display. Nevertheless, it would be the indirect effect of a donor attempt at idea transfer that would crystallise the bureaucracy's hold on the NSSS. Therefore, in terms of agenda setting and alternative specification, the NSSS seems to have been donor-driven and initiated. However, subsequently, the policy resonated with domestic political actors who attempted to shape it to their own ends.

## 4.2 Idea transfer

The wave of uptake of social protection strategies across African nations since the 2000s has drawn attention to the processes by which governments independently appear to be acting in sync (Devereux, 2020). Although donors employed non-coercive policy transfer tools, like learning and emulation (discussed in Chapter 2), to communicate their ideas, the fact that they could draw on their financial resources, research expertise, and institutional connections as the hegemonic actors in the global

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<sup>46</sup> SANEM/PRI report titled *Inception Workshop Report and Progress Report for the Formulation of the National Social Protection Strategy*, November 2013, Annex I

<sup>47</sup> The framework paper has been published in Alam (2017, p. 1)

<sup>48</sup> SANEM/PRI report titled *Inception Workshop Report and Progress Report for the Formulation of the National Social Protection Strategy*, November 2013, Annex II

development arena potentially makes the exercise less than voluntary on the part of the recipient developing country governments (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett, 2007). Two particular mechanisms were used in the case of the NSSS to transfer ideas from the donors to the government: epistemic communities and study tours.

#### 4.2.1 Epistemic communities

Epistemic communities comprise recognised experts who claim to have authoritative policy-relevant knowledge (Haas, 1992, 2008). In Bangladesh, members of the epistemic community—in the form of donor-funded consultants—were instrumental in drafting the PRSP (Rahman, 2012). In a similar vein, Devereux (2020) considers the wave of national social protection strategy adoptions an act of global policy pollination that has been orchestrated by donors. The pollination process uses the same individuals—including several Western university academics—to create an epistemic community that dominates the social protection knowledge landscape. Niño-Zarazúa et al. (2012), for instance, describe finding the same foreign actors repeatedly in different social protection policymaking contexts in Africa. Similarly, Hickey and Seekings (2020) identify Dr Stephen Kidd, a senior social policy specialist with the consultancy firm Development Pathways, as influential in the global social protection policy development scene since the 2000s. Kidd, in fact, was an important consultant in Bangladesh too.<sup>49</sup>

During the process of NSSS' formation, numerous consultants produced research reports, gave policy guidance, and even wrote the actual policy document. The UNDP's consultancy consortium, in particular, was tasked with drafting ten background papers to feed into the NSSS as well as to draft the NSSS itself.<sup>50</sup> The over-reliance on consultants to conduct research and write policy is puzzling because these tasks are traditionally the remit of bureaucrats who appear to have voluntarily abdicated their power. The GED is, in fact, the country's main hub of economists whose expertise is policy analysis (Aminuzzaman, 2013b).

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<sup>49</sup> DFAT report titled *Scoping Report on Poverty and Social Protection in Bangladesh* (Kidd and Khondker, 2013)

<sup>50</sup> SANEM/PRI report titled *Inception Workshop Report and Progress Report for the Formulation of the National Social Protection Strategy*, November 2013, Annex I

There are potentially two reasons for Bangladesh's—and indeed many developing countries'—dependence on consultants as leading actors in policy formation. The first reason is the lack of bureaucratic capacity. The competence of a state is intimately linked to its bureaucratic capacity (Huber et al., 2015); and the degree of professionalisation of the bureaucracy can significantly affect whether a state is considered weak or strong (Levy, Leibfried and Nullmeier, 2015). By that token, the Bangladeshi state has always been weakened by the bureaucracy's 'quality control' problem. In the decade after independence, the bureaucracy squabbled incessantly over the relative power held by career civil servants from the Pakistan era in its ranks versus those who joined after independence (Maniruzzaman, 1979). Rashid (2014) also blames declining recruitment standards for the deteriorating quality of the country's bureaucrats.

More recently, the bureaucracy operated as a tool of the army during the military dictatorships (Huque and Rahman 2003) and was riven by partisan politics once democracy was restored (Blair, 2010). This partisanship continues today. One bureaucrat argued, "There are variations within Secretaries. Some exercise more power than others, [such as] those who are closer to the Honourable Prime Minister."<sup>51</sup> In interviews, several bureaucrats shared they have to prove their loyalty to the ruling party to be recruited and to retain their jobs because even competent bureaucrats suspected of not supporting the ruling party are denied promotion or sent on indefinite paid leaves (euphemistically called Officer on Special Duty).<sup>52</sup> A conversation I had with a senior bureaucrat who was in the midst of getting a prestigious promotion illustrates how thorough the vetting process is. He shared his family was being investigated to ensure there were no hints of opposition party support, "I told them my grandfather was a medical officer; my father was a government officer; I am a government officer. There is nothing political. Amongst my family and friends, there are many government employees."<sup>53</sup> The upshot is that notwithstanding the many impressive bureaucrats I met during fieldwork, the government's focus is on retaining and nurturing the bureaucrats most loyal to the ruling party irrespective of their degree of competence.

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<sup>51</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Civil servant 1 (2017) and 2 (2018)

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Civil servant 2 (2018)



A second reason for the reliance on foreign consultants is the total hegemony of Western knowledge in the domain of policy.<sup>54</sup> Alasuutari and Qadir (2014) argue that the politics of policymaking is increasingly taking the form of ‘epistemic governance’ where hegemonic actors shape the way others view issues, values, and even their own subjectivities. As I showed above, academics of the Universities of Sussex and Manchester, and even their PhD students, appear in Bangladesh’s policymaking arena, including on a donor-funded “Technical Mission to the Government of Bangladesh to Support Development of a National Social Protection Strategy”.<sup>55</sup> It is difficult to envision a comparable scenario where a University of Dhaka academic and her PhD student would have a say in British government policymaking. The fact that powerful actors—like the Bangladesh government—consider themselves in need of assistance from Western academics lends some credence to the epistemic governance thesis wherein global forces have constructed the government’s subjectivity as subservient recipients of ‘superior’ Western knowledge. Dr Stephen Devereux of Sussex’s Institute of Development Studies, who described policy pollination, can be considered a pollinator as well. He was initially considered as—but ultimately not invited to be—a consultant for NSSS;<sup>56</sup> I later found him as an instructor at an Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI) course, teaching bureaucrats on study tours.<sup>57</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Study tours

Donor funded study tours have been identified as a mechanism via which synchronised social protection policy uptake is taking place (Hickey et al., 2020). In 2005, DFID took Zambian policymakers on study tours to South Africa, Lesotho,

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<sup>54</sup> I use the term Western, instead of global North, self-consciously. This is because I suspect there is a racial dimension to this issue. It was striking that the foreigners I encountered across Bangladesh’s policymaking spaces were overwhelmingly white. Although Hossain (2004) simply argues foreign knowledge is valued more in Bangladesh than local knowledge, it is potentially knowledge from white—and therefore Western—sources that is valued more. An official from an Asian OECD country, such as South Korea, may find her knowledge more valued than a local’s but not as valued as a white Westerner’s.

<sup>55</sup> UNDP/WFP/AusAID/DFID report titled *Action Plan for Building a National Social Protection Strategy* prepared by seven international consultants in March 2012

<sup>56</sup> Minutes of the second meeting of the CMC sub-committee overseeing NSSS’ development, June 11, 2013, Annex Kha, p. 3

<sup>57</sup> My analysis is not meant as a critique of the individual academics and consultants, all of whom I respect deeply and whose work I find illuminating. My critique is about the systems that create the subservience I describe. I should note that I benefited from the status quo as well because my access to the policymaking spaces was largely due to being a University of Cambridge student.

Brazil, and Chile (Pruce and Hickey, 2017); in 2006, UNICEF took Malawian policymakers to Zambia and Brazil (Kazeze, 2008); in 2012, DFID took Ugandan policymakers to Lesotho (Hickey and Bukenya, 2019). Similarly, a month after the inception event in Dhaka, UNDP and AusAid took senior and mid-ranking Bangladeshi bureaucrats on study tours to South Africa and Lesotho (August 19-27) and Nepal (August 25-31).<sup>58</sup> An organisation involved in the training on these tours was South Africa's EPRI. EPRI is led by Dr Michael Samson, an academic described by Hickey and Seekings (2020, p. 263) as one of DFID's "favoured consultants" who promotes a rights-based approach to social protection. Such consultants usually appear "when there is a message that you want to give that isn't very popular with the government. So you cover yourself. UNDP couldn't tell the government what to do, so an international consultant comes in," explained an expert who advised on the NSSS development effort.<sup>59</sup> This is an example of how experts are often presented as neutral actors with only scientific rational logic as their source of authority.

As part of my fieldwork, I participated in one of EPRI's signature 2-week social protection courses offered every year since 2007, where by a stroke of luck my fellow participants included some mid-ranking Bangladeshi bureaucrats long involved with the NSSS who were on a study tour.<sup>60</sup> From my experience at this course, which has been taken by over 1000 participants from 72 countries (EPRI, n.d.), I find that although the tours typically take bureaucrats or politicians to countries in the global South, and therefore can appear to be cases of South-South policy transfers (Bender, Keller and Willing, 2014), the 'curriculum' of the tours is decided by the donor-linked epistemic communities, and therefore should more accurately be described as 'development industry' to South transfers. By development industry, I refer to Devereux's (2020, p. 5) characterisation of:

United Nations agencies, bilateral and multilateral donors, international financial institutions, international NGOs, development consultants, management consortia, [and] research institutes...

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<sup>58</sup> Internal memo with the indicative itinerary of study tours to South Africa & Lesotho and Nepal, n.d.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Consultant 5 (2017)

<sup>60</sup> EPRI's *Designing and Implementing Social Transfer Programmes* course at Chiang Mai, Thailand, October 1-14, 2017

Some idea transfers certainly happen at these study tours. For instance, once the bureaucrats in the South African study tour “found South Africa took a life cycle approach, they instantly went on the life cycle approach [for the NSSS],” recalled a UN agency official.<sup>61</sup> The lifecycle approach considers social protection a tool to reduce an individual’s vulnerabilities throughout different stages of their life, from the cradle to the grave (Bonilla-Garcia and Gruat, 2003). Whilst the lifecycle approach is indeed prominent in the NSSS (GED, 2015), it is worth noting that adopting the approach did not require meddling with Bangladesh’s programme portfolio. It simply provided a conceptual framework with which to categorise pre-existing programmes, and as such was an adoption with zero cost to anyone. It did, however, ensure new programmes would potentially have to justify themselves as relevant to the lifecycle approach before being approved for implementation. At any rate, the recurring lifecycle terminology in the NSSS is a result of donor efforts at idea transfer.<sup>62</sup>

There is a danger of overemphasising how influential such study tours are in shaping participants’ views and actions, thereby undermining the agency of participants as important actors in the domestic policy context. Evans (2009) warns that studying cases of successful policy transfers risk exaggerating the role of transfers. Weyland (2005) argues that decision-makers deal with the preponderance of information available to them by taking psychological shortcuts, such as by considering immediately available information as more valuable. Whilst donors try to leverage the psychological shortcuts by exposing bureaucrats to relevant information in the study tours, the opposite also holds true. That is, bureaucrats rely on information already known to them from their understanding of the Bangladeshi context to reject the development industry’s knowledge offerings.<sup>63</sup> This rejection is not always immediately apparent. For instance, at the EPRI course I attended, several instructors authoritatively presented universalism as a better option than targeting. However, towards the end of the two weeks, Dr Michael Samson conducted an exercise to gauge what the participants had learnt during the course. He asked those in support of universalism to walk to one corner of the room and those supporting targeting to

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)

<sup>62</sup> Minutes of a convergence meeting chaired by the Cabinet Secretary held on September 4, 2013 to discuss the lessons learnt from the two study tours. Among others, senior bureaucrats, UNDP’s country director, and AusAid’s Head of Development at the time were in attendance at the event.

<sup>63</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 1 (2017), 2 and 4 (2018)

another corner. The Bangladeshi bureaucrats present, who at lunch over the previous days had categorically told me they do not support universalism, joined the majority of the room to walk towards the ‘universalism corner’. This is because it was clear to all present universalism was the ‘correct’ response expected in that setting – no one wanted to look like a ‘bad student’ but no one had changed their minds about universalism either. Evidently, it is difficult to gauge what ideas are truly transferred because human motivations inevitably vary.

Beyond idea transfers, I argue the study tours served another function that ultimately cemented the dominant role of the bureaucrats in the NSSS’ development by offering them the opportunity to collaborate in a context that is often not available to them in Bangladesh. Bureaucrats are generally enthusiastic about study tours because they are attractive perks better viewed as study ‘tour-isms’, an aspect described as a hazard of such tours in developed country contexts too (Cook, 2008). The more distant the location, the more expensive it would have been to fund out of pocket. This makes the distant locations more attractive for study tour-ism purposes, which means the more senior bureaucrats get the first choice to go there.<sup>64</sup> Between Nepal and South Africa, the latter was more distant, more expensive, and therefore the better choice for tourism. As a result, the more senior bureaucrats went to South Africa.<sup>65</sup> Of the 15 bureaucrats in the South African contingent, ten were at the rank of Secretary, including the Cabinet Secretary.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, of the 17 bureaucrats in the Nepal contingent, the senior-most bureaucrats were a Division Chief and three Joint Secretaries. During the tours, these senior bureaucrats who otherwise operate in silos within their ministries suddenly had a chance to bond and develop camaraderie with each other. Echoing civil servants I interviewed,<sup>67</sup> a UN agency official who oversaw the project considered the study tour pivotal for NSSS’ development:<sup>68</sup>

South Africa study tour was a groundbreaking thing... All the ten important secretaries went together in one group. And they joined together there. They formed a platform of consensus understanding.

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<sup>64</sup> Interview with Civil servant 1 (2017)

<sup>65</sup> For the same reason, I met mid-level bureaucrats at the EPRI course in Chiang Mai, Thailand but very senior bureaucrats at the ILO conference in Geneva, Switzerland.

<sup>66</sup> Internal memos issued by the Cabinet Division listing details of the civil servants nominated for the two study tours, July 2013

<sup>67</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 1 (2017), 2 and 4 (2018)

<sup>68</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)

Although the alliance would be short-lived because—being very senior bureaucrats—many retired a few years afterwards, these ten bureaucrats would go on to steer the NSSS to completion through some very difficult times. This incident can be considered as evidence of a potentially novel pathway taken by policy transfer tools, like study tours, to effect an impact – not through the content of the transfer, but through the interpersonal relationships built in the process of the transfer attempt.

### **4.3 Policy formation**

Aminuzzaman’s (2013b) normative description of the process of policymaking in Bangladesh includes several rounds of participatory consultations, at least within the bureaucracy. In contrast, Kamruzzaman (2014) and Rahman (2019) show the country’s policymaking process is almost wholly controlled by donors who effectively exclude not only bureaucrats but also parliamentarians from the process. In this section, I describe the power of state actors (bureaucratic and political) in the NSSS’ development, demonstrating the normative description appears to be more valid than the fieldwork-based positive description. This aligns with the thesis’ attention to the complex and constantly changing dynamics and interaction of power relations between different actors in the policy spheres.

#### **4.3.1 The power of bureaucratic actors**

Soon after the South Africa study tour, a flurry of bureaucrat-led activities took place around the NSSS. Civil servants commissioned NGOs and the consultant consortium to carry out regional dialogues for input into the NSSS.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, the Central Monitoring Committee’s subcommittee charged with overseeing NSSS’ drafting met frequently to discuss progress. By early 2014, several meetings had taken place amongst senior bureaucrats to discuss the design of the NSSS, and the bureaucrats arranged national dialogues with others within their ranks as well as the civil society.<sup>70</sup> Donor presence at these events—if at all—was perfunctory at best. The most consequential development in this phase was that the consultant consortium,

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<sup>69</sup> Minutes of November 3, 2013 meeting to discuss the modalities of regional dialogue of draft NSPS chaired by Member, GED

<sup>70</sup> Slide 6 of MS PowerPoint presentation by a senior bureaucrat of GED at a CMC focal points meeting on August 9, 2015

which included foreign consultants, submitted the zero, first, and revised drafts between October and December 2013. The drafts were circulated widely amongst the ministries and donor agencies. Besides conducting face to face negotiations, every ministry sent several rounds of written feedback on the drafts, as did the donors.<sup>71</sup> The drafts sparked off intense disagreements over several reform proposals that are discussed in the next four chapters. The disagreements were so severe that they ground the negotiations to a halt by early 2014 in a “seeming stalemate”.<sup>72</sup> According to a senior consultant, the disputes happened because:<sup>73</sup>

...there was some tug and pool [between] the bureaucracy and the team which was preparing the NSSS... the UNDP inserted a team of consultants who were pushing certain frameworks imported from other contexts over which there were tensions. It was a tension of improbable textbook models from elsewhere and a bureaucracy wanting to push back against this textbook model based on their knowledge of the local context.

In January 2014, a controversial national election, which was boycotted by opposition parties, took place in Bangladesh. The election severely weakened the Awami League government’s legitimacy (Riaz, 2019). Anxious about the stalemate in the NSSS negotiations and by the potential future ramifications for a policy developed under the aegis of a government with questionable legitimacy, the UNDP commissioned a political economy analysis from two veteran national and international experts to devise the best way forward.<sup>74</sup> Following a high-level fact-finding mission where, among others, they met with ministers, donor officials, and bureaucrats, their report criticised the reformists—mostly donor-funded consultants—by arguing it was only right for Bangladeshi policies to reflect Bangladeshi contextual realities and strongly recommended avoiding “polemic” debates, such as those over adopting universalism as opposed to targeting, or cash transfers as opposed to food transfers in the NSSS.<sup>75</sup> In the stand off between the bureaucrat-led old guard and the UNDP-endorsed reformists, the reformists were asked to blink first. They blinked, but slowly. Although a new draft was circulated in mid-2014, it was not until a year later in

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<sup>71</sup> The bulk of the documentary analysis I do in this study is of these memos.

<sup>72</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 3

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Consultant 9 (2018)

<sup>74</sup> Interviews with UN agency official 1 (2017), Consultants 6 and 9 (2018)

<sup>75</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 5

March 2015 that a draft was approved by the bureaucracy as worthy of being presented to the Cabinet. Nevertheless, by then the bureaucracy was confident they had prevailed in the contestation, so that summer the Finance Minister announced the NSSS in his annual budget speech in the parliament.<sup>76</sup>

I would like to reaffirm that... poverty reduction initiatives will continue in future... with a view to accelerating the poverty eradication process. We have almost finalized the 'National Social Protection Strategy'...

A discussion that happened at the time about Bangladesh's social protection budget is indicative of the bureaucracy's determination and ability to protect its own interests. Barrientos (2013) finds that most developing countries spend between 1-2% of their GDP on social protection even though the normative need is many times higher than that. In Bangladesh, the government claims to spend between 1.3 to 3% of GDP on social protection, putting it on par with other developing countries (GED, 2015). However, this figure is disingenuous because it includes the civil service pensions. The inclusion of civil service pensions in the social protection budget is technically correct – retired government employees have as much right to an income in their old age as any other population subgroup. However, as an academic advising on the NSSS put it, "Civil service pension shouldn't be a part of government policy. It's government as employer."<sup>77</sup> The issue is especially problematic in Bangladesh because employee compensation from public spending is already significantly higher in the country in comparison to its neighbours (see Figure 4.1). The disproportionate amount allocated to public servants inflates the budget artificially (see Appendix B). An expert who was an advisor on the NSSS effort complained:<sup>78</sup>

When you say that we must increase government expenditure on social protection, [the bureaucrats] say we're already spending 3% of GDP on social protection. But when they say that what they mean is 2% is going to civil service pensions... so in terms of general social assistance, it's practically nothing.

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<sup>76</sup> Budget speech 2014-15, Minister of Finance Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, June 5, 2014, p. 35

<sup>77</sup> Interview with Consultant 5 (2017)

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Consultant 8 (2018)

## Share of employee compensation in public spending, 2001 to 2016

Central government expenditures going to the compensation of government employees. Compensation of employees includes all payments (both in cash and in kind), as well as government contributions to social insurance schemes such as social security and pensions that provide benefits to employees.

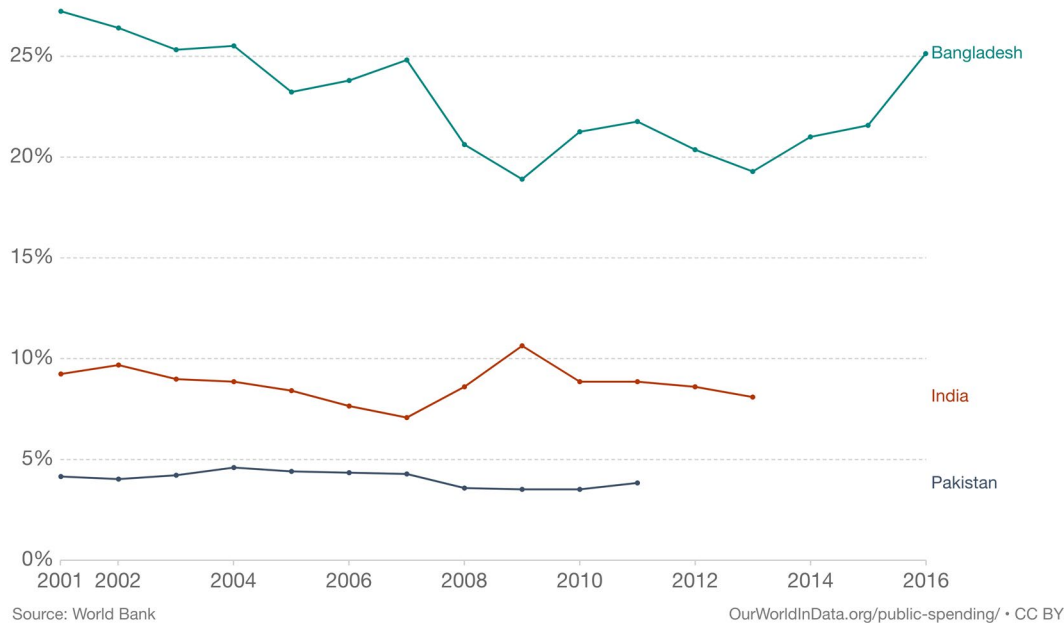


FIGURE 4.1: Share of employee compensation in public spending, 2001-16<sup>79</sup>

Bureaucrats are cognisant of the problem – I witnessed this issue discussed at a meeting between donors and civil servants involved with the NSSS.<sup>80</sup> The senior-most bureaucrat present at the meeting acknowledged that conflating the civil service pensions with the wider social protection budget creates considerable analytical confusion. There is, however, staunch resistance from the civil service against any interference in its pensions. Internal briefings this same senior bureaucrat gave in 2014 and 2015 explicitly stated the civil service pensions would remain unchanged in the NSSS.<sup>81</sup> For the benefit of the politicians, the bureaucrats have defended their budget by painting the issue as a political threat. They argue that removing the civil service pension from the social protection budget will dramatically reduce the sector’s budget by about 30%. A bureaucrat acquainted with the civil service’s thinking on this issue shared, “The fall in budget can immediately be given a political colour. Critics will say the government used to spend 2.44% on social protection, now it has jumped down to 1.75%. Why will the government create this opportunity [for

<sup>79</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on December 28, 2020 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/share-of-employee-compensation-in-public-spending?tab=chart&time=2001..latest&country=BGD~IND~PAK>

<sup>80</sup> Observations at Local Consultative Working Group on Poverty meeting on May 30, 2018

<sup>81</sup> The Microsoft PowerPoint presentations he prepared for the briefings were dated June 12, 2014 (slide 9) and March 11, 2015 (slide 13). The documents I saw did not indicate who his audience was.



criticism]?”<sup>82</sup> Unsurprisingly, the NSSS instructs (GED, 2015, p. xxiii), “Continue with the Government Service Pension under the Finance Division with no change at this time”.

The bureaucrats in Bangladesh have always acted as gatekeepers to the different ministers. As such, they manage to wield remarkable influence by virtue of their link to ministers who hold supreme authority over policymaking. An influential consultant recalled that during NSSS’ formation:<sup>83</sup>

...negotiations would be done with the Secretaries who would go to the Ministers. ... Ministers certainly poke their noses into the policies, but the Secretaries would be the go between, and would bring back the message that this wasn’t going to work with the Minister. If you wanted to place an idea into the Minister’s mind that you would want support for, then you would make sure you presented it to the Secretary in a way that would make it easy for the Secretary to transfer up... Secretaries are messengers cum negotiators...

The Cabinet Secretary, in particular, was considered a champion of the NSSS. One of the policy’s authors reported, “The [then] Cabinet Secretary [is] a very dear friend. He is now in the World Bank. He was instrumental – he was able to convince the Prime Minister that [NSSS] is the right thing.”<sup>84</sup>

#### **4.3.2 The influence of political actors**

The noteworthy characteristic of political actors’ involvement in the NSSS’ development was that no other actors contested any ministerial decisions – whatever they decreed was carried out without debate. Nevertheless, politicians were not particularly visible in the NSSS negotiations except at the very end because, as an expert interviewee shared, ministers have varying interest in policy matters:<sup>85</sup>

Some ministers are really just passing through very quickly and are not very serious. Others are very serious about their self-interest whereas others are serious about what they’re doing. Although those ministers

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<sup>82</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Consultant 6 (2018)

<sup>84</sup> Interviews with Civil servant 1 (2017) and Consultant 1 (2018)

<sup>85</sup> Interviews with Civil servant 1 (2017), 2 (2018) and 10 (2018); quote from Consultant 6 (2018)

serious about their ministerial portfolios are only about a third of the ministers I've met [in my career].

In this instance, the Prime Minister herself took a personal interest in the NSSS.<sup>86</sup> She defended existing institutional structures when there was a proposal to create a new agency to oversee all the social protection programmes, which are now fragmented across 23 ministries. This proposal was “absolutely scrapped... the Prime Minister said, ‘We [already] have the Ministry of Social Welfare’”, so a new agency was redundant.<sup>87</sup> In an instantiation of the demand for the policy to be indigenous to Bangladesh, she is also credited with the name change from National Social *Protection* Strategy to National Social *Security* Strategy (see Table 4.1).<sup>88</sup> It would keep the document consistent with the constitution of Bangladesh, which, in Article 15(d), guarantees a right to social security defined as “public assistance in cases of undeserved want arising from unemployment, illness or disablement, or suffered by widows or orphans or in old age, or in other such cases”.<sup>89</sup> Constitutional guarantees are seldom justiciable in Bangladesh though, which made the name change wholly symbolic albeit patriotic.<sup>90</sup>

Name of the document	Iteration	Date
Bangladesh National Social Protection Strategy	Zero draft	October 31, 2013
Bangladesh National Social Protection Strategy	First draft	November 15, 2013
National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) of Bangladesh	Revised draft	December 27, 2013
National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh	4 <sup>th</sup> draft	June 4, 2014
National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh	Final draft before Cabinet meeting	March 2015
National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh	Final draft after Cabinet meeting	April 2015
National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) of Bangladesh	Published document	July 2015

TABLE 4.1: The NSSS underwent several rounds of revisions

<sup>86</sup> Interviews with Civil servant 1 (2017), 2 (2018) and UN agency official 1 (2017)

<sup>87</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Civil servant 1 (2017)

<sup>89</sup> Source: Ministry of Law, <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-details-367.html>, retrieved on February 24, 2021

<sup>90</sup> Across this document, I use NSSS and NSPS interchangeably depending on the context.

The Prime Minister's reportedly conservative views about social welfare also impacted the NSSS. She was particularly apprehensive of inclusion errors<sup>91</sup> and sent written instructions to remove any direct mention of increased transfer amounts from the NSSS.<sup>92</sup> In that vein, I did not find the dependency myth, which argues that recipients become lazy and unproductive by dint of receiving welfare (Standing, 2007), to be in vogue in the policymaking arena – no interviewee brought it up, none of the various ministry memos expressed concerns about it, nor was it discussed in any policy space I observed, except in one instance. On the single occasion I saw the dependency myth being discussed, a bureaucrat at the Department of Social Services recounted to his superior:<sup>93</sup>

Sir, as you no doubt remember, our zilla committee [local government body] submitted a request to increase the size of the social protection transfers. But our Honourable Prime Minister is so far-sighted – she explained to us that, “I won’t increase the amount; I will increase the coverage. Because if I increase the amount, the recipient will stop working. Instead of doing that, I am giving nominal support so he can find some way to earn.”

The reason the dependency myth is rare in Bangladesh is possibly because transfer amounts are so notoriously low that the question of dependency appears redundant to most observers. In the NSSS, old age allowance is estimated at BDT 500/month (about GB£ 5/month) whilst child benefits are BDT 300/month (about GB£ 3/month). It is amounts like these that local government officials had petitioned to increase and the Prime Minister had worried would create dependency. Thus whilst politicians were largely uninvolved in the NSSS' making, when they chose to be involved they had a significant effect.

On April 6, 2015, the NSSS was placed before the Cabinet.<sup>94</sup> The Cabinet demanded several changes to the NSSS, which were duly made (see Chapter 8). A second

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017), who described first hand knowledge of the events.

<sup>92</sup> Memo signed by the Prime Minister circulated on April 7, 2015, outlining decisions made at the Cabinet meeting on April 6, 2015, which requested the removal of proposed standardised allowance rates from the document, such as BDT 800/month (approx. GB£ 8/month) and BDT 1600/month (approx. GB£ 16/month). The decision should be left up to individual committee's discretion in the future, the memo suggested.

<sup>93</sup> Observations at the Department of Social Services (2018)

<sup>94</sup> Minutes of April 6, 2015 Cabinet meeting

Cabinet meeting on June 1 approved the edited NSSS;<sup>95</sup> the document was published in July; and launched at a formal ceremony at GED attended by politicians, bureaucrats, donors, and members of the civil society on November 5, 2015. The National Social Security Strategy's decade long journey had ended.

#### **4.4 A home grown policy?**

The analysis of NSSS' policy development process highlights three major actors: the donors, including their consultants, the bureaucrats, and the ministers. Aid donors initiated the NSSS due to the increasing global focus on social protection since the 2000s (Deacon, 2013; Schmitt, 2020). This meant global institutional and discursive pressures that are brought to bear on countries across the world, and on Bangladesh in particular, were on display in the NSSS negotiations. Interestingly, unlike previous efforts where their power was more limited—such as when drafting the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper in the early 2000s (Kamruzzaman, 2014)—bureaucrats and ministers were included in the NSSS' policymaking process as key stakeholders with veto powers. While the ministers had absolute authority over final decisions regarding the policy, their actual involvement in the policymaking process itself was relatively small. It was the bureaucrats and donors who had more regular involvement in the process and thus had more opportunity to clash over several fronts.

The analysis of the role of the different actors in the NSSS process so far reveals three interesting issues. First, mainstream literature on policymaking in Bangladesh discussed in Chapter 3 paints the bureaucracy as a hapless entity in front of the donors (Aminuzzaman, 2013b; Rahman and Quadir, 2018). The discussion above does not concur with this description. Instead, bureaucrats have substantial influence and appear to wield it in part motivated by self-interest. Deviating from earlier Weberian notions of a professional meritocratic bureaucracy that was 'above politics', public choice theorists had proposed the bureaucracy could in fact act in self-interested ways. Bureaucrats could seek to increase their departmental budget (Niskanen, 1971) and maximise personal gain (Dunleavy, 1991). The Bangladeshi bureaucracy's robust defence of its pensions even when it compromised social protection's fiscal portfolio is in line with public choice theorists' arguments. The bureaucracy's lack of

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<sup>95</sup> Minutes of June 1, 2015 Cabinet meeting

professionalism stems in part from political partisanship whereby loyalty to the ruling party, not competence, decides the career trajectory of a bureaucrat.

Second, the debate about donor imposition versus national ownership of policies seems—in the minds of the bureaucracy, at least—to have been resolved in the case of the NSSS. The final NSSS document includes a message from its policy champion, the then Cabinet Secretary M Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan, where he writes (GED, 2015, p. vii), “The National Social Security Strategy that has now been finalised is a home grown one, built on our profound experience and fit to the context of Bangladesh.” Certainly, the intransigence of the bureaucrats in the face of reform efforts and the fact that they ultimately prevailed in the contestations would seem to indicate it is indeed a home grown policy. Conversely, the fact that the policy exists at all is an outcome of donors initiating the process, and the donor-linked epistemic community setting the parameters of the discussion throughout the process. Both arguments have validity and simply tracing the policy development process is unlikely to resolve the debate, therefore I return to this issue in later chapters.

Third, the terms the interviewees used and are prevalent across contemporaneous documents—‘home grown’ or ‘donor imposed’ or ‘ministers’—implies that these refer to monolithic issues when, in fact, they involve a multitude of agencies and actors with often conflicting interests. Different donor agencies have different agendas, just as different ministries have different interests. The fact that a multitude of polyolithic organisations was involved allowed four types of contestations to surface during NSSS’ development: the contestation between donors, the contestation within the state, the contestation between donors and the state, and the contestation between the state and society. In several instances, since many social actors do not have access to policymaking spaces, the influences of society were not manifested directly but through the interplay of complex historical processes, which set up path dependent mechanisms that constrained policymakers’ choices. Some of these societal factors have been introduced in the previous chapter through the discussion on political, economic, and social contexts. The salient question that remains for the remaining chapters is how the interaction between the donors, the state, and the wider society impacted NSSS’ design through issue-specific political settlements.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed the question: *What political concerns shape the role of bureaucrats and donors in Bangladesh's social protection system?* I traced NSSS' formation to show there was a tension between donors and state actors. The donors were the prime movers in the early stages of NSSS' formation, dominating agenda setting and alternative specification, and using epistemic communities and study tours to pollinate their ideas in the policymaking community. Although donor-linked idea transfer efforts actively tried to shape the contours of the discussion surrounding social protection, it is difficult to gauge the extent of uptake of their ideas. Towards the end of the process, the bureaucracy appears to have taken charge, which is contrary to the existing literature's expectations of the bureaucracy. At the final stage, the ministers also had their say. I have not addressed donor motivations in this chapter; these are explored in subsequent chapters. In contrast, to some degree, the bureaucratic motivation appears to have been self-interest. However, it would be incorrect to treat donors and bureaucrats as monolithic entities since they represent a variety of interests.

This chapter sought to zoom out to give a broad overview of the process of NSSS' development in order to enable a more detailed zoomed-in analysis of the reform contestations in the later chapters. As the locus of activity shifted away from the donors to the bureaucrats, major disagreements arose over NSSS' design that nearly stalled its development. One of the utilities of political settlements analysis is it helps explain which reform efforts are likely to succeed and which to fail (Khan, 2011). *Ceteris paribus*, institutional reform efforts that substantially change the power distribution amongst actors and their consequent rental streams are unlikely to succeed. The NSSS undertook four key reform efforts. It tried to introduce universalism instead of targeting; it tried to shift to cash instead of food; it tried to involve NGOs in the policymaking process; and it tried to introduce social insurance for formal sectors workers. All of these efforts failed. Their failures indicate the efforts interfered with the existing constellation of power and institutions. In the next four chapters, I zoom in on the reform contestations and explain the reasons they failed. I argue the so-called "polemic" reformist debates, far from being trivial, were in fact indicative of important issue-specific political settlements that exist in the

country and were resolved in accordance with these settlements. The first reform contestation I discuss was the NSSS' attempt to shift away from targeted social protection transfers to universal transfers. Whilst the attempt failed, it left in its wake the puzzling oxymoron of 'targeted universal', which is examined next.

<p><b>2005</b> World Bank, DFID, and WFP fund a policy workshop on safety nets</p> <p><b>2010</b> Funded by UNDP, PPRC conducts a thorough study of social protection in the country</p> <p><b>2011</b> October: UNDP and the government organise the Dhaka Conference; Prime Minister inaugurates</p> <p><b>2012</b> January and March: UNDP, DFID, AusAid, and WFP consultants recommend the government should lead NSSS' formation even if it slows the process</p> <p><b>2013</b> July: UNDP assists GED to select SANEM and PRI as the consortium of consultants who will draft the NSSS; they are tasked with delivering 10 background papers to feed into the strategy</p> <p><b>2013</b> August: UNDP and AusAid take senior and mid-ranking bureaucrats on social protection study tours to South Africa and Lesotho (19-27th) and Nepal (25-31st); EPRI assists</p> <p><b>2014</b> March-April: Concerned by delays in NSSS' development and the political upheaval over the controversial 2014 election, a UNDP commissioned political economy analysis of NSSS' formation is carried out by veteran national and international consultants; they recommend avoiding polemical debates and heeding local stakeholder demands to ground policy choices in contextual realities</p>	<p><b>2012</b> September: Cabinet meeting on 10th, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, entrusts GED with drafting the NSSS under the guidance of a Central Monitoring Committee; Action Plan is finalised on 22nd</p> <p><b>2013</b> July: Framework paper prepared under the aegis of GED is endorsed by the Central Monitoring Committee and approved by the Ministry of Planning; the paper is almost identical to UNDP-PPRC study's recommendations</p> <p><b>2013</b> July 28: NSSS' inception workshop is attended by 3 ministers and 19 senior to mid-ranking secretaries, including the Cabinet Secretary, as well as several director generals, joint chiefs and their subordinates. Among others, high ranking representatives from UNDP, DFID, FAO, WFP, EU delegation, UNICEF, World Bank and AusAid are also present, along with the media and consultants from the consortium</p> <p><b>2013</b> October 21: Chaired by GED, and attended by bureaucrats, UNDP, DFID, AusAid, consultant consortium, and EPRI, the background papers are discussed; they would be finalised after the suggested revisions</p> <p><b>2013</b> October 31, November 15, and December 27: Consultant consortium submits zero, first, and revised drafts respectively for review; many agencies—both government and donor—and international consultants, including several academics, submit written feedback; intense disagreements arise</p> <p><b>2013</b> November: GED contracts PRI/SANEM and local NGOs to host regional dialogues in Rangpur, Sylhet, Khulna and Dhaka with local public officials, civil society, and programme beneficiaries</p> <p><b>2014</b> January 9: GED meets with 39 senior officials from all ministries/divisions to discuss NSSS</p> <p><b>2014</b> February 16 and 20: National dialogue held with senior bureaucrats and civil society organisations respectively</p> <p><b>2014</b> June 4: 4th draft is circulated</p> <p><b>2014</b> June 5: In the annual budget speech in parliament, Finance Minister announces NSSS will be adopted</p> <p><b>2015</b> March and April: Changes are made to draft NSSS before and after April 6 Cabinet Meeting</p> <p><b>2015</b> June, July, and November: NSSS is approved at June 1 Cabinet meeting; published in July; and launched on November 5th</p>
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FIGURE 4.2: NSSS' development timeline



# CHAPTER 5

## THE POLITICS OF RESISTING UNIVERSAL SOCIAL PROTECTION: THE “TARGETED UNIVERSAL” OXYMORON

*“Benefits meant exclusively for the poor often end up being poor benefits.”*  
Amartya Sen, 1995, p. 14

A major fault line in the design of social protection systems exists around the question of benefit coverage – whether benefits should be universally available to a populace or whether they should be targeted to the poor. Esping-Andersen’s (1990) classic welfare regime typology uses this rift as the basis for its categorisation. Globally there is also a high-level drive ongoing to gradually introduce universalism to developing countries. This drive is exemplified by the ILO and World Bank’s joint call for universalism in 2015 (World Bank, 2015b) and the ILO’s 2011 global social protection floor initiative (Deacon, 2013). The focus in these global calls—rhetorically at least—is for less targeting and more universalism. The NSSS saw vigorous contestations on this issue as well. During the NSSS negotiations, the debate between targeting and universalism was one of the so-called “polemic” reform debates mentioned in the last chapter that was criticised for being “over-focused on the historical experience of high and middle-income countries” and thus disconnected from Bangladesh's context.<sup>96</sup> In this chapter, I describe the debate as it unfolded in the NSSS. Despite robust efforts to instate universalism, targeting prevailed in the final

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<sup>96</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 5

policy in the form of an oxymoronic compromise called “targeted universal” (GED, 2015, p. xxi).

Using this thesis’ conceptual framework, I attribute the failure of the reform effort to a constellation of power, institutions and ideas that favour targeting over universalism and create an issue-specific settlement that I call a ‘targeting settlement’. In the previous chapter, I argued that the debate between donor imposition and national ownership needs to be resolved at the issue-level. In this chapter, on the issue of universalism and targeting, I demonstrate that whilst donors did exert coercive influence during the NSSS negotiations, the coercion worked in tandem with domestic factors to preclude universalism as a viable policy option. The domestic factors involve ideas about social protection and deservingness, and the reluctance of bureaucratic and political rent-seekers to consent to any changes to a status quo that has historically favoured targeting. The status quo is a result of institutions that arose in response to historical developments outlined in the previous chapters. These findings form the basis of my answer to the question: *What political considerations animate the universalism vs. targeting debate in the NSSS?*

In the next section, I describe the contours of the debate in the NSSS. I explain that although the government chose an oxymoronic compromise called ‘targeted universal’, it is just ‘targeting’ by another name. I then discuss four factors that explain why targeting was defended – one transnational and three domestic. I conclude by describing a targeting settlement and commenting on the significance of my findings in light of the global efforts to institutionalise universalism.

## **5.1 The universalism vs. targeting debate in the NSSS**

Between late 2013 and early 2014, there were vigorous negotiations between the proponents of targeting and the proponents of universalism in Bangladesh, with targeting ultimately emerging victorious in the NSSS. Both the pro-universalist and pro-targeting camps in the contestation used the standard arguments about targeting and universalism discussed in Chapter 2. Many bureaucrats questioned the fiscal implications of universalism whilst others, especially international consultants,

focused on the political disadvantages of targeting.<sup>97</sup> The debate culminated in the puzzling and oxymoronic compromise called “targeted universal” that is explained below (GED, 2015, p. xxi).

The most telling outcome of the contestation can be seen in the language changes made to the NSSS drafts (see Table 5.1). In the 2013 draft, the government aimed to expand coverage to include broad categories, such as children, the elderly and the disabled, without any poverty targeting. It thus described the classic categorical variant of universalism discussed in Chapter 2 (Skocpol, 1991). In contrast, the 2014 draft—the language of which is retained in the final document—undergoes a complete shift in intent and character. It says the government will adopt a “targeted universal” approach. The approach will aim to avoid leakage of transfers, and the key goal of social protection would be to eliminate extreme poverty. The focus on poverty signalled a shift away from universalism to means-testing. However, despite professing to focus on extreme poverty, along with the poor, the document also adds the nominally non-poor to the target population. Thus social protection beneficiaries, as envisioned by the NSSS, would be those below the poverty line plus those with per capita income less than 1.25 times the poverty line (GED, 2015).

NSSS draft	Priority challenges the government aims to address over the medium term, i.e. next five years
December 27, 2013 (p. xv)	“Expanding coverage of core schemes for the most vulnerable members of society, focusing on children, the elderly and people with disabilities.”
June 4, 2014 (pp. xv-xvi)	<p><i>New addition:</i> “A shift from current discretionary to a targeted universal approach to avoid leakages and under-coverage.”</p> <p><i>Revised statement:</i> “Expanding coverage of core schemes for the extreme/hardcore poor and most vulnerable people of the society, focusing on mother and child, youth, working age, the elderly and people with disabilities. A basic objective for the next five years would be to support the elimination of hardcore/extreme poverty as much as possible.”</p>

TABLE 5.1: Language changes in the NSSS drafts between 2013 and 2014

The oxymoronic term “targeted universal” is unique to Bangladesh and was described as a compromise between the targeting and universalism camps.<sup>98</sup> In an interview, a

<sup>97</sup> Observations at Dhaka stakeholder consultation (2018), Geneva conference (2019), and interviews with UN agency official 10 (2019), Civil servant 5 (2019), Consultant 7 (2017) and Consultant 8 (2018)

<sup>98</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 1 (2017), 2 (2018), 4 (2018), and Consultant 1 (2018)

senior bureaucrat explained the government's understanding of the term as (emphasis added):<sup>99</sup>

The government wants to acknowledge that there are loopholes in the current system of distributing social safety nets – there are no specific criteria [for choosing beneficiaries]. To a large extent, it is discretionary. The UNO, the MP, the Upazila Chairman, or the Union Parishad Chairman [all local government positions] submit names of people they feel are suitable and remove those names they find unsuitable. It's dependent on the official's wish. ... Targeted universal is not universal. But amongst those for whom the program is applicable, it will be for all. *It won't be discretionary.* ... It is one step above discretionary. We won't be able to give to everyone, but *everyone who is targeted will get it.*

Although the intent to remove politically motivated leakage is well-intentioned, the proffered explanation only underscores that “targeted universal”—by virtue of giving social protection to everyone who is targeted—in fact describes “perfect targeting”, which is nearly impossible to achieve (Kidd, 2017). At the moment, the extent of exclusion error in the state's social protection programmes is as high as 71% and the inclusion error is around 46.5% (Razzaque et al., 2020). Given the ubiquity of targeting errors discussed earlier (see Chapter 2), the government's aim certainly appears overly ambitious. Overall, instead of being a compromise, this episode is more accurately characterised as a victory for targeting.

The key difference between a political settlement and a one-off policy decision is that political settlements are durable and reproducible (Khan, 2018a). As discussed in the conceptual framework, this thesis tests for durability and reproducibility by grounding the analysis in historical developments and, where available, discusses policy developments subsequent to the NSSS to gauge if the settlement is upheld. In this case, the refusal to instate universalism was not a one-off event. Three years after the NSSS was finalised, UNICEF undertook a new attempt to institutionalise universalism by proposing a universal child benefit programme explicitly linked to the NSSS.<sup>100</sup> Officials involved with the effort acknowledged that there exists a

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<sup>99</sup> Interview with Civil servant 2 (2018)

<sup>100</sup> Titled *Agamir Shishu*, the project established an institutional foothold within the Cabinet Division with a Policy Guidance Unit for Child-focused Social Protection in late 2018. At the Dhaka stakeholder consultation (see Chapter 1), almost all the speakers referred to the NSSS to legitimise the child grants.

strong opposition to universalism in Bangladesh.<sup>101</sup> To avoid difficulties, UNICEF promoted the project as merely a consolidation of pre-existing projects administered by several ministries.<sup>102</sup> The rationale was that consolidation could reduce duplication and increase coverage, and thus act as a first step towards universalism. However, the universal aspect of the child grant was immediately challenged. Bureaucrats, in particular, questioned the deservingness of non-poor beneficiaries as well as the fiscal space<sup>103</sup> – at a projected cost of 0.9% of GDP, it would have to be one of the biggest public social protection budget lines.<sup>104</sup> As a result, the ‘universal’ aspect of the project was largely treated with scepticism. An influential consultant for the government predicted, “[The UNICEF proposal] will just remain in the document” because since “it hasn’t passed the test of credibility and acceptance”, it would not be implemented.<sup>105</sup> Proving him correct, soon the concept of universalism was side-lined and the project focused on consolidation.<sup>106</sup> The opposition to universalism in the NSSS was thus not a one-off decision.

The NSSS’ decisions are puzzling for two reasons. First, the NSSS was negotiated at a time when there was a global shift towards universalism. For example, amongst international organisations, the World Bank and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) traditionally hold diametrically opposed views about social protection. The World Bank backs a residualist, targeted model whereas the ILO promotes a rights-based, universalist approach (ILO, 2017). However, around the time the NSSS was finalised, the two agencies released an unprecedented joint statement in favour of universal social protection (World Bank, 2015b). NSSS’ decision to uphold targeting, therefore, went against a global discourse shift in favour of universalism. Second, at the local level, the efforts to instate universalism was particularly strong, in fact, strong enough that they stalled the NSSS negotiations altogether (see Chapter 4). Despite that, the support for targeting was entrenched enough that the policy authors had to invent an oxymoronic term like “targeted universal” to ensure targeting was retained. It is unclear what makes the targeted

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<sup>101</sup> Interviews with UN agency official 10 (2019), Consultant 8 (2018) and Civil servant 5 (2019)

<sup>102</sup> UNICEF draft report *Towards child-sensitive social protection in Bangladesh*, February 2019

<sup>103</sup> Observations at the Dhaka stakeholder consultation (2018) and the Geneva conference (2019)

<sup>104</sup> UNICEF draft report *Towards child-sensitive social protection in Bangladesh*, February 2019

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Consultant 9 (2018) and Civil servant 5 (2019)

<sup>106</sup> Interview with UN agency official 10 (2019)

approach to social protection so influential in the country. The following section addresses these puzzles.

## **5.2 The reasons for “targeted universal”**

There are four reasons why universalism did not prevail during the NSSS negotiations. The most obvious reason is that there was substantial pressure from the World Bank to continue with targeted social protection programmes. Additionally, the Bank’s pressure was matched by a domestic environment that also supported targeted programmes. The reasons for preferring targeting on the domestic front were bureaucratic pressure, electoral politics, and ideas. In this section, I explain these four reasons in order to describe the targeting settlement in the next section.

### **5.2.1 Donor pressure**

As discussed in previous chapters, donor coercion through aid conditionalities has been a common feature of state-donor relations for decades. In Bangladesh, donors were even accused of committing “development aggression” through their policy prescriptions during the structural adjustment period (Parnini, 2009, p. 560). Although the language of ‘national ownership’ of policies is more common now, researchers have argued ownership simply masks the previous conditionality regime in an ostensibly participatory language (Whitfield, 2009). This is because coercion can happen as much through the exercise of direct force as by manipulating economic costs and benefits, a practice that continues today (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett, 2007). During the NSSS negotiations, the World Bank exerted coercive pressure by using its loans as incentives to ensure universalism did not replace targeting. This section explains how donor pressure impacted the debate in the NSSS.

The World Bank has always stridently opposed universalism in Bangladesh.<sup>107</sup> Bank officials, for example, have produced extensive justifications for proxy means test

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<sup>107</sup> Interviews with UN agency official 1 (2017), Consultants 7 (2017), 1 (2018) and 8 (2018)

based targeting in the country.<sup>108</sup> In response to the NSSS drafts that advocated for universalism, the Bank sent written comments to the government complaining:<sup>109</sup>

...something which we find of [great] concern – the draft NSPS advocates a move away from targeting. ... the authorities in Bangladesh have finally started to make important advances in the area of improving targeting of social safety nets, and it would be a great loss if these efforts are undermined by the publication of a document that advocates abandoning/shifting away from it.

Whilst the Bank has always been ideologically aligned with targeting, in this case, the Bank was motivated to a major extent by institutional incentives. An influential consultant for the NSSS effort shared that, at the time, the Bank was “trying to sell loans to Bangladesh for workfare programs and for conditional cash transfers. [Universalism] wasn’t aligning with their institutional interest. So they got very upset.”<sup>110</sup> The Bank reportedly relied on the line ministries who were its loan recipients to transmit its displeasure. One of the authors of the NSSS recalled, “They were talking to the ministries. The comments were coming as if they were coming from the government but it was obvious to us that they originated from the Bank.”<sup>111</sup> A 2014 UNDP assessment also reported “claims of patronage and personal networking behaviour by key players”.<sup>112</sup>

The ministry benefiting the most from the Bank’s financing was the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MODMR), which oversaw a US\$ 500m ‘Safety Net for the Poorest’ cash transfer project targeted to 30% of the population.<sup>113</sup> Consequently, MODMR expressed written concerns that the draft NSSS was recommending “a contradictory policy regarding targeting”<sup>114</sup> and formally warned that the NSSS was incompatible with the government’s existing agreements with the

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<sup>108</sup> An example is the report *Building a Targeting System for Bangladesh based on Proxy Means Testing* written by Iffath Sharif (2009) who was an influential senior economist in the World Bank country office’s Social Protection Team during the NSSS negotiations. However, Bangladesh’s World Bank funded attempt to create a proxy means tested national household database has doubled its budget from US\$ 39m to US\$ 86m over seven years without much success (Idris, 2020b).

<sup>109</sup> World Bank memo on NSSS 1<sup>st</sup> draft, November 2013

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Consultant 7 (2017)

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Consultant 8 (2018)

<sup>112</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 5

<sup>113</sup> MODMR memo on NSSS draft, December 4, 2013

<sup>114</sup> MODMR memo on NSSS draft, December 4, 2013, p. 2

World Bank.<sup>115</sup> The Economic Relations Division of the Ministry of Finance also warned that a further \$150m World Bank loan was in the pipeline for a conditional cash transfer project; this loan risked being jeopardised if Bangladesh moved to universalism.<sup>116</sup> The Statistics and Informatics Division and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reported overseeing a US\$ 40m Bank-funded project to create a proxy means test based Poverty Database – universalism would render the database, and the project, redundant too.<sup>117</sup> The potential threat of loss of funds from multiple projects proved a tangible threat in the negotiations, and the NSSS eventually reversed course from universalism to ‘targeted universal’.

In retrospect, the ministries’ conservative position appears to have been the financially prudent choice since the Bank’s insistence on targeting did not change even after the 2015 joint declaration with ILO in favour of universalism. During interviews in 2018, for example, Bank officials reported their superiors were still in favour of targeting.<sup>118</sup> Three years after the Bank’s joint declaration with ILO, the World Bank’s project appraisal document for a US\$ 300m loan to Bangladesh promised “Transparency and efficiency would be largely determined on the basis of targeting” and that this was “fully aligned with the World Bank Groups Social Protection and Labor Strategy (2012-2022)”.<sup>119</sup> Had Bangladesh shifted to universalism, funding streams such as this one would indeed have been jeopardised.

Although the Bank could convince the ministries to fall in line, the contestation between other donors and the Bank on the issue of targeting and universalism was more difficult to resolve. “The World Bank was at one point arguing UNDP was destroying all their work in Bangladesh [by advocating for universalism]”, recalled a UN agency official.<sup>120</sup> However, most donors, including those in favour of universalism like ILO and UNICEF, were primarily interested in protecting their “pet

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<sup>115</sup> MODMR memo on NSSS draft, January 8, 2014

<sup>116</sup> Economic Relations Division memo on NSSS third draft, n.d.

<sup>117</sup> Statistics and Informatics Division and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics memo on NSSS draft, December 1, 2013

<sup>118</sup> Interview with UN agency official 3 (2018)

<sup>119</sup> World Bank report titled *International Development Association Project Appraisal Document on a Proposed Credit in the amount of SDR 213.6m (US\$ 300m equivalent) to the People’s Republic of Bangladesh for a Cash Transfer Modernization Project*, January 4, 2018, quotes are from p. 18 and p. 16 respectively

<sup>120</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)



projects”.<sup>121</sup> They also did not have the financial clout the Bank had which would have allowed them to undertake their own forms of coercion. Therefore, although they framed the debate in terms of their theoretical position on universalism and targeting,<sup>122</sup> once their own projects were protected in the NSSS, the contestation effectively ended.

In the absence of any successful pushback from the other parties, the consultants tasked with drafting the NSSS were left to mount the defence for universalism on their own. The international consultant, in particular, was outspoken in his support for universalism.<sup>123</sup> However, since consultants were easily replaceable and had no institutional leverage, they had almost no power resources at their disposal. Given their fundamental weakness against the coercive power of the Bank, the consultants adopted a surprising tactic that Scott (1985) has described as a weapon of the weak: foot dragging. Scott’s use and mine are world’s apart – Scott was describing non-revolutionary forms of peasant resistance in class struggles, and I am describing highly paid national and international consultants refusing to edit MS Word documents. But the similarities are noticeable too. Scott’s (1985, p. 34) peasants used “unannounced, limited, and truculent” ways to avoid outright retaliation from the state. Instead of entering into a direct confrontation that would have resulted in them defaulting on their contract with the government, the consultants similarly dithered in making the changes demanded of them. “A particular cause for dis-satisfaction was the unresponsive attitude of the NSPS consultant to the comments [on their draft demanding changes be made to it],” records a UNDP assessment.<sup>124</sup>

Foot dragging achieved success too. Scott’s (1985, p. 36) peasants succeeded because their actions “changed or narrowed the policy options available to the state”. The consultants managed to insert the ‘vulnerable population’ into the NSSS (defined as those with per capita income less than 1.25 times the poverty line) when the original push had been to include only those below the poverty line. Although not an outright

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<sup>121</sup> Interviews with UN agency official 1 (2017), Consultants 7 (2017), 1 (2018), 8 (2018), Civil servant 2 (2018), and DFID memo on NSSS draft, December 8, 2013

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Donor 3 (2018)

<sup>123</sup> I witnessed this first hand when I heard him speak against targeting at a UNESCAP conference in Bangkok in 2017. Later, in Geneva in 2019, in conversations with UN officials working on social protection I found he had a reputation as a frank speaker who has emerged as a strong proponent of universalism in many developing country contexts.

<sup>124</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 5

victory, the shift in the government's position to extend social protection to more people than was originally planned is a testament to the limited, but tangible, success of the consultants' foot dragging tactics. Nevertheless, they could not hold out for long, and the pro-universalist wording was removed from the NSSS within months of the dispute arising. Abandoning their delaying tactic, they accepted a "pragmatic" compromise—which was the oxymoronic term 'targeted universal'—to ostensibly appease everyone.<sup>125</sup>

Since the Bank did not officially give conditionalities, and since it was the ministries voicing their opinions for them, it may appear at the outset that there was national ownership about the 'targeted universal' decision in the NSSS. However, the 'behind the scenes' mobilisation from Bank officials indicates that coercion can be brought to bear on governments in more insidious ways than direct conditionalities. In identifying these insidious processes, however, there is a risk of overlooking the agency of national actors. Whilst it is undoubtedly true that the Bank exerted coercive pressure to resolve the debate in its favour, the underlying domestic order was hospitable to its message too. The next three sections focus on the domestic factors.

### **5.2.2 Bureaucratic pressure**

The incremental and iterative process by which Bangladesh's social protection portfolio developed has incorporated a multiplicity of actors who are resistant to reforms. Specifically, the targeted nature of the social protection programmes has set Bangladesh down path dependent routes that have become entrenched in bureaucratic interests. This has made bureaucrats a key part of the political settlement on targeting, which I discuss in this section.

Since independence, Bangladesh has layered targeted programmes on top of targeted programmes (see Chapter 3). Rahman and Choudhury (2012) argue that there are three key features common to all these multi-decade social protection programmes. First, the programmes were demand-driven, responding to natural disasters and new democratic impulses. Second, none of the programmes was designed as rights-based programmes. Instead, repeated phases of experimentation and incrementalism drove

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<sup>125</sup> Interviews with Consultant 1 (2018) and Civil servant 2 (2018)

programme design. Finally, social protection programme expansion has been driven by a ‘vulnerability discourse’ that attempted to identify the groups of poor people missing in existing programmes and extending social welfare to them. Due to being ‘demand driven’, the programmes have lacked a central coordinating plan, which makes the country’s social protection system disconnected and fragmented.

The culture of ‘incremental programme experimentation’ meant almost any programme for which there was donor funding and/or domestic political backing stood a good chance of being adopted. As a result, over the years the donors have not felt a need to coordinate their efforts, opting instead to promote “pet projects”.<sup>126</sup> The government also had no interest in coordinating social protection efforts. This is because the proliferation of programmes meant many ministries could bolster their budgets and prestige even if it came at the cost of programme coherence. In fact, a civil servant shared that a government strategy to fend off uncomfortable questions about programme design is to pilot a small programme of any suggested design and let it run in the background. When challenged, the government can always respond, “It is being piloted” even when there is no real interest in expanding or institutionalising the programme.<sup>127</sup> As a result, when the NSSS was being negotiated, there were 13 ministries/agencies responsible for the main programmes, and 27 ministries/agencies were overall in charge of administering social protection programmes, with several instances of two or more ministries administering a single programme (see Table 5.2). The programmes had also proliferated unsystematically to number well over a hundred (see Appendix B).

<b>Major social protection programmes with a budget above BDT 1 billion</b>		
	<b>Programme name</b>	<b>Ministry</b>
1	Civil service pension	All ministries, mainly MOFn
2	Open Market Sale	MOFd, MODMR
3	Food for Work	
4	Test Relief	
5	Gratuitous Relief	
6	Vulnerable Group Feeding	MOWCA, MOFd, MODMR
7	Vulnerable Group Development	
8	Employment Generation Programme for the Ultra Poor	MODMR

<sup>126</sup> Interviews with UN agency official 1 (2017), Donors 1, 2, 3, 4 (2018), Consultants 7 (2017) and 1 (2018)

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

<b>Major social protection programmes with a budget above BDT 1 billion</b>		
	<b>Programme name</b>	<b>Ministry</b>
9	Allowance for the Financially Insolvent Disabled	MSW
10	Old Age Allowance	
11	Revitalization of Community Healthcare Initiative	MOHFW
12	Maternal, Child, Reproductive and Adolescent Health	
13	Primary Education Stipend	MOPME
14	School Feeding Programmes and School Feeding Programmes in Poverty Prone Areas	
15	Stipend and Access Increase for Secondary and Higher Secondary Level students	MOE
16	Honorarium for Insolvent Freedom Fighters	MOLWA
17	Construction of residence for landless and poor freedom fighters	
18	Ashrayan-2 Project	PMO
19	One Household One Farm	MOA
20	Fund for climate change	MOEF
21	Rural Employment and Road Maintenance Programme	MOLGRDC
22	Food Assistance for Chittagong Hill Tracts	MOCHTA

TABLE 5.2 Ministries responsible for some major social protection schemes (adapted from Mansur and Khondker, 2017, pp. 334-35)

As more programmes were added to the list, the number of actors resisting changes to the system increased at the cost of the efficiency of the entire system. Thus a “programme, once introduced, has rarely been rolled back, even if the benefits are so thinly distributed as to not justify the cost of administration” (Mahmud and Mahmud, 2015, p. 74). A result of such fragmentation and duplication in the social protection system is that bureaucratic interests have become entrenched in the current institutional structure that mostly comprises targeted programmes.<sup>128</sup> Introducing universalism would have required significant changes not only to the programmes themselves but also to the logic by which programmes are adopted. It would have inevitably required programme consolidation and possibly wholesale redesign. Whilst all bureaucrats, in theory, agreed on the need to consolidate programmes, almost all actual attempts to consolidate were fiercely resisted by them, in several instances through their ministers.<sup>129</sup> A contemporaneous UNDP study reported:<sup>130</sup>

It was revealing how the newly appointed Minister for Women and Children Affairs frankly admitted being strongly persuaded by her bureaucrats to join the 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2014 stakeholder dialogue to pre-empt any possible decision regarding program consolidation that could disfavour her ministry.

<sup>128</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 7 (2017), 4 (2018), 11 (2018) and Consultant 1 (2018)

<sup>129</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

<sup>130</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 7

The issue of programmatic restructuring presents a collective action problem for the government – whilst the final outcome of consolidation is one the bureaucracy unanimously supports, individual ministries may end up having to pay a disproportionate cost they are unwilling to pay (Olson, 1965).<sup>131</sup> As a result, they followed the classic reasoning of budget maximising bureaucrats who prioritise expanding their budgets to enhance their department’s prestige (Niskanen, 1968).<sup>132</sup> Several interviewees affirmed that the bureaucracy’s behaviour could be described as ‘turf protection’ rather than protecting personal financial gains:<sup>133</sup>

All the line ministries protected their corner... They are basically trying to protect their ability to design and implement their programs... I don’t think the secretaries would get any financial benefit out of it but it was a question of protecting their territory.

Path dependence was discussed in the conceptual framework to explain policy inertia and how a bias towards the status quo is created (Pierson, 2000). In the debate between targeting and universalism, part of the reason targeting prevailed was path dependence. Bangladesh’s social protection programmes were largely designed as targeted programmes and the cost of shifting to an alternative route now is too high for stakeholders. Not reforming the system allows bureaucratic rent-seeking to continue undisturbed. Previous political settlement analysis of social protection, such as Ulriksen’s (2020) on Tanzania, has argued bureaucrats are important in developing and implementing policies, but—by virtue of not being part of the ruling coalition—bureaucrats are not rent-seekers themselves. However, the issue-specific analysis in this thesis reveals that whilst bureaucrats are not part of the ruling coalition, they are nevertheless rent-seekers on specific policy issues. To protect economic rents for their ministries, they keenly defend the fragmented and targeted multiplicity of programmes that comprise Bangladesh’s social protection system.

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<sup>131</sup> Unsurprisingly, by 2019, which is four years after NSSS was finalised, 145 social protection programmes had only been nominally reduced to 118 (FPMU, 2019).

<sup>132</sup> Some policy activity does lead to personal benefit although it is not a particularly attractive benefit at the moment. Civil servant 1 (2017) shared that developing a policy document, such as the NSSS, which is then adopted, entitles bureaucrats involved in crafting the policy to a month’s basic salary as a bonus. This may partly explain Bangladesh’s prolific history of officially adopting a range of policies, many of which are seldom implemented. Some civil servants, such as 11 (2018), suspect this will be the fate of NSSS.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Consultant 1 (2018)

### 5.2.3 Electoral politics

Besides donor and bureaucratic pressures, electoral politics also played a role in helping targeting to triumph over universalism. This is because patron clientelism has thrived under targeting; there is cross-party consensus in support of targeted policies; and class-based arguments did not hold sway at a time the country was pivoting to authoritarianism. I discuss each in turn below.

#### *Patron clientelism*

Political settlement analysts argue that informal institutions like patron clientelism reflect underlying power structures in society (Behuria, Buur and Gray, 2017). When formal institutions are unable to allocate rents to key interest groups, informal institutions like patron clientelism arise to allow rents, like public resources, to flow to clients in return for their support (Khan, 2010). The difference between patron-clientelism and other forms of materially redistributive policies is that, unlike in the former, in the latter all eligible beneficiaries have access to resources irrespective of their political allegiance (Stokes, 2011). Introducing universalism to Bangladesh would have undermined patron clientelism and replaced it with materially redistribute policies that dealt with entire voter blocs instead of individual voters. This did not fit the interests of the ruling party.

In Bangladesh, as attested by both interviewees<sup>134</sup> and the literature (Sarker and Nawaz, 2021), social transfers have always been recognised as a tool for maintaining patron-client relations. The ruling party establishes networks within the state that allow it to direct resources to its preferred clients (Hossain and Rahman, 2017). Although it has always been viewed as evidence of corruption, the result of patron-clientelism in the country has not always been anti-poor. There is a general belief that patronage should be somewhat benevolent (Hossain, 2004). Thus, Hossain and Osman's (2007) study on the distribution of social welfare in Bangladesh revealed that three categories of people receive transfers, of which two are the poor. The categories are: the eligible poor; the eligible poor with political value (either due to their political connections or as vote bank); and the ineligible rich with political

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<sup>134</sup> Interviews with UN agency officials 1 (2017) and 2 (2018), and Civil servant 4 (2018)

capital. Politicians, the two researchers argue, allocate social protection for a variety of reasons, including to: show their concern for the poor, build their personal and party's political capital, finance personal and party expenditures, and further personal interests. The sheer number of the poor means that even if only the politically valuable among the poor are covered by social protection transfers, that is still a substantial number of people (Hossain and Osman, 2007). As a result, transfers can continue to target only clients, i.e. the politically valuable poor, without the programmes losing their legitimacy altogether.

The status quo is wholly advantageous to the ruling party, which is why the politicians involved with the NSSS negotiations were unwilling to countenance even small changes to it, let alone the wholesale restructuring universalism demanded. Since universalism would have required an overhaul to long-entrenched politically lucrative arrangements, it did not gain traction among politicians. A UNDP study at the time recorded:<sup>135</sup>

Many ministers with small/minor social protection programmes in their portfolio are reluctant to see these programmes consolidated or closed as the resources provided by such programmes can be useful for managing patron-client networks – regardless of whether they meet the goals of a social protection strategy.

### ***Interparty competition***

Theories of welfare state development discussed in Chapter 2 consider interparty competition and cross-class coalitions as key factors in the extension of social welfare (Cousins, 2005). For instance, the development of sickness insurance in 18 OECD countries can be explained by left party participation in government (Korpi, 1989). In Bangladesh, there is almost no interparty competition on social protection, and thus no political pressure to introduce universalism.

The major political parties are centrist in orientation and do not differ on most economic and social policy issues (see Chapter 3). Additionally, since the early misadventures with socialism and revolutionary Marxism in the 1970s, leftist politics has stagnated in Bangladesh. There are several reasons for the left's failure – some of

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<sup>135</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 7

these reasons are endogenous to the leftist parties and others exogenous to it. From before independence, the left struggled with factional conflict in its ranks (Maniruzzaman, 1988). Subsequently, successive governments throughout the 1970s and 1980s violently cracked down on radical leftist parties, severely weakening their organising capabilities (Hossain, 2017). Leftist parties also failed to articulate an agenda that went beyond trite slogans of a revolutionary working class to one that resonated with the non-industrialised peasant class to which most Bangladeshis belong (Karim, 2001). This is why military dictators could bifurcate the rural constituency by cultivating developmental NGOs (Karim, 2001). Even though the NGOs provided few challenges to the structures of exploitation affecting the poor, these donor-funded organisations could meet the immediate needs of the rural poor better than the unpopular revolutionary promises of the resource-weak left parties (Karim, 2018b). In fact, as elsewhere in the developing world, many leftist leaders were absorbed within the NGO sphere. By the 1990s, the Communist Party of Bangladesh's peasant wing had morphed into an NGO offering credit and savings services (Holloway, 1998). Today the leaders of many left parties are local capitalists of their own right. Previously leftist intellectuals have also shifted their allegiance to market-oriented growth strategies (Hossain, 2017). Therefore although a few leftist leaders hold ministerial posts in the current government, they do not further leftist causes like social protection expansion.<sup>136</sup>

Consequently, interviewees did not expect party politics to have any effect on social policies because all parties hold similar residualist positions on social protection.<sup>137</sup> Contemporaneous accounts of the NSSS negotiations support this view too, arguing “there is little controversy on the broad theme of social protection across the political parties.”<sup>138</sup> Overall, a cross-party consensus about social protection exists in Bangladesh, which is mainly residualist in nature. Thus, there was no push for universalism on the basis of electoral politics.

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<sup>136</sup> Leftist activism is most visible today in the energy sector where activists have resisted the establishment of coalmines and power plants that have dispossessed locals and harmed the environment (Faruque, 2017).

<sup>137</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 2, 3 and 4 (2018)

<sup>138</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 7



### *Swing to authoritarianism*

Bangladesh exhibits ambiguous effects of democracy on social protection. Although the turn to democracy in the 1990s shifted social protection away from food rations that had historically benefited the urban middle class to more poverty targeted programmes (see Chapter 3), it was the military dictatorships of the 1970s that instated large-scale welfare programmes, like the Vulnerable Group Development (Hossain and Osman, 2007). These developments reflect the ambiguity in the theoretical literature which finds that after controlling for variables like economic development and age, democratic and non-democratic regimes do not exhibit significant differences in the size and design of social protection systems (Mulligan, Gil and Sala-i-Martin, 2010). To ensure regime stability, authoritarian bargains may form between the rulers and the ruled where the latter's consent is obtained by providing them access to public resources like social protection (Desai, Olofsgård and Yousef, 2007). Conversely, democracy allows citizens to express their collective policy preference in favour of social protection (Brooks and Manza, 2007). Thus, whether one regime type will be better for social welfare than the other in a specific context is an empirical question.

Since the 1990s, a crucial feature of Bangladesh's political landscape had been that the incumbents were always voted out of power in national elections. This had created an incentive structure that encouraged social protection expansion if only for re-election or rent-seeking purposes (Mahmud and Mahmud, 2015). In the past decade, this underlying context has changed. As the NSSS negotiations were ongoing, Bangladesh underwent a profound shift from a competitive clientelist two-party democracy to a competitive authoritarian regime (Lewis and Hossain, 2019; Mostofa and Subedi, 2020). Having decimated all opposition, frequently through violence, the ruling party has now held power continuously since 2008 (Riaz, 2019).

Amongst a range of policies the government has adopted to consolidate its grip on power, a crucial one for social protection has been the fundamental institutional changes at the local level. Whilst politically favoured individuals have always received welfare, now the decisions are made directly at the party office than by the local administration (Lewis and Hossain, 2019, pp. 13-14):

...decisions about who is entitled to social welfare benefits are no longer the sole preserve of the elected [local government] authority but are now shared with the local party. ... Local [Awami League] leaders draw up lists of recipients and submit them to the MP, who then sends his approved instructions down to the [local government] officials.

These national political developments impacted the universalism and targeting debate. The messaging the pro-universalist camp used to try to convince sceptics during the NSSS negotiations<sup>139</sup> and again during the UNICEF' universal child benefit effort<sup>140</sup> (see section 5.1) were Korpi's (1980) classic theories relating to middle-class activation (see Chapter 2). If the middle class aligns with the poor through universal social welfare programmes, the international consultants who supported universalism argued, the cross-class coalition would ensure the elites are forced to expand social protection. For a government engaged in ruthlessly suppressing all forms of oppositional politics and handpicking welfare recipients at the ruling party office, the argument that they should extend universal social protection to create a new adversarial constituency—that also class-based in nature—was spectacularly unattractive. No one I interviewed found it a convincing proposition that could tip the balance in favour of universalism. Given the other factors I have discussed above, it is difficult to predict what would have happened had these messages been given to a more democratic government. But, *ceteris paribus*, the prospect of elections may have potentially made the government more amenable to universalism than they are now. In the 1990s, for example, broad-based universalist school stipends were rolled out when democracy was reinstated (see Chapter 3). Therefore, there is some evidence that a different regime may have responded to the pro-universalism advocacy differently.

In summary, the culture of patron clientelism, the uniformity of social welfare policy across political parties, and the pivot to authoritarianism all conspired to make universalism an unattractive option for the ruling party.

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<sup>139</sup> See NSSS background paper titled 'International Best Practice in Social Protection: Implications for Bangladesh' by Kidd, Freeland and Khondker (2017)

<sup>140</sup> Observations at Dhaka stakeholder consultation (2018)

#### **5.2.4 Ideas about social protection and deservingness**

Following the lead of Lavers and Hickey's (2016) approach to political settlements, ideas are treated as a key variable in this study. The two major ideas that played a role in the contestation around targeting and universalism were about the purpose of social protection and the deservingness of welfare recipients. The Bangladeshi versions of these ideas are rather unique. If the goal of social protection is poverty alleviation, Bangladesh's decreasing poverty levels seem to call for lower social protection expenditure. Universalism, from this perspective, fruitlessly increases social protection's budget allocation at the expense of more important projects. It also extends social protection to the rich, who the Bangladeshi policy elite find undeserving of social protection in comparison to the poor.

##### ***Who deserves social protection?***

The deservingness of social protection is usually discussed in terms of the deserving and undeserving poor. The undeserving poor are those deemed poor due to moral failings or abdication of personal responsibility (Katz, 2013). Blame for their plight incorporates a behavioural dimension (Gans, 1995). In contrast, the deserving poor are those considered poor through no personal failings; it is the structural factors and not the behavioural aspects that gain precedence in this view (Bridges, 2017). Social policies for the 'deserving poor' are found to be more popular amongst the taxpayers and the elite than those for the 'undeserving poor' (Appelbaum, 2001; Slothuus, 2007). This is not only true in the developed world, developing countries, such as Botswana and Uganda, also exhibit similar features (Hickey et al., 2020). In this section, I argue that a unique aspect of Bangladeshi policy elites is they promote targeting out of a concern for the poor and scepticism of the rich's deservingness.

A key feature of Bangladeshi elites is they do not distinguish between the deserving and undeserving poor. Hossain and Moore (2005, p. 104), who carried out the definitive study on elite perceptions of poverty in Bangladesh, argued:

[There are no] powerful precedents in Bengali Muslim culture for categorizing poor people into 'deserving' and 'undeserving'... The ethics articulated by our [elite] respondents tend to put the poor above reproach: they are to be blamed neither for their misfortunes nor for their mistakes.

There are several explanations for this benevolent attitude. The most important one is that Bangladeshi society is largely, albeit not fully, homogenous in terms of religion and ethnicity. Although the rich may not understand the daily realities of the poor, the homogeneity promotes a degree of social cohesion (Hossain, 2005). The perception of homogeneity among most Bangladeshis also means that national unity trumps class-based mobilisation. In fact, no major class-based conflict has taken place since the turn of the last century, with political contestation exhibiting a factional patron-client orientation rather than a class-based one (Khan, 2000). Contrary to nearby India's caste structure, Islamic norms do not hinder social mobility, so the potential for upward mobility of the poor is not seen as an automatic threat in Bangladesh (Sultana and Subedi, 2016). As a result, the elite are inclined to blame poverty mostly on structural factors, such as the lack of economic growth and poor governance. The fact that they do not view themselves as intrinsically different from the poor makes the elite inclined towards personal, paternalistic forms of charity (Hossain, 2005). Having little faith in the state, they relegate it to the role of a mere facilitator in poverty alleviation efforts. Instead, they expect that society, either through personal philanthropy or NGOs, will provide the poor with the productive capacity necessary, such as via education, to 'pull themselves up by the bootstraps' (Hossain and Moore, 2005). Overall, it is a benevolent but residualist attitude.

Interviewees made similar arguments. "In many other countries you have a discussion of the deserving poor and the undeserving poor... You don't have that discussion in Bangladesh," said a UN agency official with long experience in the country.<sup>141</sup> Strikingly, several parliamentarians briefed on the NSSS supported extending social protection to drug addicts, the quintessential 'undeserving poor', with one MP declaring, "Unemployment often creates frustration among the young people leading to drug addiction. Therefore, unemployment allowances may reduce the risk of drug abuse."<sup>142</sup> Despite such widespread sympathy for the poor, when the NSSS changed its wording to centre targeting, the concept of deservingness entered into the NSSS document. As Table 5.3 shows, the change in wording from the previous objective of building a social protection system "for all Bangladeshis" to a social protection

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<sup>141</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)

<sup>142</sup> Consultation with parliamentarians: Proceedings of NSSS Workshops for MPs, December 2016

system “for all deserving Bangladeshis” signalled a shift from a universalist to a targeted approach.<sup>143</sup>

NSSS draft	Long term objective of NSSS (emphasis added)
December 27, 2013 (p. xiv)	“Build an inclusive SPS [social protection system] <i>for all Bangladeshis</i> that effectively tackles and prevents poverty and rising inequality and contributes to broader human development, employment and economic growth.”
June 4, 2014 (p. xv)	“Build an inclusive SSS [social security system] <i>for all deserving Bangladeshis</i> that effectively tackles and prevents poverty and rising inequality and contributes to broader human development, employment and economic growth.”

TABLE 5.3 Inclusion of deservingness in the NSSS drafts

However, if the Bangladeshi policy elites do not differentiate between the deserving and the underserving poor, then who is it that the NSSS considers undeserving? The answer is that in the NSSS, as well as in the UNICEF effort, it was the rich that were considered undeserving. The policy actors were concerned that extending social protection to all the people, as universalism does, would give the rich, who are underserving, access to social protection.<sup>144</sup> Reflecting this opinion, a Ministry of Finance official involved with both the NSSS and the UNICEF efforts argued:<sup>145</sup>

The highest [income] quintile has exorbitantly high amount of income... It doesn't make sense [to introduce universal social protection] if you think about those high-income earners. It doesn't make sense with our resource constraints... You need to think about the deserving Bangladeshis.

Here, ‘deserving Bangladeshis’ meant all poor Bangladeshis. Since universalism opens up a path for the undeserving rich to take a share of the finite resources that justifiably belong to the poor, targeting is considered a better option for benevolent reasons. This line of thinking perfectly juxtaposes with Hossain and Moore’s (2005) findings of a benevolent but residualist attitude towards the poor amongst the elite. Research in other countries have shown people express opinions about whether the rich deserve their wealth (Sadin, 2017), Bangladesh is a unique case where the question is whether the rich deserve social protection. This benevolent line of thinking

<sup>143</sup> The discourse of deservingness was also prominent in the UNICEF effort (observation at the Dhaka stakeholder consultation, 2018).

<sup>144</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 1 (2017), 4 and 7 (2018); and observations at the Dhaka stakeholder consultation (2018)

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Civil servant 7 (2018)

in support of targeting is an important contribution to deservingness literature, which primarily ascribes conservative behaviourist expectations to deservingness. Instead, Bangladesh shows it is possible to deploy the concept of deservingness for more altruistic reasons.

### *What is the goal of social protection?*

The second idea that was important in the debate about targeting and universalism was about the goal of social protection. At the heart of the debates on welfare at large are complex questions about rights, risks, and needs (Munro 2008). The ‘risk’ school in welfare is mostly concerned with alleviating poverty and is favoured by international financial institutions. It argues that since private insurance markets fail to safeguard against many risks people are inevitably exposed to in their lives, the state must provide a residualist form of welfare to fill in the gap (Barr, 2002). The ‘rights’ school, on the other hand, argues that all humans have certain inalienable rights, many claimable upon the state, of which social protection is one (Munro, 2008). Many UN and development agencies subscribe to the rights-based approach. The ‘needs’ school argues social protection should meet people’s basic needs since economic growth alone may not be able to do so (Seers, 1969). Given the state should only step in when the market fails to, this school is also of the residualist bent.

The residualist notions foregrounding risks and needs have been in the ascendancy from the structural adjustment era, including in Bangladesh, as discussed above. The goal of social protection, in this view, is poverty alleviation as opposed to a rights-based social contract between the citizens and the state (Mkandawire, 2005). Since Bangladeshi policy elites hold residualist notions of social protection,<sup>146</sup> several stakeholders questioned why social protection should be expanded through universalism at a time when poverty levels in Bangladesh were actually decreasing.<sup>147</sup> A Ministry of Finance memo succinctly outlined this argument (emphasis added):<sup>148</sup>

...projections in poverty suggest the number of poor will be going down [in Bangladesh]. Given the urgent needs for investments in infrastructure, energy, and climate change, it will serve Bangladesh better if less

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<sup>146</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)

<sup>147</sup> Interviews with Civil servant 4 (2018) and Expert 7 (2018)

<sup>148</sup> Economic Relations Division memo on NSSS third draft, n.d.

budgetary allocation is required for social protection. *The reduction in SP [social protection] allocation should be seen as a success of Bangladesh SP system in reducing poverty and not a failure.*

The impulse to lower budgetary allocation for social protection, which is already very low (see Appendix B), was not due to a lack of resources. After all, as discussed in Chapter 2, the budget is a political choice (Ortiz, Cummins and Karunanethy, 2017). Instead, it stemmed from a desire to protect targeting as a virtue:<sup>149</sup>

[A consultant] wanted the words ‘universal coverage for the old age pensions’ [in NSSS]. That was something I knew the finance ministry was not going to support. The question wasn’t one of resources, it was the idea that if everyone was on safety nets, how can it be safety nets?

Opposing arguments offered about the much bigger size of social protection budgets in high-income countries did not enjoy much traction.<sup>150</sup> Since Bangladesh is already alleviating poverty and becoming a middle-income nation, many of the NSSS’ stakeholders believed that the social protection budget needed to decrease or remain constant—but certainly not increase—to catch the remaining few poor people in the safety net. In this view, progressively better targeting was the only way forward, not universalism.

### 5.3 The targeting settlement

There is a tendency to view the targeting vs. universalism debate as an apolitical technical design contestation (see Chapter 2). In this chapter, I have argued that instead of being apolitical, the ultimate decision between the two approaches is decided wholly for political reasons underpinned by a settlement I call a targeting settlement. In this section, I describe the issue-specific political settlement on targeting by examining how a constellation of power, institutions, rents and ideas upholds the status quo that is inimical to universalism. The settlement I describe is also reproducible as is evident from the failure of the UNICEF effort to instate universalism.

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<sup>149</sup> Interview with Consultant 1 (2018)

<sup>150</sup> Observations at the Dhaka stakeholder consultation (2018)

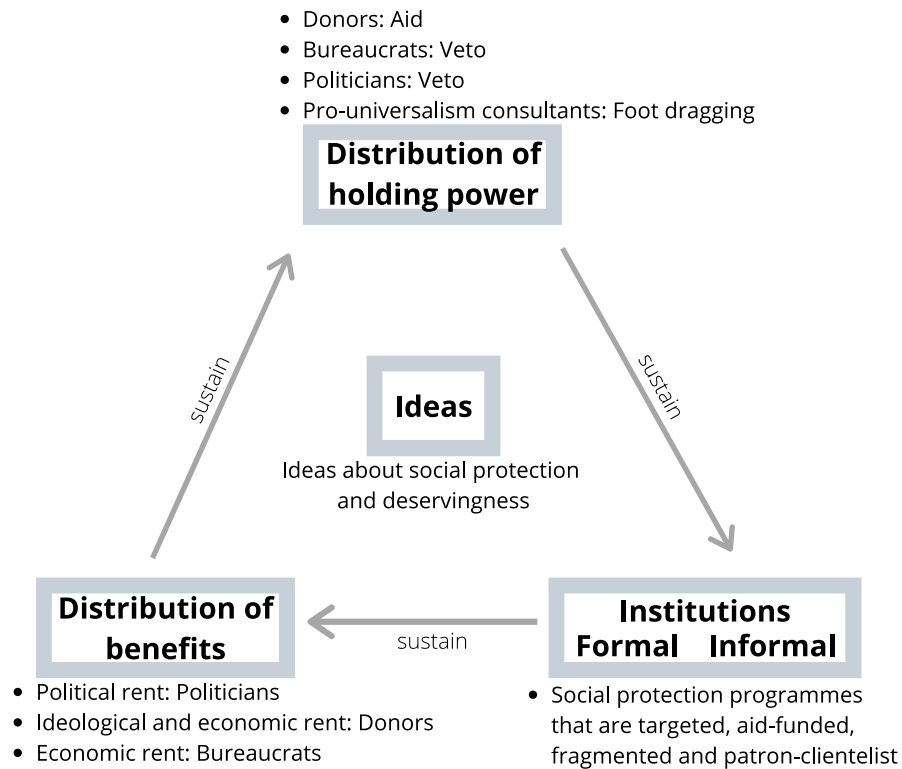


FIGURE 5.1: Bangladesh's targeting settlement

As Figure 5.1 shows, four major types of actors dominated the contestation over targeting and universalism. They were: donors, bureaucrats, politicians, and the consultants tasked with drafting the NSSS. Each interest group had varying types of resources at their disposal: donors had aid, bureaucrats and politicians had veto powers, and consultants could stall the policymaking process for a short period by foot dragging. The nature of the resources relative to each other dictated each group's holding power in the contest during the NSSS negotiations (Behuria, Buur and Gray, 2017). Whilst this constellation of rent-seeking interest groups and their holding power sustain residualist social protection institutions in Bangladesh, they are supported in this endeavour by relevant ideas and formal and informal institutions. The ideas held by influential actors impacted the policy design by giving direction to and legitimacy for their activities. The two definitive ideas that underpinned the targeting settlement were views about the goal of social protection being purely poverty alleviation and unique ideas about the rich's un-deservingness. The institutional framework, on the other hand, reflected the underlying power structure in society (Khan, 2010). In this instance, the key institution that was sustained through the settlement is a social protection system that is targeted, aid-funded, fragmented



and patron-clientelist. These institutions have developed over decades, which have given them a sticky quality. The rents generated from the institutions are economic rents for donors and bureaucrats, political rent for politicians, and ideological rent for donors, who used coercion to impose their preferred residualist idea on the system.

The powerful actors within the targeting settlement above, especially the donors and bureaucrats, are not part of the ‘ruling coalition’ (Khan, 2010, 2018a) even though their influence in policymaking and rent allocation is evident in the analysis. The finding in this chapter, therefore, support this thesis’ approach to issue-specific political settlement analysis, which is not tethered to the composition of the ruling coalition but rather to the constellation of actors and institutions surrounding a specific issue. Moreover, Lavers and Hickey’s (2016) proposal to include international actors in political settlement analysis also has validity given the strong presence of donors and their consultants in the policymaking arena. It’s worth considering that notably absent in the policy contestation are the people for whom the interest groups are legislating, i.e. the poor, the middle class (although they appear in key argumentation as an abstract entity), and even the purported representatives of the poor, i.e. the NGOs. This potentially indicates the low holding power of these groups, which is addressed in the subsequent chapters.

Before I conclude, I will briefly consider the implications such ‘targeting settlements’ have for the ‘progressive universalism’ agenda pursued by several international agencies, especially the ILO and the World Bank since their joint call in 2015 (World Bank, 2015b). Progressive universalism is the notion that countries can gradually introduce social protection programmes, of even the targeted kind, that over time will accumulate to become a full set of universal programmes (Leisering, 2020). The World Bank has therefore taken to encouraging the introduction of targeted programmes to countries with the excuse that targeted programmes will one day in the future coalesce to form a universal social protection system. What is remarkably absent in this theorisation is a viable causal pathway between introducing targeted programmes and achieving universalism in contexts, like Bangladesh, where a targeting settlement exists. If the international agencies believe that a multiplicity of programmes is an indicator of a country’s progress down the universal path—as the concept of progressive universalism implies—then Bangladesh’s 145 programmes

can be considered a success story of universalism. As this chapter has demonstrated though, such a conclusion would be patently false. The greater number of targeted programmes, in fact, indicates greater categories of power holders who have a stake in protecting the targeting settlement. Identifying targeting settlements therefore can help distinguish between genuine and deceptive advances towards universalism.

## Conclusion

This chapter has delved into the political dynamics behind the targeting vs. universalism debate in the NSSS. It finds that both transnational and domestic factors align to uphold targeting as the preferred policy option. On the transnational front, coercive donor pressure enforces a residualist model of welfare on the country. But the donor pressure acts in tandem with a domestic political setting that also favours targeting. On the domestic front, the historical origin and subsequent trajectory of the social protection agenda create path dependent processes that preclude changes to the status quo. Politicians and bureaucrats both act as rent-seekers who benefit economically and politically from a targeted system. There is little electoral competition—on social policies or otherwise—in the country, which means the avenue of introducing universalism through competitive politics is closed. Alongside these, ideas about the role of social protection as a tool of poverty alleviation and the un-deservingness of the rich limit the possibility of a universalist re-imagining of the welfare system. The resulting constellation of power holders, institutional structures, and paradigmatic ideas form a ‘targeting settlement’. The existence of targeting settlements has implications for the global ‘progressive universalism’ agenda (World Bank, 2015b). The growth in the number of social protection programmes cannot be a measure of a country’s progress down universalist paths. The proliferation of targeted programmes may well be proof of the opposite, as is the case in Bangladesh. More programmes may mean more stakeholders in the settlement and therefore more policy inertia. Overall, this chapter has addressed the first part of the subsidiary research question: *What political considerations animate the universalism vs. targeting and food vs. cash debates in the NSSS?* The second part, the food vs. cash debate, is discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 6

### ***“RICE IS A POLITICAL COMMODITY”: THE POLITICS OF THE FOOD VS. CASH TRANSFERS DEBATE***

*“The skin on the face looked like parchment, the bones stuck out... One is used to the thought of death from an early age, but not to the utter physical dissolution of a whole people under nutritional assault.”*

Asok Mitra, 1989, p. 260

The year I did the fieldwork for this chapter in Bangladesh—2018—was the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1943 Bengal famine and the 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1974 Bangladesh famine. In the intervening decades, the country has undergone major transformations in its political systems and economic policies. Bengal won independence from the British Raj, and Bangladesh from Pakistan. And yet, the spectre of those famines continues to haunt the collective memory of the nation and shape policy decisions even today. The long shadow of the famines was most visible in the NSSS’ reform contestation about whether the country should transition away from food transfers in favour of cash transfers. In discussing the debate between food and cash transfers in Chapter 2, I had highlighted that what at the outset appears to be a purely technical debate actually conceals the political and philosophical positions of the policymakers. This was the case in Bangladesh as well. This chapter zooms in on the second reform contestation in the NSSS and uses it to answer the question: *What political considerations animate the food vs. cash transfers debate in the NSSS?* In the previous chapter, I argued that whilst donor coercion was a factor in eschewing universalism, targeting was an already accepted idea in Bangladesh. In this chapter, I

argue that even the demands of powerful donors do not find purchase against ingrained paradigmatic ideas in society. The World Bank used the same leverage it had successfully used in the contestation on targeting—a US\$ 500m targeted cash transfer programme—but on this issue, the threat did not work. This episode underscores this thesis’ emphasis on issue-specific analysis because the same actor using the same power resource to influence the same policy document achieved different results based on the issue at hand.

For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on rice transfers, as opposed to any other food types. Rice is the staple food for Bangladeshis – the country’s average per capita consumption of rice is the highest in Asia, the continent that hosts the vast majority of the world’s rice-eating population (Hossain and Deb, 2010). When discussing food provisioning in the country, commentators almost wholly talk about rice, the bellwether of the sector. Rice production supports nearly 48% of rural employment, provides one half of the agricultural GDP, and one-sixth of the country’s national income (BBS, 2018). Globally, the rice market is distinct from the rest of the staples market in that it is thinly traded, which means only a small portion—in this case 7%—of global production is traded in the international market (Caballero-Anthony et al., 2016). Therefore, issues of dumping and financial speculation, which are highly consequential for staples like wheat, are less important for rice (Timmer, 2010). As a result, domestic political machinations are more visible when studying rice provisioning than other food types.

The first part of the chapter outlines the puzzling outcome of the food vs. cash transfers debate in the NSSS, which decided to retain food transfers as the preferred policy choice for the time being but with a view to transition to cash transfers in the future. The following sections analyse the different factors that shaped this policy decision: the persistence of colonial-era institutions, the power difference between rice consumers and rice farmers, and the significant need to dispose of old public rice stocks via food transfers. The chapter ends by discussing the political settlement on food provisioning and the implications of a possible shift to cash transfers on the country’s food self-sufficiency aims.

## 6.1 The food vs. cash transfers debate in the NSSS

In this section, I introduce the current food and cash transfers portfolio in the country before describing the debate between the two modalities of transfer as it unfolded during the NSSS negotiations. Unlike the previous chapter, powerful donors in favour of cash were thwarted by the NSSS' decision to retain food transfers for the time being, even though, puzzlingly, the strategy promises to shift to cash transfers in the future.

The social protection programmes introduced in Chapter 3 contained several food and cash transfer programmes (see Table 6.1). Today food transfer programmes have the highest coverage amongst all social protection programmes in the country (Razzaque et al., 2020). In contrast, although cash transfers cover fewer beneficiaries, they have a higher budgetary allocation than the food transfer programmes. Most cash transfer programmes run throughout the year, unlike most food transfer programmes that are activated seasonally or during emergencies. Also, most cash transfers now use banks or mobile financial services, whereas food transfers still require in-person collection.<sup>151</sup>

Programme	Transfer value	Delivery mechanism	Delivery nature/ frequency	Beneficiary (million)	Budget (million BDT)
<b>Cash Transfers</b>					
Old Age Allowance	BDT 500/ month	Bank	Long term; Quarterly	4.4	26,400.00
Employment Generation Programme for the Poor	BDT 200/ day	Bank	Oct-Nov and Mar-Apr; Weekly	0.83	16,500.00
Test Relief Cash	-	In-person	During emergencies; Daily/ Weekly	2.1	15,300.00
Allowances for the Financially Insolvent Disabled	BDT 700/ month	Bank	Long term; Monthly	1.55	13,905.00

<sup>151</sup> The classification of social protection programmes in Bangladesh is not standardised, which has resulted in a variety of typologies (see Alam, 2017, Annex 9a; Hebbbar and Scott, 2020; Rahman, Choudhury and Ali, 2011). Therefore, whilst Table 6.1 details the key cash and food transfer programmes that constitute the country's social protection portfolio, Appendix B provides the full list, which includes programmes with more ambiguous classifications.

Programme	Transfer value	Delivery mechanism	Delivery nature/ frequency	Beneficiary (million)	Budget (million BDT)
Income Support Programme for the Poorest	BDT 500/ visit plus conditional benefits	Cash cards	Long term; Quarterly	1.08	7,781.00
Maternity Allowance Programme for the Poor	BDT 800/ month for 3 years	Bank	Long term; Every six months	0.77	7,632.70
Work For Money	BDT 200/ day	In-person	During emergencies; Weekly	1.58	7,500.00
Primary School Stipend	BDT 100/ month, 200 (2 children), 250 (3 children), 400 (4 children)	Mobile financial services and bank	Long term; Quarterly	14.4	7,223.60
Secondary Education Stipend	Rate varies by grade/program from yearly BDT 1380 to 3510	Mobile financial services	Long term; Yearly	0	1,048.60
Stipend for Disabled Students	BDT 500 (primary), 600 (secondary), 700 (higher secondary), 1200 (university)	Mobile financial services	Long term; Quarterly	10	956.4
<b>Cash transfers total</b>				<b>36.71</b>	<b>104,247.30</b>
<b>Food transfers</b>					
Food Friendly Programme	30 kg of rice/ month	In-kind twice/year (Mar-April, Sep-Nov)	Seasonal; One-off	0.05	26,240.00
Vulnerable Group Feeding	10-30 kg of rice	In-person	During emergencies; Monthly	8.34	19,569.10
Vulnerable Group Development	30 kg wheat or rice, or 30 kg fortified rice and single cash grant of BDT 15,000	Bank for cash grant; in-person for food	Long term; Monthly	14.25	16,989.10
Food For Work	8 kg of rice for 4 hours of work	In-person	During emergencies; Usually twice yearly	1.71	12,040.80
Open Market Sales	10–20 kg of rice	In-person	During emergencies; Weekly/ monthly	8.94	9,495.20

Programme	Transfer value	Delivery mechanism	Delivery nature/ frequency	Beneficiary (million)	Budget (million BDT)
Gratuitous Relief	Ad hoc	In-person	During emergencies; One-off	5.68	5,435.90
School Feeding Programme	Food	N/A	Long term; Daily	2.5	4,745.90
<b>Food transfers total</b>				<b>41.47</b>	<b>94,516.00</b>

TABLE 6.1: Major food and cash transfer programmes in Bangladesh, fiscal year 2019-20 (adapted from Hebbar and Scott, 2020, pp. 8-10)

The NSSS negotiations witnessed a series of discussions on the question of whether Bangladesh should transition fully from food to cash transfers. Consequently, across the various iterations of the NSSS, the future of food transfer programmes underwent several transitions – swinging between the possibilities of total abolition to tentative continuation. Ultimately, the NSSS moved away from its original radical proposal of abolishing all food transfers. Instead, it proposed that whilst food transfers would continue uninterrupted in the near future, the government would move to cash transfers in the longer term.

The first draft of the NSSS, dated November 15, 2013, divided food transfer programmes into four categories where food was considered: a benefit transfer (e.g. Vulnerable Group Development); a form of compensation for work (e.g. Food for Work); a provision for disaster relief (e.g. Vulnerable Group Feeding); and a method to stabilise grain markets (e.g. Open Market Sales). Clearly influenced by the ‘pro-cash transfer’ position of the consultants who wrote the policy, the draft argued it was “well established that social protection transfers through cash is a better option [than food]”, further announcing that the government would “convert all food-based transfer programmes into cash transfers” (p. 78). In particular, all workfare programmes would be consolidated into a single large cash transfer programme. An exemption was made for the disaster management arm of existing policies, which would continue to distribute food, but these programmes would henceforth be separated from social protection policies. Only the food market stabilisation programme, Open Market Sales, would remain unaltered.

The revised draft of the NSSS, dated December 27, 2013, continued in the same vein as the earlier draft, markedly highlighting that “it is evident from international experience that cash transfers have significant advantages over food transfers in supporting food security through conventional social protection schemes” (p. 74). However, it moderated some of the more sweeping claims of the previous iteration with an eye to the practicalities of implementation. For example, it added that the heavily subsidised food distribution during emergencies through Open Market Sales must be coordinated with the government’s food stock policy and that programmes must tackle hunger and food affordability. It made a significant concession by agreeing that the Open Market Sales of food could also be expanded if needed. Nevertheless, during the early phases of the NSSS negotiations, it seemed unlikely that the full transition away from food transfers could be stopped.

However, by the time the fourth draft of the NSSS was formulated on June 4, 2014, the document had done a volte-face about the full transition to cash. Although cash transfers were still acknowledged to be superior to food, crucial phrases were added to the document that changed the thrust of the policy. Now, instead of directly changing all food transfers to cash, the government would work “in a longer perspective” to convert “all workfare based food programmes into cash transfers” (p. 81). The addition of an unspecified future timeframe along with shifting the target from “all food programmes” to “all workfare based food programmes” limited both the scope and rapidity of the reforms. The document also recommended caution – before initiating reforms, an inter-ministerial feasibility investigation had to be conducted. The remaining iterations of the NSSS, preserve this diluted wording regarding the transition from food to cash transfers, and it is this version that was approved by the Cabinet in mid-2015.

The NSSS, therefore, underwent key shifts on the question of food and cash transfers. The early drafts advocated abolishing all food transfers. In later drafts, it moved away from this radical proposition, making it clear that food transfers would remain but only for now. The final version of the policy, approved in 2015, remained equivocal about both the time frame of the transition from food to cash transfers and limited the scope of the programmes that would be changed. By the time I conducted fieldwork in 2018, the pro-food transfers position had gained further strength. Bureaucrats



reported there was renewed determination amongst them to retain food transfers: “There was a decision that we have to come out of the policy [to convert food to cash transfers].”<sup>152</sup> Accordingly, the mid-term progress review of the NSSS’ implementation notes even the watered-down transition project had essentially stalled (Razzaque et al., 2020, p. xxiv):

An important recommendation of the NSSS was to transform all food-based workfare programmes to cash-based. The progress of this transformation is slow... the review report on programme consolidation has still not been prepared.

Nevertheless, the NSSS still argues for a transition to cash transfers “in a longer perspective” (GED, 2015, p. 59) and the mid-term review argues there is still “a general consensus amongst the concerned policymakers/officials that cash-transfer programmes are a much better option” (Razzaque et al., 2020, p. 56).

These vacillations are puzzling on their own, but what makes them especially intriguing is that the pro-cash lobby was a formidable coalition comprising the Ministry of Finance and major donors, particularly the World Bank.<sup>153</sup> The previous chapter has shown how the Bank was able to influence the NSSS to reflect its own position on targeting. In this instance, the Bank had the support of the Ministry of Finance, which is a particularly influential ministry. A bureaucrat I interviewed shared, “If even a mid-level officer of Finance Ministry says something, we pay attention to it. Otherwise, they won’t give us the money [for our projects].”<sup>154</sup> Both the Bank and the Ministry of Finance echoed the standard arguments about cash transfers I discussed in Chapter 2, such as its efficiency and lack of market distortion.<sup>155</sup> And yet, the powerful pro-cash coalition appears to have lost the debate. The puzzle before us is thus two-fold: Why did the government reverse its decision to move from food to cash transfers? And, having reversed their decision, why is the option to shift to cash transfers in the longer term still being retained?

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<sup>152</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 9, 10, 11 (2018); quote from Civil servant 4 (2018)

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Civil servant 7 (2018)

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

<sup>155</sup> Interviews with Civil servant 9 (2018) and UN agency official 3 (2018)

## **6.2 The reasons behind the NSSS' decisions about food and cash**

Broadly, three factors explain the NSSS' oscillations between food and cash transfers. First, the public food distribution system, a colonial-era institution, needs food transfer programmes to rotate its stock of old rice. Second, there is an anti-famine social contract in the country that sustains the public food stocks. Third, due to the low holding power of farmers, public food stocks are used to honour the government's commitment to rice consumers, whilst neglecting the farmers. The explanation highlights the stickiness of institutions and the power of the zeitgeist.

### **6.2.1 The colonial legacy of the public food distribution system**

Path dependency, as discussed in the conceptual framework, lends policies a degree of inertia that inhibits radical change. Once established, institutions have 'sticky' qualities that prove resilient to the passage of time. Huber and Stephens (2001), for example, contend that the policy legacies of nineteenth-century political regimes continue to impact European welfare states today. For developing countries, McMichael (2009) finds colonial food regimes to be pivotal – food production in the Indian subcontinent primarily served the consumption needs of the imperial centre in Great Britain instead of the local population. A vestigial remnant of that era, the public food distribution system in Bangladesh (henceforth, PFDS) can, in fact, be traced to the emergency legislations enacted by the British Raj during World War II (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). Over half a century later, the issue of PFDS' stock turnover mechanism decided the food vs. cash transfers debate.

#### ***The evolution of the PFDS***

In order to understand Bangladesh's current policy debate about food and cash transfers, we need to go back to the events of 1942 when the Japanese occupation of Rangoon in present-day Myanmar set off a chain of events that culminated in the 1943 Bengal famine (Sen, 1977). That year, the proximity to the war front disrupted Bengal's food supply chain, natural disasters destroyed crops, and Churchill's colonial government diverted supplies to feed the war machine at the expense of the beleaguered but brown Bengalis (Mukerjee, 2010). To control the resultant food crisis, provincial authorities passed emergency legislation and set up a central Food

Department (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). Intent on denying food to the advancing Japanese army, they used this newly enacted legal and administrative machinery to confiscate food stocks from the border regions and control stock movements within and outside the province. Abandoning the rural population to its fate, they rerouted all food supplies through present-day Kolkata to ensure the urban population—comprising the industrial labour force, the army, and the government administrators—had steady access to food. Soon, with daily air raids spreading terror through Kolkata, panic purchases, hoarding, and speculation made food unaffordable for millions (Devereux, 1993; Sen, 1977). As a result, 1.5-3m people starved to death, the majority in rural Bengal. In the aftermath, Bengal was left with an abiding fear of private speculators, who had removed food from the market, and—somewhat paradoxically given the complicity of colonial officials in exacerbating the famine—a firm faith that only robust government regulations could prevent another famine (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). Therefore, the emergency legislations that allowed the government to regulate the food market were extended after the war.

After independence in 1947, East Pakistan, and subsequently Bangladesh in 1971, inherited the same fear of private traders and faith in the government's ability to control food provisioning. Therefore, the legislative and administrative machinery designed during the war were retained in Bangladesh as the PFDS (Rahman, 2000). Food aid ballooned after Bangladesh's independence and was distributed as rations through the PFDS amongst mostly urban and some rural constituencies (Atwood et al., 2000). However, even as the PFDS expanded, discontent brewed in the background. Due to inflation following the 1971 independence war, the cost of the subsidy to the PFDS was proving an onerous fiscal burden on the state (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). The ration system was highly leakage-prone and, crucially, mirrored its colonial past when it protected food supplies for the urban middle class during the 1974 Bangladesh famine at the expense of the rural poor, who perished by the hundreds of thousands (Hossain, 2017). As aid dependence intensified during the military dictatorships, several donor agencies expressed their deep dissatisfaction with the inefficiencies of the system. Thus, in 1992, the government dismantled the ration system and liberalised the food market (see Chapter 3).

It has been nearly thirty years since the food market was liberalised and food rations largely abolished. And yet, Bangladesh still has not shed its colonial inheritance. Coupled with a lingering faith in some form of government control over food provisioning, a degree of wariness about utter reliance on private traders has endured in the national imagination (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). This is why although food stocks are very costly to maintain, a heavily truncated form of the PFDS continues to persist to this day. This PFDS is often summoned by the government when it needs to intervene in the market (Goletti, 2000).<sup>156</sup> During the food vs. cash transfers debate in the NSSS negotiations, the fate of the PFDS' rice stocks played the decisive role in settling the dispute.

### ***PFDS' stock turnover in the food vs. cash transfers debate***

The sticky nature of this colonial institution meant the key issue that determined the outcome of the NSSS' food and cash transfers debate was the PFDS, or, more precisely, the limited lifespan of the PFDS' rice stocks. In response to the first draft of the NSSS, which proposed a total transition from food to cash transfers, the Ministry of Food wrote an insightful eight-page rebuttal making the case for food transfers in Bangladesh.<sup>157</sup> The memo (p. 5) acknowledged that cash is “in vogue” as an “effective tool to transfer purchasing capacity”. Nevertheless, it drew on the National Food Policy 2006 to argue that there is broad consensus within the government on the need to maintain at least 1m metric tons of grain stocks for the PFDS. At current technology levels, these stocks have a life span of 9-12 months;<sup>158</sup> and storage duration is inversely linked to grain quality (Hoque and Hoffman, 2019). Such quality loss is very costly – amounting to 10.9% of the total net outlay on rice stock (Dorosh and Farid, 2003).<sup>159</sup> Therefore, to ensure the stocks do not rot, there has to be stock turnover. And the safest—i.e. least market distortionary—way to carry out this stock

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<sup>156</sup> The PFDS distributes food to the poor through non-monetised social protection programmes, like Food For Work, and stabilises the market through monetised programmes, like Open Market Sales, that trades in heavily subsidised staples (Hossain and Deb, 2010).

<sup>157</sup> Ministry of Food memo on NSSS 1<sup>st</sup> draft, n.d.

<sup>158</sup> The duration is contested – Ahmed and Bakhtiar (2020) believe it to be 7 months. Civil servant 9 (2018) believed the duration could be increased to 3 years with better technology that Bangladesh does not currently have. Besides some minor influence on the frequency of yearly stock rotation, the difference does not have any bearing on my argument.

<sup>159</sup> Estimate for fiscal year 2000-01

rotation, argued the Ministry of Food memo (p. 6), is food transfers because they do not artificially depress the price for rice farmers:

In order to rotate the stock, it is important to identify uses of the stored food that have minimum distorting impacts on the market. Ideally it could be exported at subsidized prices, disposed or used for animal feeding. But these are very costly options. A less costly channel, currently used in Bangladesh, is to distribute the food that is reaching its maximum shelf life through various safety nets to the poor consumers. Indeed, in this case those consuming food would have otherwise not been able to buy (at least part) of the same food from the market. In more technical term, by distributing through safety nets the public food reaches consumers whose potential demand would have not been transformed in actual demand due to lack of income.

In support of the Ministry of Food, the World Food Programme sent a memo acknowledging the superiority of cash transfers but finding the government's plan to be "very challenging if not unrealistic".<sup>160</sup> Similarly, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation echoed the Ministry of Food's memo, using almost identical language, to make the same case.<sup>161</sup> Bureaucrats I interviewed also shared the same logic about the need to distribute rice stocks through food transfers before the stocks rot.<sup>162</sup> A bureaucrat who was present at the NSSS negotiations recalled, "Outside counterparts were insisting 'cash is the answer' so I had to be on the defensive even harder... Bank was behind this move to cash... Bank is always there but I prevailed [in defending food transfers] because it's a practical issue of stock turnover."<sup>163</sup> As long as the government accepted the need to maintain the PFDS, food stocks would have to keep rolling, which means food transfers would also have to. As a result of the Ministry of Food's advocacy, food transfers returned triumphantly to the NSSS draft.

The revisions to the draft NSSS left the World Bank bewildered. A Bank official recalled, "We were shocked... We had documented it as a project achievement that the transfers had been converted to cash. Then we were told it's been converted back to food."<sup>164</sup> The Bank's shock is understandable because the US\$ 500m targeted cash transfer programme they had successfully used as leverage against universalism in the

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<sup>160</sup> WFP comments on NSPS 1<sup>st</sup> draft, n.d., p. 4

<sup>161</sup> FAO comments on NSPS 1<sup>st</sup> draft, n.d.

<sup>162</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 4, 9, 10 and 11 (2018)

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Civil servant 9 (2018)

<sup>164</sup> Interview with UN agency official 3 (2018)

NSSS was the same programme they were advocating for in this instance but getting the completely opposite result (see Chapter 5). In response to the Bank's demands, a senior Ministry of Food bureaucrat insisted, "We don't have aid dependency", so Bangladesh was not beholden to donors.<sup>165</sup> Bangladesh's rapidly declining reliance on food aid (see Figure 6.1) had left the Bank without any effective power resource to wield in issues of food policy. Such variations in outcomes even when the same actors contesting the same policy document use the same power resources highlight the importance of issue-specific analysis this thesis proposes in Chapter 2 to accommodate heterogeneity. The Ministry of Finance's concerns about the leakages in food transfers also failed to sway the decision because cash is not leakage-proof either.<sup>166</sup> For example, a World Bank study had found that political intermediaries withdrew cheques on behalf of recipients, in the process appropriating a share of the cash transfers (Anwar and Cho, 2019). Thus, despite being a formidable coalition, the pro-cash actors could not advance convincing arguments in their favour against the colonial inheritance that is the PFDS and its stock turnover requirements. Whilst this episode demonstrates the stickiness of established institutions against even powerful actors, it does not explain why this particular colonial legacy—amongst all others—proved to be so sticky, despite decades of liberalising reforms. This is addressed next.



FIGURE 6.1: Food aid to Bangladesh, 2002-2016<sup>167</sup>

<sup>165</sup> Interview with Civil servant 9 (2018)

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Civil servant 7 (2018)

<sup>167</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on December 20, 2020 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/food-aid-received?tab=chart&time=earliest..latest&country=~BGD>

## 6.2.2 The subsistence crisis contract

The PFDS has endured because the political elite in Bangladesh uses it to honour an anti-famine contract that protects the vulnerable from food crises. Sen (1990) argues that democracy is key to famine prevention because expanding the citizens' civil and political rights, including freedom of association and a free press, protect—amongst other rights—the right to food. De Waal (1996, 2000) qualifies Sen's claim by arguing it is not democracy per se but a particular form of anti-famine political contract between the citizens and the state that can combat famines. The state needs to be incentivised to eliminate famines; informed constituencies must be prepared to mobilise; and all citizens, not just preferred majorities, must be included in the contract. Although such contracts are more likely to develop in democracies, effective social contracts need not necessarily be progressive or democratic (de Waal, 2000; Hickey, 2011). Hossain (2017) has shown that the 1974 famine set the foundation for an effective anti-famine subsistence crisis contract between the elites and the masses in Bangladesh that is in force irrespective of regime type.<sup>168</sup> The PFDS provides the tools for the elite to honour the contract. In this section, I trace the development of the contract in order to explain the PFDS' stickiness and how it continues to impact ideas about food transfers in social protection policymaking today.

### *The development of the subsistence crisis contract*

The 1974 famine was hugely consequential for the newly independent Bangladesh. The causes of the famine have been discussed at length in the literature (Alamgir, 1980; Dowlah, 2006; Ravallion, 1987; Sen, 1983; Sobhan, 1979). Although consensus is elusive, most explanations reference the devastation of the 1971 liberation war and the impact of successive floods on the nation's economy and the physical health of its citizens. A decimated economy meant the government could not import enough food when it needed to whilst years of deprivation meant the emaciated citizens could not bear yet another consumption shock (Hossain, 2017).

Beyond that, the explanations are divided into Cold War politics, entitlement losses, and governance failures. For the perceived crime of exporting jute to communist

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<sup>168</sup> Although the perception, even domestically, is that the contract is better enforced in democratic regimes (Hossain and Jahan, 2014).

Cuba, the US government stopped food aid shipments to Bangladesh in the year of the famine (Sobhan, 1979). Aid scenario notwithstanding, Bangladesh had high food availability in 1974 and what was actually missing was the rural population's ability to command the food (Drèze and Sen, 1990). This is because speculation, hoarding and smuggling by politically influential actors had significantly pushed up rice prices (Dowlah, 2006; Ravallion, 1987). Tragically, even as the emaciated rural populace trickled into Dhaka to be corralled by the government into camps where they died by the thousands, the PFDS continued to supply food to state employees and urban, politically influential, constituencies at the cost of their starving rural counterparts (Alamgir, 1980). In the end, 2% of the country's population died (Hossain, 2017). The leader under whose watch the famine unfolded, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was assassinated just months afterwards in 1975 – the two events are inextricably linked. In the Bangladeshi psyche, “governmental ineptness, corruption and failures” starved to death 1.5m of their fellow citizens (Dowlah, 2006, p. 354).

Since the current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, is Sheikh Mujib's daughter, the famine is a politically charged topic in Bangladesh today. For instance, the May 2013 draft of the NSSS framework paper (p. 4) contained the sentence, “In 1974, the state was incapable of preventing a devastating famine”. Within weeks, senior bureaucrats decided it would be prudent to remove “politically sensitive” sentences relating to “specific years” from the document.<sup>169</sup> Consequently, the published paper omits the ‘offending’ sentence, with the revised paragraph skipping over the 1970s altogether and starting by discussing the floods of the 1990s (Alam, 2017, p. 3, para 1). Whilst the famine is mentioned elsewhere in the published paper, it carefully avoids attributing any blame to Mujib's government. Given the sensitivity of the issue, the bureaucrats' references to the famine during interviews proved all the more compelling.

The memory of the famine continues to impact Bangladesh's food policies to this day. The guilt felt by survivors, many of whom were the country's elite, created a conviction to ‘never again’ repeat the errors of 1974, at least as far as food provisioning was concerned (Hossain and Jahan, 2014). Mujib's fall from grace (Mascarenhas, 1986)—from a nationalist hero “almost made a god” (p. 48) to a

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<sup>169</sup> Minutes of a meeting chaired by the Secretary of the Cabinet Division, May 16, 2013



“cursed” figure of derision (p. 44)—also did not go unnoticed by subsequent generations of political leaders. Famines, it was understood, led to the loss of political legitimacy (Hossain, 2017). As a result, military dictators decisively used the PFDS during the 1979 and 1984 floods to successfully manage food scares (Osmani, 1991). Even after market liberalisation in the early 1990s, the PFDS was retained with the express aim to stabilise the food market through government procurement and distribution of staples (Dorosh, 2008). What developed in Bangladesh was an “aggressively pragmatic” governance mind set that was beholden to no ideology except practical outcomes (Hossain, 2017, p. 131). It is a net food importing country where food markets are allowed to function freely to the extent that the poor are not exposed to debilitating shocks.

Food imports, however, cannot always be relied on to bridge the gap between national production and consumption, which is why the government still maintains the stocks. This unreliability of rice imports was demonstrated during the 2007-08 global food price shock. In the case of rice, the price shock appears to have been sparked by fear of future price increases and consequent pre-emptive export bans enacted by some of the world’s largest rice exporters, including India (Timmer, 2010). During the 1998 floods, the positive experience of small traders importing rice from India to feed the nation had sold Bangladesh on the efficacy of private food imports (del Ninno et al., 2001). The country had thus followed advice from the international financial institutions to progressively lower its grain stocks. Unexpectedly, in 2007, it was caught by severe crop destruction from two floods and a cyclone, low public food stocks, and closed borders with India (Dorosh, 2009; Hossain and Deb, 2010). As a result, rice prices spiked and the poor’s gross income fell by 36.7% (Raihan, 2014). A military-backed government ruled in Bangladesh at the time. They immediately took steps to control the crisis, including lowering tariff rates on essential food items to zero and intensifying food distribution through the PFDS. But the global nature of the crisis meant the government was not readily successful (Raihan, 2014). Their failure diminished people’s faith in the regime, ultimately leading them to peacefully step aside in 2009 for a democratic government (Hossain and Jahan, 2014). By proving that food imports were unreliable, this episode deepened the government’s determination to maintain the PFDS to honour the subsistence crisis contract.

### *The idea of the subsistence crisis contract in the food vs. cash transfers debate*

The subsistence crisis contract exists in Bangladesh as the zeitgeist. As discussed in the conceptual framework, the zeitgeist is a set of assumptions about the function of the government that is not subject to any immediate contestation (Mehta, 2011). In this instance, it encodes, amongst other things, a belief that the state is responsible for protecting consumers from price shocks and ensuring food access for all citizens (Hossain and Jahan, 2014). The PFDS has proven sticky because it is the tool the government uses to honour this contract. The Ministry of Food's memo sent to oppose the full conversion to cash transfers noted (emphasis added):<sup>170</sup>

Bangladesh is still a net food importing country and thus exposed to volatile world food market and highly prone to natural calamities with their ever increasing severity and frequency. *So the need for building a buffer stock in order to rise to the occasion at times of crisis can hardly be over-emphasized.*

I asked several senior bureaucrats why this was the case – after all, the Bangladeshi state does not “rise to the occasion” to provide housing or healthcare to its citizens.<sup>171</sup> What makes food exceptional enough that costly buffer stocks need to be maintained to ensure a steady supply of food for the poor? “A hungry man is an angry man,” responded a Cabinet Division official.<sup>172</sup> Another insisted, “Rice is a political commodity... rice is the only thing in Bangladesh that can topple a government.”<sup>173</sup> They firmly believed if a Bangladeshi government allowed its citizens to go hungry, that government would lose power. As evidence, they pointed to the British Raj after the 1943 Bengal famine, the Mujib regime after the 1974 famine, and the military-backed government after the 2007-08 food price shock.<sup>174</sup> As long as the state considers itself the guarantor of the people's food, the PFDS must exist. Therefore, the Ministry of Food memo continued (p. 6), “as long as the need to maintain public food stock is recognized, the need to identify channels to rotate the stock in absence of emergencies needs to be addressed. Distributing the food to the poor is a cost

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<sup>170</sup> Ministry of Food memo on NSSS 1<sup>st</sup> draft, n.d., p. 1

<sup>171</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 4, 8, 9, 10, 11 (2018) and 5 (2019)

<sup>172</sup> Interview with Civil servant 5 (2019)

<sup>173</sup> Interview with Civil servant 10 (2018)

<sup>174</sup> Hossain (2018) believes the 1970 Bhola cyclone is another node in this argument; the West Pakistani rulers' callous response to the devastation precipitated Bangladesh's liberation from Pakistan. None of my interviewees made this connection.

efficient way to rotate the stock while minimizing market distortions.” A senior bureaucrat summed up the scenario as:<sup>175</sup>

The government is obligated to keep food stocks. It is obligated irrespective of which party is in power. If there are food stocks, there has to be outlet channels through the food transfer programmes. So it is impossible to shift fully to cash. It’s not viable. To protect its own political interests, no government will do it.

The subsistence crisis contract can only be explained at the level of ideas since it is very difficult to find concrete evidence for it in the present day. I drew on Parsons (2007) in Chapter 2 to argue that the causal autonomy of ideas can be established by outlining the range of viable options available to actors and showing that the reason they choose a particular option can only be explained by the ideas they hold. I demonstrate this below in order to explain why—as I mentioned in section 6.1—by the time I conducted fieldwork in 2018 the pro-food transfer position had strengthened in the policymaking circles as opposed to cash transfers.

A bureaucrat intimately involved with the NSSS negotiations reported the conviction in food transfers had grown deeper because of the *haor* floods of 2017 when the government was caught unawares with extraordinarily low public food stocks.<sup>176</sup> In March-April, July, and August 2017, three episodes of severe flash floods destroyed hundreds of thousands of hectares of harvest-ready crops in northern Bangladesh (FAO, 2017). The floods directly affected the lives and livelihoods of 8m people, whilst the 30% increase in rice prices created consumption shocks nationwide. Due to holding extraordinarily low stocks, the government failed to stabilise the price (see Figure 6.2). The government blamed the low stocks on the floods, market prices being higher than the procurement prices it had set, and very limited imports (FPMU, 2019). However, besides the floods, the other two factors were completely in the government’s control, making this episode evidence of rent-seeking at worst and incompetence at best.

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<sup>175</sup> Interview with Civil servant 10 (2018)

<sup>176</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

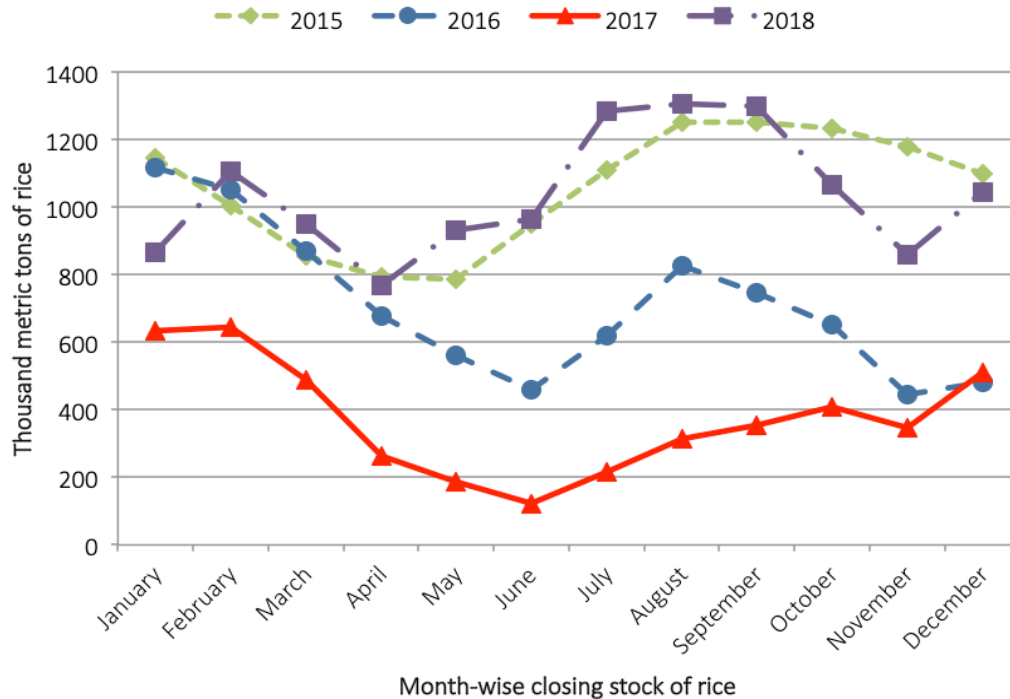


FIGURE 6.2: Rice stock in 2017 compared to other years<sup>177</sup>

First, the low imports. Unlike 2007, the international market was functioning well in 2017. Usually, the government responds to production shortfalls by rapidly lowering import tariffs, allowing private traders to bridge the supply gap in the market. In 2017, even though the first floods occurred in March, the import tariffs were maintained at 25% up to June and 10% up to August, before finally falling to 2% (FAO, 2017). Bureaucrats blamed this on incompetence and miscommunication between the Ministries of Food and Finance.<sup>178</sup> Second, the procurement price. Again, bureaucrats blamed incompetence and miscalculation – the losses from the floods and the effect of the import tariff debacle had pushed prices higher than they had expected in the early formative weeks of the harvest's price.<sup>179</sup> At the same time, the government had to release substantial portions of its meagre stocks to support the flood-affected destitute population as well as the Rohingya refugees, nearly a million of whom had fled to Bangladesh to escape genocide in Myanmar that year.<sup>180</sup> The PFDS can only function properly if it is perceived to have the stocks necessary to stabilise the price (Ali et al., 2008). In 2017, private traders knew the government most definitely did not have

<sup>177</sup> Source: Food Policy Management Unit, Ministry of Food; retrieved on December 26, 2020 from <http://fpmu.gov.bd/fpmu-database/0601.htm>

<sup>178</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 9, 10 and 11 (2018)

<sup>179</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 9 and 10 (2018)

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Civil servant 9 (2018)

adequate stocks, so prices shot up and people suffered.<sup>181</sup> Although my interviews did not reveal any rent-seeking explanations, the possibility should not be discounted since the extraordinarily high prices heavily benefited market intermediaries and producers. Whilst they did not specifically describe rent-seeking activities relating to the 2017 rice market, several senior bureaucrats insisted rent-seeking was rampant within the country's food policy apparatus. They pointed to the high-level Food Planning and Monitoring Committee, comprising six powerful ministers and an assortment of senior bureaucrats, as a major site of such activities.<sup>182</sup>

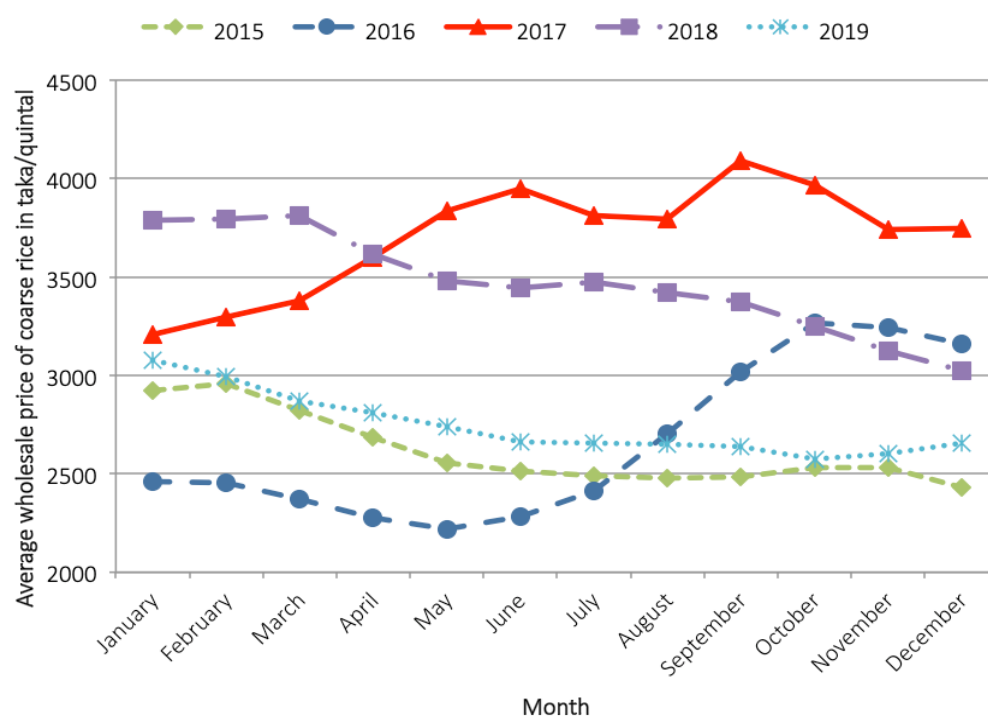


FIGURE 6.3: Rice price in 2017 compared to other years<sup>183</sup>

As Figure 6.3 shows, 2017 saw a sustained period of extraordinarily high rice prices, which did not fall until well into 2018. Eight million people were affected by just the floods alone (FAO, 2017); even six months after the floods, only 30% of the affected families were food secure (Gabrysch, et al., 2018). Nearly half a million people fell into poverty nationwide as a result of rising staple prices (Parvez, 2017). And yet, nothing politically consequential happened – no government was toppled, no food

<sup>181</sup> Interview with Civil servant 10 (2018)

<sup>182</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 9 and 10 (2018). Evidence of food related rent-seeking in Bangladesh has been described in Crow (1989), Hossain and Jahan (2014), and M. M. Islam (2015). Bureaucrats in the Ministry of Food have been implicated too (Adams Jr., 1998).

<sup>183</sup> Source: Food Policy Management Unit, Ministry of Food; retrieved on December 26, 2020 from <http://fpmu.gov.bd/fpmu-database/0201.htm>

riots ran amuck. This is despite the fact that, unlike 2007 when global factors played a role, in 2017 it was solely the government's fault. The bureaucrats involved with the NSSS could have easily interpreted 2017 as a repudiation of the subsistence crisis contract thesis – PFDS could fail, and spectacularly so, but the regime would be safe. The bureaucrats, however, drew the diametrically opposite conclusion: PFDS must be strengthened; food stocks must be increased; and, naturally, stock turnover meant food transfers trumped cash transfers. The choice to take this route when the other was readily available shows the subsistence crisis contract thesis is the zeitgeist in Bangladesh – it can only be explained at the level of ideas. Despite evidence to the contrary, actors involved in the contestation believed it was the responsibility of the government to feed the nation, and the fallout from the failure to do so would be dire. But, if this is the case, why does the NSSS advocate a move away from food transfers to cash transfers “in a longer perspective” (GED, 2015, p. 59)?

### **6.2.3 Effect of farmers holding less power than competing factions**

The food supply chain, like any other, has consumers at one end and producers at the other. Thus far, I have focused on the consumers, examining how the Bangladesh government acts as their guarantor through the PFDS, why it does so, and how its measures impact the food vs. cash transfers debate. Often missing from discussions of the food supply chain in Bangladesh are the producers, especially small farmers. The government in Bangladesh has always attempted to use the PFDS as a two-in-one tool to resolve the food price dilemma in the country. The dilemma is that food prices on the one hand must be kept at an affordable level for the consumer to stave off hunger while prices need to remain high enough for farmers to incentivise production (Timmer, Falcon and Pearson, 1983). Farmers, however, have low holding power. As discussed in the conceptual framework, holding power is not only a group's access to wealth and resources, it is also its ability to mobilise strongly enough to pose a viable threat to competing factions in a political settlement (Behuria, Buur and Gray, 2017). In this section, I show that the reason the NSSS promises to shift to cash transfers in the future is because Bangladeshi farmers have historically held very little power in the political arena. So although the PFDS has a procurement arm to support farmers, it is ineffective. If changes in storage technology allow the PFDS to store grains longer, the frequent need for stock turnover will diminish, enabling the move away

from food transfers to cash transfers “in a longer perspective” (GED, 2015, p. 59). In this scenario, any concern about not procuring regularly from farmers is an insufficient deterrent.

### ***PFDS’ designated role in supporting farmers***

Rice production in Bangladesh has grown steadily over time, with each decade witnessing accelerations in comparison to the last (see Figure 6.4). After a late start in the 1970s, the Green Revolution<sup>184</sup> increased crop yields in the country (Ahmed and Haggblade, 2000), as did the liberalisation of agricultural input markets, which enabled widespread adaptation of irrigation technology (Levy, 2014). The increased supply has increased the affordability and accessibility of the rice, leading to more consumption and less hunger (Hossain and Deb, 2010). To stimulate domestic production, starting in the mid-1970s, the government shifted from compulsorily levying food from producers to voluntarily buying them from farmers, traders and millers at a fixed price (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Haggblade, 2000). Even after the market reforms of the early 1990s, the PFDS’ producer supporting functions were retained. Whilst its distribution arm was tasked with setting the ceiling prices to benefit consumers, its procurement arm was meant to set the floor prices to benefit producers (Ali et al., 2008). Theoretically, setting the floor price can benefit farmers by incentivising farming and providing a price guarantee, especially for small farmers (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Ahmed, 1993). In reality, since the government only buys a small fraction of the harvest, the market price can easily be far lower than the government’s procurement price (Ali et al., 2008). Big farmers and market intermediaries like rice millers, regularly take advantage of the system to sell to the government’s stocks to the detriment of the small farmers and peasants it was designed for (Ahmed and Bakhtiar, 2020).

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<sup>184</sup> The Green Revolution of the 1950s-60s sparked intense scholarly debate. The uneven adoption of modern seed varieties coupled with class inequalities was predicted to devastate the peasantry (Griffin, 1979). Subsequent studies, however, found the rural poor also benefited from the new technology, albeit unequally (Lipton and Longhurst, 1989). In Bangladesh, the Green Revolution has had deleterious environmental impact (Sala and Bocchi, 2014) but the predicted immiserising effect on the peasants did not materialise (Orr, 2012). Widespread technology adoption and resultant growth benefited broad swaths of the rural population, including large and small farmers, agricultural labour, and the non-farming poor (Osmani, 1998).

## Rice production, 1961 to 2018

Rice production is measured in tonnes.

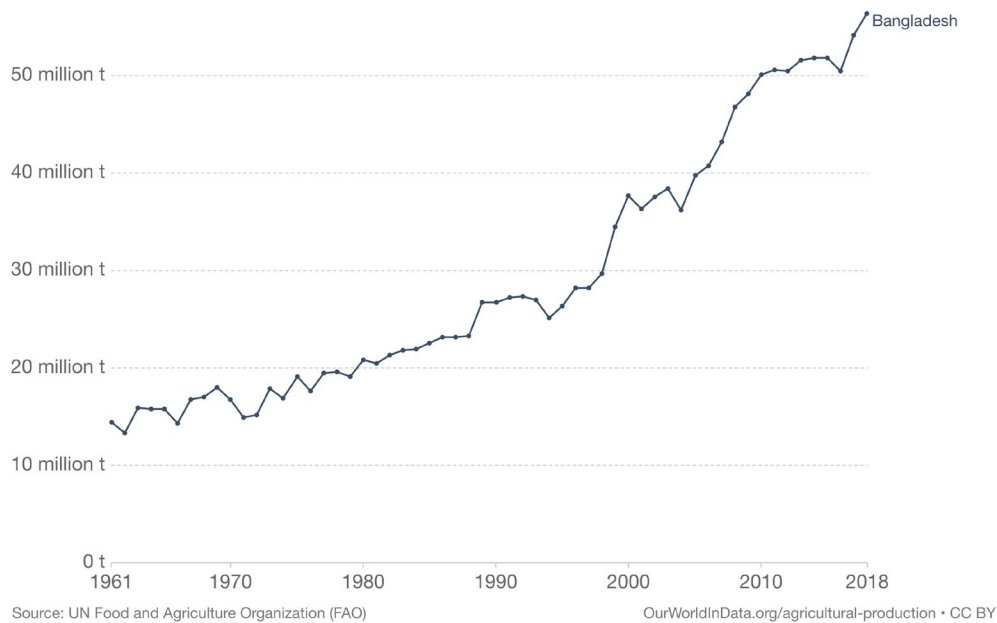


FIGURE 6.4: Rice production in Bangladesh, 1961-2018<sup>185</sup>

By numerical measures, small farmers and peasants form a sizeable group in Bangladesh – the majority of the rural population in Figure 6.5 belong to this category. But their geographical spread, heterogeneity, ideological fragmentation, and low resource access make them extremely weak actors in comparison to the organised interests of the state, the bureaucracy, and most importantly, the big farmers and rice millers (Abdullah and Shahabuddin, 1997). This is not to say that farmer protests have been completely ineffective in Bangladesh. Fertiliser market liberalisation in 1994-95, instituted due to donor pressure, was met with militant protests from mid-level farmers (Ahmed et al., 2009). The resulting police violence and deaths succeeded in partially reversing the reforms. The reversals have proven lasting – farmers benefited from urea fertiliser subsidies even during the 2007-08 food price shock (Hossain and Deb, 2010). Today such victories are vanishingly rare. Whilst the urban poor can depend on the subsistence crisis contract to protect their consumption interests, since rural farmers have no holding power or access to the policymaking arena, their concerns are uniformly dismissed in the policy process (Abdullah and Shahabuddin, 1997; Hossain and Jahan, 2014).

<sup>185</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on December 20, 2020 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/rice-production?tab=chart&time=earliest..latest&country=~BGD>



## Population living in urban and rural areas, Bangladesh, 1950 to 2016

Total estimated population living in rural and urban areas.

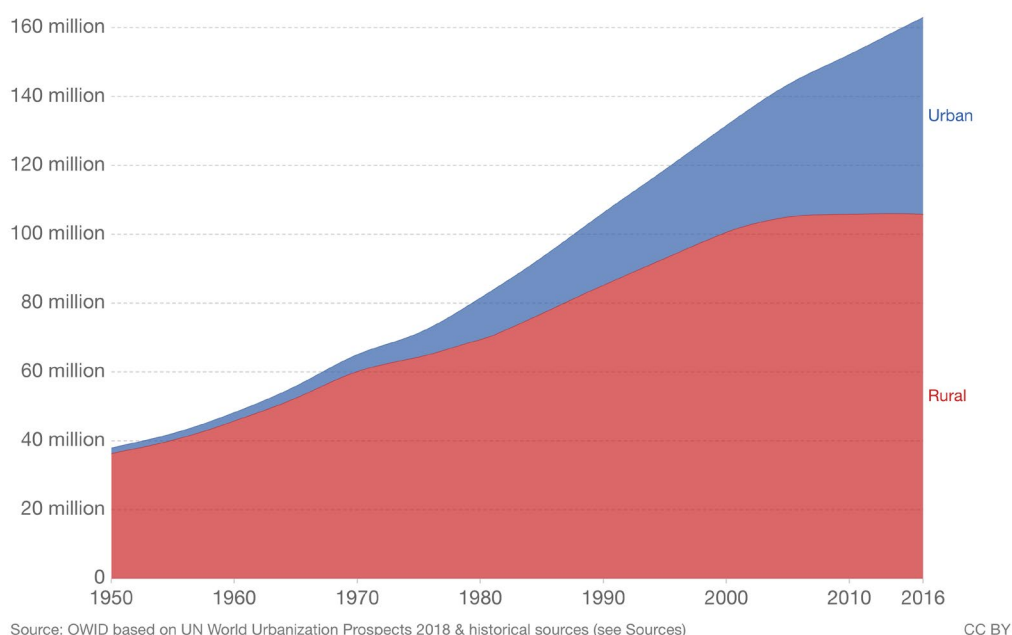


FIGURE 6.5: Urban and rural population, 1950-2016<sup>186</sup>

### *PFDS procurement in the food vs. cash transfers debate*

Returning to the NSSS' food and cash transfers negotiations, the Ministry of Food memo responded to early attempts to convert transfers fully to cash by drawing attention to the food producers:<sup>187</sup>

Our food policy rightly provides that the producers be safeguarded against any price plummet especially during the harvest in order to enable them to invest in the successive crop years with the ultimate objective of attaining self-sufficiency in food production. This calls for undertaking procurement drive internally during the harvest of [rice and wheat] to prevent price from falling below the threshold of cost of production...

Although the memo paid lip service to PFDS' procurement function, studies find public procurement in Bangladesh woefully inadequate as a tool to support farmers (Ahmed and Bakhtiar, 2020). As early as 1993, PFDS was criticised for trying to ineffectively balance the conflicting interests of distribution and procurement (Ahmed, Chowdhury and Ahmed, 1993); these criticisms continue to date (Sayeed

<sup>186</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on December 20, 2020 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/urban-and-rural-population-stacked?country=~BGD>

<sup>187</sup> Ministry of Food memo on NSSS 1<sup>st</sup> draft, n.d., p. 1

and Yunus, 2018). The PFDS' inadequacy stems from the weak holding power of the farmers compared to market intermediaries, like the politically influential millers, who have monopolised the PFDS' procurement arm, leaving small farmers at their mercy. For instance, in 2019, instead of small holders and tenant farmers, the government procured over 80% of its stock from rice millers (Ahmed and Bakhtiar, 2020). The monopoly that the millers have established allows them to buy at a depressed price from the farmers and sell at a huge mark up to the government (Raha et al., 2013). They can do so due to their considerable holding power derived from their control of the rice market (Rahman et al., 2020), access to superior technology (Reardon et al., 2012), and political influence (Alam, Akter and Begum, 2014).

The bureaucrats I interviewed believed the millers and powerful businessmen, in collusion with the ruling party, completely control the rice market.<sup>188</sup> When I asked how the government responds to this, a senior bureaucrat responded, “Who said it isn't the government's own people?” pointing to the ruling party's links with the syndicates that control the market.<sup>189</sup> Over time, the PFDS has demonstrably displayed indifference to the producers, whilst still offering a price stabilising utility for the consumers (Ali et al., 2008). Given our earlier discussion about the subsistence crisis contract, it is not surprising that the distributive function of the PFDS is successful. But the weak holding power of farmers is arguably why—despite the intervening decades and intermittent protests—the procurement arm of the PFDS remains dysfunctional (Ahmed and Bakhtiar, 2020). A renowned expert who has researched the issue throughout his career declared to me, “Procurement price [arm of the PFDS] has failed”.<sup>190</sup>

The weak holding power of the farmers has had two effects in the food vs. cash transfers debate. First, although the government needs to maintain a public food stock to stabilise prices for the consumer, it does not have any imperative to regularly procure from farmers to help protect the farmers' interests. As a result, the government procures about a million metric tons of rice (Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, 2006), which is just enough to stabilise the price for the

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<sup>188</sup> Interviews with Civil servants 9, 10 and 11 (2018)

<sup>189</sup> Interview with Civil servant 10 (2018)

<sup>190</sup> Interview with Expert 9 (2018)

consumers but is only one-third of what is needed to support the farmers (Ahmed and Bakhtiar, 2020). Lower than necessary procurement decreases the amount of rice the government would otherwise have to rotate through food transfers. As a result, there is more policy space for cash transfers.

Second, the farmers' weak holding power means there is no pressure to procure a certain amount of rice from them – the pressure is only to distribute enough to meet the poor's subsistence requirements. Thus if the government could increase the storage duration of the rice, then the stocks would last longer. The government would then need to procure even less rice every year to replace rotting stocks. This means even less stock will need turnover through food transfers. The government is indeed constructing technologically advanced facilities through the Modern Food Storage Facilities Project that will allow grains to be stored three times longer, from the current 9-12 months up to 3 years (Ahmed and Bakhtiar, 2020; Hoque and Hoffmann, 2019). The World Bank pointed out the significance of better storage technology for social protection transfers in a memo where it argued:<sup>191</sup>

The proposed \$235 million Modern Food Storage Facilities Project undertaken by the Ministry of Food and supported by the Bank would help to reduce the frequency of the rotation of public food stocks, and as a result reduce the pressure on these safety nets to manage these stocks.

A senior bureaucrat shared that these developments would allow the state to further disengage from food procurement:<sup>192</sup>

We're moving to longer-term storage. We will keep 1m metric ton rice fixed there safely. We will renew it. And sometimes send it to export... We are expecting that the government will not remain too involved [in the rice supply chain]. The government's job is to franchise, to create the instruments, to attract entrepreneurs, to give them financing...

Knowing that it would not be politically risky to procure fewer stocks every year and thus have less annual stock turnover going forward, the NSSS can insist on retaining food transfers now but can promise a move to cash transfers in the future. If farmers held more power, it is unlikely the PFDS' procurement arm would be so neglected in

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<sup>191</sup> World Bank memo on the NSSS first draft, November, 2013, pp. 3-4

<sup>192</sup> Interview with Civil servant 9 (2018)

Bangladesh and, consequently, also unlikely the NSSS could so blithely promise the move to cash transfers in the future.

### **6.3 Political settlement on rice provisioning**

Understanding the issue-specific settlement on rice provisioning helps clarify NSSS' puzzling decisions about food and cash transfers. As outlined in Figure 6.6 below, the entire political settlement on provisioning in Bangladesh lies on the zeitgeist—rooted in colonial-era decisions—that famines jeopardise regime stability. State officials respond to the zeitgeist by sustaining the formal institution of the national food stock, which in turn sustains the informal institution of stock turnover through food transfers. Private traders, especially market intermediaries, use power resources like their market control and access—both to superior technology as well as politicians, who have policymaking monopoly—to tilt the settlement in their favour and against farmers, who have low holding power. Neither donors nor farmers find their power resources, food aid and protests respectively, particularly influential during contestations. The resulting constellation of power and institutions generate economic and political rents for traders and politicians.

I argued in the conceptual framework that there could be a dialectical relationship between ideas and institutions in a political settlement. There is some evidence for it in this case. The historically rooted idea of famine prevention created formal and informal institutions like food stocks and rotating stocks through food transfers that, in turn, constrains the policymakers' ideas of what reforms are practicable, despite their inclination to think of cash transfers as superior to food. Ideas, therefore, shape institutions, which then shape ideas. Seekings' (2020b) treatment of the conservative character of Botswana's welfare system due to successive droughts the country faced as well as colonial influences on its attitudes to the poor resonate with my analysis.

Since political settlements are 'durable' constellations of power and institutions, the analysis in this chapter has extended to the past by tracing the historical evolution of the institutions. Analysing the decisions subsequent to the NSSS' finalisation, particularly the *haor* floods episode, also tested the settlement's reproducibility. As predicted by political settlement analysts, like Khan (2010, 2018a), decisions that

were incompatible with the current settlement were reversed prior to implementation. Thus all attempts to immediately shift wholly to cash transfers were cancelled.

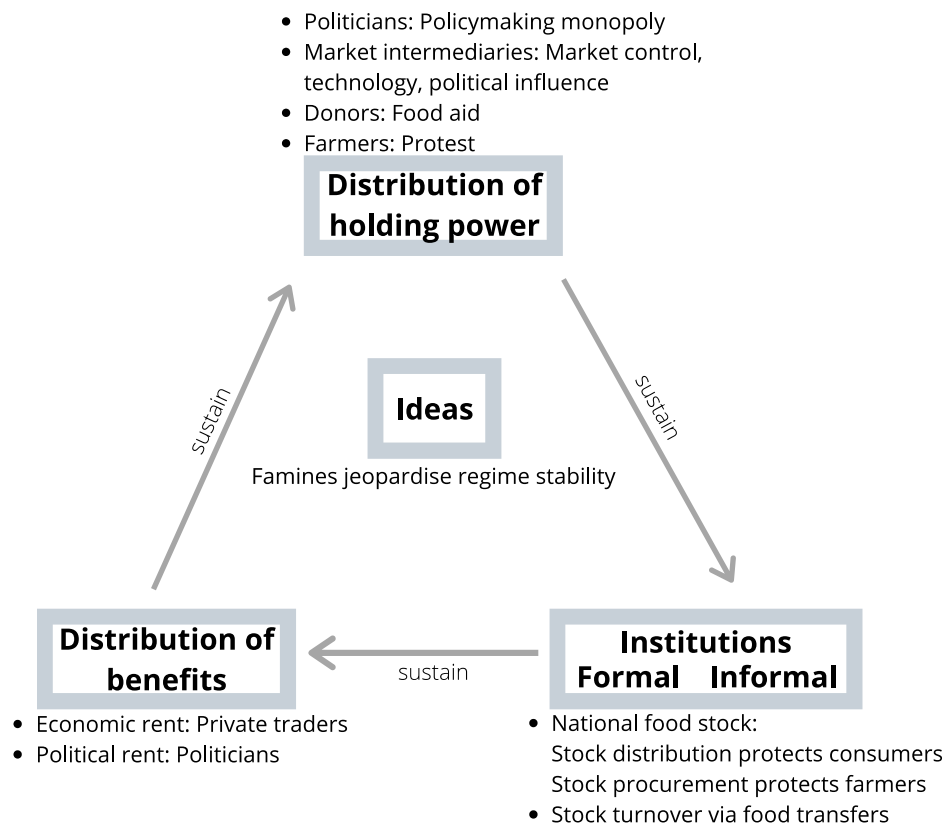


FIGURE 6.6: The political settlement about provisions in Bangladesh

The World Bank's interest in funding better storage facilities that allow the government to shift away from food transfers and to cash transfers in the future has major implications for Bangladesh's food self-sufficiency aims. Although aid donors have long encouraged the government's complete disengagement from the rice value chain, Bangladesh has historically adopted a relatively pragmatic and restrained approach (Ahmed, Haggblade and Chowdhury, 2000). The 2007-08 global food price shock demonstrated the fickleness of the international food markets, and the rice market in particular (Gilbert, 2011), leading to greater acceptance, and indeed support, for governments to intervene directly in national food security issues, including by maintaining food stocks (Timmer, 2010). Since 98% of the region's food needs are met through domestic production, the spotlight has fallen on the Bangladesh government's role in supporting producers (Reardon et al., 2012). On this front, as the discussion above illustrates, the government has a dismal track record. The more the

government relies on better storage technology, the less it will need to procure from farmers to maintain stocks. The less it procures, the weaker the PFDS' farmer support arm will be. Weak PFDS procurement and its consequent effects on market prices discourage farmers from engaging in production. There is some early evidence for this already, as employment in the agriculture sector as a share of total employment in Bangladesh has been falling at a faster rate than its neighbours' (see Figure 6.7). This disenfranchisement is happening at a time when volatile international food markets are proving unreliable suppliers (Timmer, 2010) and climate change is wreaking havoc on domestic harvests (Sarker, Alam and Gow, 2012). The amalgamation of events, therefore, has the potential to negatively impact Bangladesh's food security, as well as its aspirations for food self-sufficiency.

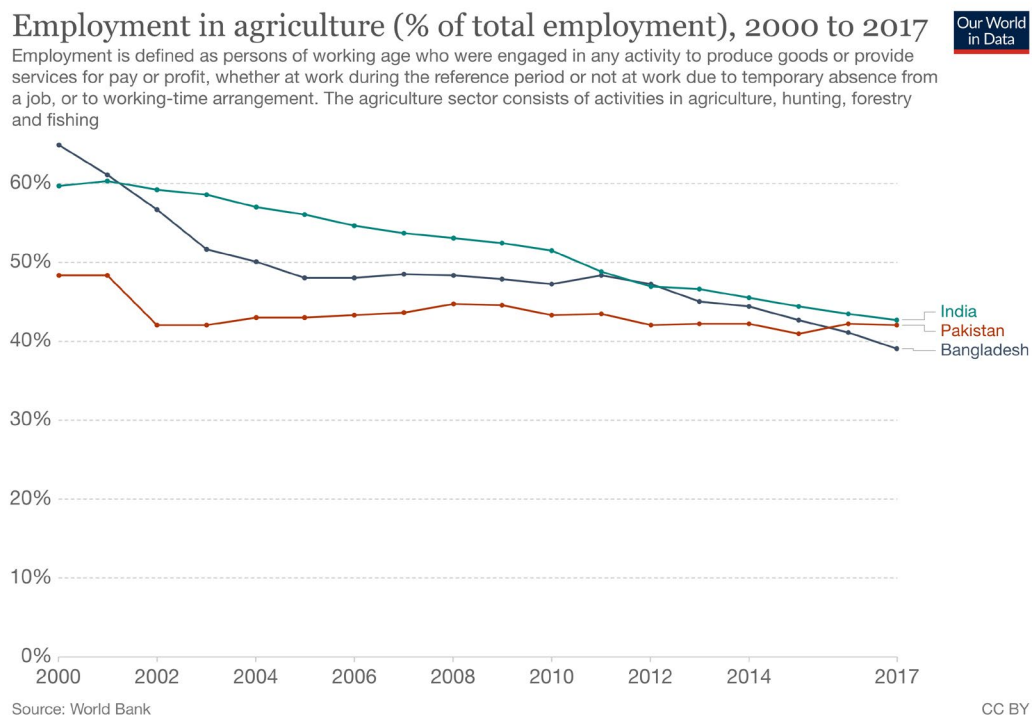


FIGURE 6.7: Share of employment in agriculture in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, 2000-17<sup>193</sup>

<sup>193</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on December 20, 2020 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/employment-in-agriculture?tab=chart&time=2000..latest&country=BGD~IND~PAK>

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed the question: *What political considerations animate the food vs. cash transfers debate in the NSSS?* The main argument is that, depending on the issue being contested, paradigmatic ideas in society—which are historically rooted—can even trump the demands of powerful aid donors. The paradigmatic idea held by Bangladesh’s elites is that basic food provisioning is foundational to regime stability. The NSSS’ adherence to food transfers for now and promises to shift to cash transfers in the future, therefore, have little to do with the merits and demerits of cash and food as modes of transfers and wholly to do with the underlying settlement on food. Whilst a minimal amount of stocks are maintained to protect rice consumers, the increasing reliance on food imports to meet national consumption needs has weakened the position of farmers vis-à-vis market intermediaries as well as consumers. Thus, whilst the government has an overriding imperative to feed the nation, there is no related imperative to feed the nation with food obtained from *within* the nation. The weak holding power of farmers allows the government to safely bank on new technology, such as improved grain storage facilities, to store grains even longer, leading to less procurement over time, and thus less food transfers over time. In the long run, this has potentially deleterious effect on the nation’s food self-sufficiency aims, and allows the government to promise to shift to cash transfers in the NSSS. Farmers, however, are by no means the only excluded group in Bangladesh’s political settlements. In the next chapter, I draw attention to NGOs and donors who are also facing exclusionary pressures.

# CHAPTER 7

## NGOS AND DONORS IN SOCIAL PROTECTION POLICYMAKING

*“The failure of NGOs to achieve their goals is often attributed to a set of managerial and technical problems instead of their inadequacy in the face of the complex realities of poverty, underdevelopment and political power relations within which they operate.”*

Maha M. Abdelrahman, 2004, p. 73

Aid donors and NGOs have long been intertwined with the story of Bangladesh’s development. In the early years after independence, major donors considered treating the country as a test case to prove the relative efficacy of the free market over a state-controlled economy (Faaland and Parkinson, 1976). Donor agenda has closely guided national policy formation since then (Faaland, 1981; Rahman, Sadath and Giessen, 2016). Military dictators, for instance, undertook structural adjustment programmes in response to donor demands (Hossain, 1995). With regards to the prevalence of NGOs, Bangladesh has been called the “NGO capital of the world” (Karim, 2001, p. 96) with the country being lauded for hosting “one of the largest and most sophisticated NGO sectors in the developing world” (Gauri and Galef, 2005, p. 2046). The Nobel Prize-winning Grameen Bank, which pioneered the microfinance model, and BRAC, the world’s largest NGO, are both indigenous to Bangladesh. The government and the NGOs have even partnered over the years to provide social protection, and contribute to the health, education and environmental sectors. As a result, over 90% of villages



had at least one NGO programme by the turn of this century (Fruttero and Gauri, 2005).

This chapter zooms in on the third reform contestation in the NSSS, which was about the inclusion of NGOs in the NSSS' formation, to reflect on how the roles of NGOs and donors have changed in recent years. It draws on the contestation to address the research question: *What political concerns shape the role of civil society organisations and donors in Bangladesh's social protection system?* The previous chapter argued that ideas have a pivotal influence on the inner logic of a political settlement. In contrast, this chapter argues that although ideas provide an alternate pathway for weak and excluded groups to enter the policymaking arena, this process is irregular and unreliable.

Section 7.1 examines the role NGOs and donors played in formulating the NSSS. Despite strong donor exhortations to the contrary, NGOs were largely ignored in the NSSS even though, subsequently, random and arbitrary donor- and NGO-linked programmes were incorporated in various parts of the document. Section 7.2 explains these puzzling developments by drawing on the complex relationship between the state, the donors, and NGOs in the country since independence and tracing the manifestations of their contestation to the present day. It argues that donors and NGOs have recently become particularly weak actors in comparison to the state, and documents the methods these actors resort to in order to exert influence in the policymaking arena. The chapter concludes by outlining the new political settlement on donors and NGOs in the country and its implications for these actors.

## **7.1 NGOs and donors in the NSSS**

In this section, I examine the role of NGOs and donors in shaping the NSSS. Three broad questions emerge from a critical examination of the policy formation: Why were NGOs overlooked in the NSSS despite their acknowledged historical prominence in the process of Bangladesh's development? Why were donor exhortations to include NGOs in the NSSS' formation ignored despite the historical influence donors have had in Bangladesh's policy spheres? And, given these

challenges, through what processes did specific NGO and donor-linked programmes eventually manage to find a place in the NSSS?

### 7.1.1 NGOs

Since Bangladesh's independence, donors have channelled significant amounts of aid to the country through NGOs (see Figure 7.1). As a result, the NGOs have become a flourishing sector that has had some demonstrable impact on the country's development. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (2013) has highlighted Bangladesh's achievements in furthering women's agency, noting the country is ahead of its neighbours and credited NGOs for their emphasis on improving gender equity.<sup>194</sup> Asadullah, Savoia and Mahmud (2014) argue that there appears to be a correlation between improvements in certain social development indicators and the onset of NGO interventions in those sectors. The impact of NGOs is evident in the country's pluralistic healthcare system, for example, where state healthcare is supplemented by the private sector for the affluent and NGOs for the poor (Chowdhury et al., 2013). Despite intense opposition to their effort from Western donors keen to protect their pharmaceutical multinationals, Gonoshasthaya Kendra, an NGO, was at the forefront of forming a national drugs policy that indigenised the drug industry, admittedly to a limited extent (Chowdhury, 1995). As in the pluralistic healthcare system, NGOs and the government have also collaborated successfully in service delivery, for example in running tuberculosis treatment programmes (Chowdhury et al., 2013). Children's immunisation rates also improved vastly when NGOs became involved in immunisation programmes (Karim, 2011).

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<sup>194</sup> NGO efforts to further women's agency have faced strident opposition from religious groups in Bangladesh, whose conservative social outlook, especially concerning women, have been threatened by the expansion of NGOs with a progressive stance on gender issues (Karim, 2011; Lewis, 2011). Nevertheless, Karim (2001) cautions against the simplistic narrative of NGOs as liberators of poor women. This is because framing themselves as a progressive force has allowed NGOs to mask their own exploitation of poor women who are indebted to them via onerous microfinance loans, and hyping the overblown threat of extremism has helped NGOs access Western donor funds earmarked for fighting transnational Islamic extremism. Wood (2007) notes that the rise of Islamic politics in the country has impacted erstwhile secular NGOs in various ways, with some choosing to promote Islamic values, others focusing on apolitical service delivery, whilst a third group continues down their historically secular paths.

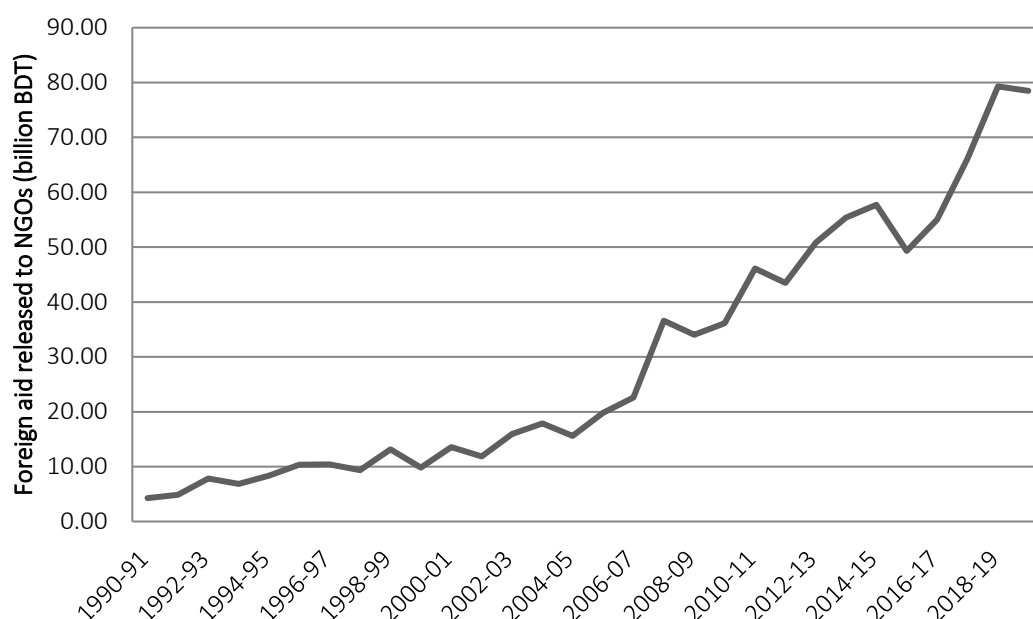


FIGURE 7.1: Foreign aid released to NGOs through the NGO Affairs Bureau, fiscal years 1990-91 to 2019-20<sup>195</sup>

Despite the prominence of the NGO sector in the country and their collaboration with the state in poverty eradication efforts, NGOs have a very small footprint in the NSSS. For example, under the heading ‘Engagement with NGOs’, the NSSS zero draft of October 31, 2013 (p. 116) states:

Bangladesh has established numerous world-class NGOs in delivering a range of social services, including in the area of social protection. The Government takes a great pride in partnering with the NGO community. This partnership has yielded positive results in poverty reduction and human development. The Government will continue, and where necessary, deepen this partnership in the area of delivering social protection services based on the NSPS.

Despite extolling their virtues, this short paragraph is extraordinarily vague in terms of concrete policy proposals on the role of NGOs. This is striking given that the NSSS is the seminal social protection policy document that is to guide the government’s long-term strategy. Several civil servants I interviewed acknowledged the omission was glaring, with one bureaucrat who was intimately connected to the process commenting, “Although I shouldn’t say this as a representative of the government, what is lacking [in the NSSS] are the NGOs, even though they also work in social

<sup>195</sup> Source: NGO Affairs Bureau; retrieved on January 10, 2021 from <http://www.ngoab.gov.bd/site/page/2cf5ab46-53a4-4126-a948-fef63a5d0e7a/->

protection. They aren't in here. They've somehow been left out.”<sup>196</sup> Whilst NGOs had been excluded from the NSSS in terms of being partners in policymaking, a narrow conceptualisation that focused on some of their strengths at project implementation to a very limited extent did make an appearance. For instance, revisions to the draft of December 27, 2013 (p. 102)—which were retained in the final iteration of the document—extended the short paragraph on NGO engagement to include that NGOs could help in “piloting of innovative ideas for possible scaling up”, “identification of potential beneficiaries” and help to “redress grievances and disputes relating to the implementation” of the NSSS. The somewhat random addition of issues like grievance redress to the NSSS is puzzling and is addressed later in this chapter.

These omissions in the NSSS did not go unnoticed nor, indeed, unchallenged. Major international donors and several influential NGOs sent memos expressing their desire to see greater NGO involvement in the strategy (see Table 7.1).

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Comments on draft NSSS in late 2013</b>
BRAC <sup>197</sup>	Existence of World class NGOs in the country is mentioned in the strategy paper. However the scenario of GO NGO collaboration could be clearly articulated as there are clear scopes for effective partnership between GO and NGO...
Save the Children <sup>198</sup>	...the [NSSS] has limited information on the anticipated role of NGOS in supporting government to implement the strategy. This is a missed opportunity...
DFID <sup>199</sup>	GO-NGO Collaboration: ... The process does not indicate that the draft was shared with stakeholders outside the Government - a significant issue considering that a national strategy needs to be consulted with and agreed by all stakeholders.
Australian High Commission (DFAT) <sup>200</sup>	There is clear scope for GO NGO collaboration in the proposed strategy but demands a bit more attention which would strengthen the strategy.
EU delegation <sup>201</sup>	...the consultation/participation exercise leading to this draft should have been broadened to allow further, longer and substantial national debate with all stakeholders: NGOs, private sector, local authorities, academia, media...

<sup>196</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

<sup>197</sup> BRAC memo on NSPS draft, December 8, 2013, p. 7

<sup>198</sup> Save the Children on NSPS draft, December 1, 2013, p. 1

<sup>199</sup> DFID memo on NSPS draft, December 8, 2013, p. 1

<sup>200</sup> Australian High Commission (DFAT) memo on NSPS draft, December 8, 2013, p. 6

<sup>201</sup> EU delegation memo on NSPS draft, December 8, 2013, p. 6

Organisation	Comments on draft NSSS in late 2013
UNDP <sup>202</sup>	Some inconsistencies are observed, which need further critical review... ‘engagement with NGOs’ is addressed to deepen the partnership in social protection services based on NSPS. But no mechanism or framework is suggested how this engagement or partnership can work and endure.

TABLE 7.1: Donor and NGOs advised greater NGO involvement in the NSSS

Despite such clear reminders from Bangladesh’s key donors and influential NGOs, the role of NGOs remained minimal, both in the formation process and in the content of the document. For example, the government used NGOs as ‘event management’ organisations to arrange regional dialogues with local government officials, the civil society, and programme beneficiaries in Rangpur, Sylhet, Khulna, and Gazipur in late 2013.<sup>203</sup> These dialogues were seen as tick boxing exercises, described by bureaucrats as “*nai mamar cheye kana mama bhalo*” – a Bangla idiom indicating it was better than nothing.<sup>204</sup> The government also arranged a dialogue with national-level civil society organisations ostensibly to include their views. However, an internal report written by consultants who observed the event cautioned to no avail that the government had not taken donor advice on board.<sup>205</sup>

Civil society organizations including NGOs have been strikingly marginal to the NSPS formulation process. Consultation exercises, to the extent they have been held, have lacked participatory depth. This was vividly brought out in the stakeholder dialogue of 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2014. The draft NSPS even in its final May version only has a perfunctory residual paragraph about its vision of engaging CSOs and NGOs...

The issue of NGO absence and their diminished role in the NSSS is perplexing on two counts. First, given they’ve been widely lauded for their influence in Bangladesh, including specifically in social protection, their absence in the NSSS is an unexplained puzzle. Second, given they were effectively ignored in the NSSS, the subsequent random reference to NGOs in very particular and limited roles, such as to “redress grievances”, is also puzzling.

<sup>202</sup> UNDP memo on NSPS draft, November 3, 2013, p. 3

<sup>203</sup> Minutes of November 3, 2013 meeting to discuss the modalities of regional dialogue of draft NSPS chaired by Member, GED

<sup>204</sup> Interview with Civil servant 1 (2017)

<sup>205</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP from two veteran national and international experts, August 2014, p. 7

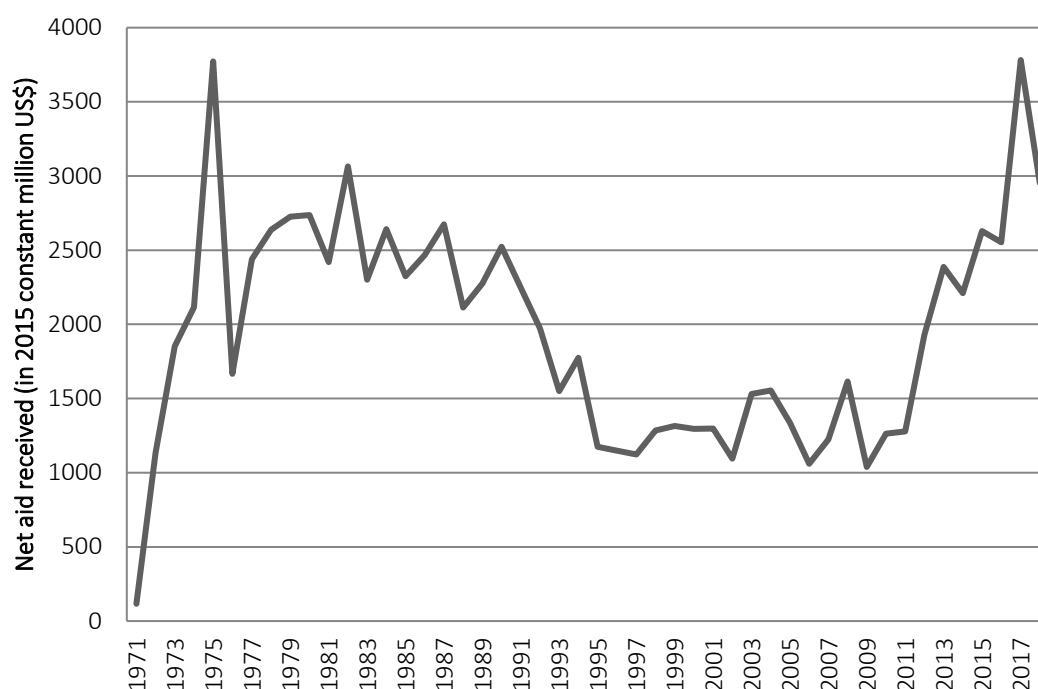


FIGURE 7.2: Net official development assistance and official aid received (in 2015 constant million US\$), 1971-2018<sup>206</sup>

### 7.1.2 Donors

As discussed in previous chapters, international donors have always played a major role in Bangladesh's policy making. For example, Rahman's (2012) study on the process of Bangladesh forming its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) in the early 2000s revealed that donors were firmly in the driving seat of policymaking in the country. Despite the PRSP being a major policy document purportedly developed with the support of a trifecta comprising the state, donors and the civil society, not only bureaucrats but also parliamentarians were systematically disregarded in favour of realising donor agenda (Rahman, 2018). At the time, donors used the Local Consultative Group—a forum for donor agenda harmonisation—as a base from which they coordinated with various ministries to promote their own agenda. Since then, aid funding to the country has significantly increased. Figure 7.2 shows aid funding is now at the highest it has been since the mid-1970s. Therefore, it would not be unreasonable to expect that donor influence would have increased in tandem.<sup>207</sup> And

<sup>206</sup> Source: World Bank; retrieved on January 19, 2021 from

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.KD?end=2018&locations=BD&start=1971>

<sup>207</sup> After all, in the contrasting scenario I describe in Chapter 5, the reason the Ministry of Food bureaucrats provided for ignoring the World Bank's demand to move to cash transfers was that

yet, as the above discussion shows, requests from major donors to include NGOs in the NSSS were summarily ignored, revealing a potentially diminished degree of influence despite larger aid inflows to the country.

Donors themselves appear in the zero draft of the NSSS, dated October 31, 2013 (p. 116), under the heading ‘Engagement with Development Partners on Social Protection’.<sup>208</sup> The section, which for the most part remained unchanged across various iterations of the document, primarily acknowledged the contribution donors have made to social protection in the country. The technical assistance donors provided in developing the NSSS was also acknowledged. NSSS’ final version, dated July 2015 (p. 80), summarises that “significant investments in Social Security have been made by bilateral development partners, mainly through non-government channels.”

Although there are no substantial differences in this section between the original draft and the final document, there is a telling change that points to a wider debate on what is often called the ‘graduation’ model. The donor-funded ‘graduation’ model, pioneered by BRAC in Bangladesh, refers to a set of programmes wherein extreme poor households are given cash and asset transfers over a short period of a year or two to improve their income and wellbeing, after which they are expected to ‘graduate’ out of ‘poverty’ (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2015). Whilst currently in vogue amongst international development organisations, the model is controversial amongst development researchers, generating debates that I address later in this chapter. However, for the purposes of the NSSS, it is noteworthy that after recounting the programmes funded by DFID, DFAT, EU, and UNDP, the zero draft (p. 116, emphasis added) stated, “These [donor-funded] programmes are essentially income generating, asset transfer or micro-enterprise programs and *may not necessarily be characterized as social protection programmes.*” In stark contrast, the same sentence in the final version of the NSSS (p. 80, emphasis added) states, “These schemes are essentially income generating or asset transfer type programmes, *which have demonstrably supported a large number of the very poorest to move out of extreme*

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Bangladesh is not reliant on food aid anymore and therefore did not need to pay heed to the particular donor demands regarding food versus cash transfers.

<sup>208</sup> For a list of aid donors operating in Bangladesh now, see Appendix C.

*poverty.*” The reported impact of donors’ interventions in the form of graduation programmes thus undergoes a radical shift in the document – from being considered unworthy of the label ‘social protection’ in the first instance to being uncritically praised in the final iteration.

This is not the only place in the NSSS where asset transfer programmes are endorsed after initially being disparaged. The zero draft of October 31, 2013 (pp. 63-64) cautions against the graduation model, noting that the income gain from the programme is so small in real terms that it does not allow families to escape—or ‘graduate’ out of—poverty, and nearly half the participants lose their productive assets after leaving the programme. Both BRAC and major donors wrote to the government to dispute these characterisations in the NSSS (see Table 7.2).

Organisation	Comments on draft NSSS in late 2013
BRAC <sup>209</sup>	...there is an extremely successful, well researched programme model developed and implemented by BRAC in Bangladesh and it has also been replicated in 10 other countries across the globe. This programme targets the ultra poor women, through asset transfer and handholding for a given period it helps the most vulnerable households come out of ultra poverty. Programme like BRAC's... which helps [the poor and] excluded to graduate to inclusion should be part of the NSP strategy.
DFID <sup>210</sup>	GO-NGO Collaboration: Bangladesh is replete with social transfer programmes which NGOs have implemented over the years focused on graduating people out of poverty. The document could draw much more on this experience.
EU delegation <sup>211</sup>	The NSPS draft does not incorporate at all graduation aspects...
UNDP <sup>212</sup>	...we reiterate that the Strategy leaves too little space for direct poverty ‘graduation’ programmes. UNDP believes that social protection needs to include not only safety nets but also ladders to move out of poverty, building on the country’s own innovative best practices, especially given that Bangladesh has the most tangible graduation results globally.

TABLE 7.2: Donors and NGOs defended the graduation model

Subsequently, in the final version of the NSSS, the offending section was substantially revised to present the graduation model in a far more favourable light. This document, dated July 2015, credits BRAC and notes that other NGOs are following BRAC’s footsteps: “Graduation programmes developed by BRAC in

<sup>209</sup> BRAC memo on NSSS draft, December 8, 2013, pp. 7-8

<sup>210</sup> DFID memo on NSSS draft, December 8, 2013, p. 1

<sup>211</sup> EU delegation memo on NSSS draft, December 8, 2013, p. 7

<sup>212</sup> UNDP memo on NSSS draft, November 28, 2013, p. 2



Bangladesh and now being replicated globally, are an innovative approach to help the extreme poor engage with the market” (p. 43). It reports that average income does increase for participants in the graduation model, albeit by a small margin, and there is also a small gain in assets that is sustained over the years. Essentially, it presents almost the same facts as earlier drafts did but packages them in a positive light.

As before with NGOs, the role of donors in the NSSS prove perplexing on two counts. Why does donor influence on policymaking seem to have decreased despite a substantial increase in aid? And, despite such seemingly diminished influence, why and how are some particular programmes, like the graduation model, defended successfully in the NSSS? In the subsequent sections, I attempt to explain these puzzles by drawing on the historical relationship between the NGOs, the state, and the donors in Bangladesh, and tracing its manifestation to the present day.

## **7.2 The reasons behind NSSS’ decisions about NGOs and donors**

In this section, I provide two explanations for the puzzling decisions regarding NGOs and donors in the NSSS. First, the relationship between the state, donors, and NGOs has been in constant flux since Bangladesh’s inception, and for structural and historical reasons it is currently at a stage where the state has the upper hand over the donors and NGOs in terms of policy decisions. As a result, NGOs were excluded from the NSSS despite donor exhortations to the contrary. Second, given their relative weakness vis-à-vis the state, donors and NGOs are now largely using the power resource of ‘ideas’ rather than coercion to keep their rental streams intact. These ideas are sometimes packaged as projects – this is why some NGO and donor-linked projects randomly appear in the NSSS, like the graduation model and grievance redress. Ideas are, however, a weak and unreliable pathway through which to exert influence, which is why the outcomes appear random to onlookers.

### **7.2.1 A complex history between the state, the donors, and the NGOs**

As discussed in the conceptual framework, the holding power of organisations in a contestation is shaped by their historical evolution and is revealed through prior political contestations (Gray, 2018). The relationship between the three actors

relevant to this chapter—the state, the donors, and the NGOs—has fluctuated over the decades, characterised by what Karim (2018a, p. 580) calls a “constant state of negotiation about their roles in society”. The growth of NGOs can be attributed to the weaknesses of the state to provide for the needs of the poor, a weakness that international donors capitalised on (White, 1999). The subsequent reining in of NGO power can be credited to the growing strength of the state relative to the donors (Lewis, 2010).

In this section, I trace the historical evolution of the relationship between them, paying particular attention to the political contestations starting in the 1990s. I divide the relationship between these actors into four phases distinguished by the inception, growth, acceleration, and capitulation of NGOs (see Figure 7.3). At various points, the contestation flared up into direct confrontation where one party or the other emerged as the victor. Each phase of the contestation left behind its imprint in terms of power, institutions, and ideas that were carried over into subsequent phases, affecting decision-making in the subsequent phases, and ultimately the NSSS. This section aims to show that political mobilisation by the NGOs opened them up to challenges from Bangladesh’s political parties. Unable to withstand these challenges, NGOs’ holding power progressively declined until—by the time the NSSS was negotiated—they had become weak actors. Just as the growth and expansion of NGOs was a long and complex process, the process of their capitulation was complex as well and unfolded over several decades discussed below.

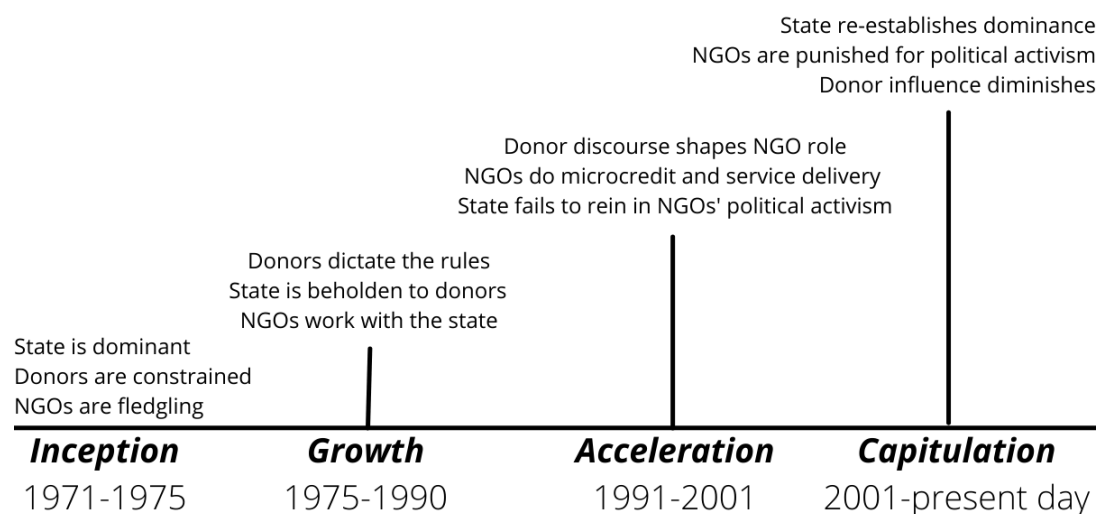


FIGURE 7.3: The relationship between the state, donors and NGOs, 1971-present day

### *Inception (1971-1975) and Growth (1975-1990)*

At independence, similar to other post-independence countries, state institutions (especially the military and the bureaucracy), played the central role in Bangladesh's development and policy planning. The state viewed any form of foreign interference, including from aid donors, with suspicion (Islam, 1981). Nevertheless, the massive post-war international relief effort allowed some Bangladeshis of the professional educated class to get experience in the workings of the aid industry, and consequently establish indigenous NGOs in the country (Lewis, 2004; Zohir, 2004). This period saw relatively low NGO expansion because the expectation in society was that the state would support the poor (Lewis, 2004). By 1975 though, for reasons discussed earlier, the economy collapsed, a famine unfolded, and the government was ousted, ending the inception phase.

NGOs began growing when Bangladesh entered a decade and a half of military dictatorships in 1975. This is because NGOs were on particularly good terms with the military, especially General Ershad, who cultivated them as a countervailing force against opposition political parties (Karim, 2011; Wood, 2007).<sup>213</sup> Alongside, as discussed in Chapter 3, military dictators capitulated to donor demands for economic liberalisation in return for higher aid flows (Karim, 2018b). Donors lauded the growth of NGOs because it served both their ideological and programmatic interests. Less state involvement was, and remains, an overarching ideological goal for the donors' neoliberal reform projects (Mosse and Lewis, 2005). NGOs were useful because they could extend necessary services—like education and healthcare—to the poor without involving the state. At the programmatic level, using NGOs also helped protect aid from the corruption Ershad's regime was notorious for.<sup>214</sup> This early tendency to avoid channelling aid through the government in favour of the donors' partner NGOs remains to this day.<sup>215</sup> A senior official of a major Western donor agency reported, for example, that during the NSSS negotiations his office had even tried to convince the

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<sup>213</sup> Given the peak association of NGOs anointed Ershad with the title “friend of the poor”, it is not surprising NGOs were largely uninvolved in the pro-democracy movement that forced him to relinquish power in December 1990 (Lewis, 2004).

<sup>214</sup> When Ershad requested donor funds to support those affected by the devastating floods of 1987, for instance, the donors insisted that aid would be channelled only through NGOs (Karim, 2011).

<sup>215</sup> Interview with UN agency official 2 (2018)

government to spend its own domestic resources for social protection through the NGOs:<sup>216</sup>

[Development projects] need to be done in a way that the government doesn't get in the way. We've got loads of NGOs in Bangladesh. Not just BRAC but others who are not national in scope but know their regions really well, [and] have capacity in their area... If the government tries to get in on the act, they should be a channel but they shouldn't be getting in the way. You've got organisations that can [run projects] in Bangladesh. The issue is domesticating the resource flows. So, yeah, we did try to influence that.

### *Acceleration (1991-2001)*

NGO expansion accelerated in the 1990s after the re-establishment of democracy. In this phase, some large NGOs confronted the state and, with donor support, triumphed over the state. Ultimately, this acceleration phase established a 'partnership' model between the state and NGOs even as it created the conditions that led to an outright confrontation between the state and NGOs in the next phase, which the state won. The partnership model exists to this day and impacted the NSSS' development.

NGOs began political mobilisation in the 1990s. By then, NGOs in Bangladesh lay along a continuum of different approaches to poverty. Organisations that approached poverty as a technocratic problem with apolitical market-based solutions (Ferguson, 1994), like Grameen Bank and BRAC, lay at one end of the continuum. At the other end of the continuum were organisations that attempted social mobilisation whereby the poor were to be educated, organised and mobilised to challenge the structural forces oppressing them (Freire, 1970). Although the NGOs that pursued apolitical market-based solutions to poverty, like service delivery and microfinance, would ultimately come to dominate the landscape, in the 1990s some NGOs, like Proshika, engaged in both microfinance and social mobilisation activities (Kabeer, Mahmud and Castro, 2010).<sup>217</sup> These NGOs made highly consequential forays into national politics that would radically alter the state-NGO relationship within a decade.

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<sup>216</sup> Interview with Donor 3 (2018)

<sup>217</sup> By the 1990s, Grameen Bank's success in getting loan repayments had made the most vulnerable members of society 'bankable', making microfinance a panacea that could alleviate poverty, empower women, and generate profits for NGOs all in one heady mix without the messiness of politics (Karim,

The ascent of the NGOs in national politics was helped by two developments – one global, the other local. First, with the rise of the ‘good governance’ agenda in international development discourse, donors saw the state as corrupt and inefficient, making NGOs their preferred vehicle of democratic and social progress (White, 1999). Second, the establishment of multi-party democracy opened the political arena up to a multitude of actors for the first time since independence (Quadir, 2003). NGOs sought to capitalise on this space by entering into national politics. These NGOs, prominent amongst which was Proshika, arguably conducted a “takeover of oppositional political processes” (Karim, 2001, p. 92). Alarmed by their growing political activism, in 1992, the government cancelled the registration of ADAB (Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh), which was the peak association of NGOs. However, under pressure from donors, the government was forced to rescind the order within hours (Hashemi, 1995). Thus in the first open confrontation between the state and NGOs, the NGOs won due to donor intervention. The clash only intensified after that. For example, during the 1996 election that BNP lost, ADAB, controlled by Proshika-leaning NGOs, mobilised strongly against BNP and in favour of Awami League (Devine, 1996).<sup>218</sup>

This growing role of political activism exposed profound schisms within the NGO sector, with many NGOs, foremost among them BRAC, deeply uncomfortable with ADAB’s openly partisan stance (Hashemi and Hassan, 1999). A *quid pro quo* relationship had developed between ADAB leadership and Awami League, which won the 1996 election. ADAB was to deliver votes, which it did (Devine, 2006), whilst Awami League would reward the NGO leaders with material resources, which is also reported to have happened (Hashemi and Hassan, 1999). Lost in this relationship were the poor who were made into political clients without political agency. Since they were beholden to NGOs from whom they received money and services, they could not refuse NGO directives concerning their vote (Devine, 2006). Whilst the state was accused of lacking good governance because of political

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2011). NGOs’ interest in microfinance stemmed from the fact that donors prioritised ‘sustainability’, wanting their funds to be used efficiently by organisations that could scale up and achieve financial independence (Devine, 2003). Microfinance programmes offered financial sustainability, unlike social mobilisation activities. For critical appraisals of microcredit programmes in Bangladesh and their impact on poor women borrowers, see Kabeer (2001), Karim (2011), and Rahman (2001).

<sup>218</sup> For instance, they organised large rallies, one of which was attended by over 100,000 people, and was described as: “Bangladesh had never witnessed a political gathering like that of January 1996, certainly not one organised by NGOs” (Devine, 1996, p. 83).

partisanship and rent-seeking patron-client relationships (Lewis, 2011), NGOs—the donors’ preferred guardians of good governance—also exhibited similar vices.<sup>219</sup> Like NGOs everywhere else, the only group the NGOs were accountable to was the donors. Political activism by entities that controlled large vote banks but were beholden only to foreign powers is considered deeply concerning for state sovereignty (White, 1999). Thus, as the new millennium drew near, many in Bangladesh were suspicious of NGO politics, including many NGOs.

The suspicions about NGOs’ political activism did not draw any immediate reprisals from the state because the party in power after BNP’s ouster was Awami League, which benefited from ADAB support. Instead, spearheaded by donors, a reconfiguration of the state-NGO relationship took place where donors anointed NGOs as the ‘partners’ of the state in development (White, 1999). The NGO Affairs Bureau, which had originally been established under Ershad as a watchdog of NGOs, became facilitators of NGO projects that still operate today under the aegis of the Prime Minister’s Office (Karim, 2011). The influential GO-NGO Consultative Council was established to harmonise state and NGO activities (Lewis, 2008). The institutionalised partnership was a victory for donors because greater cooperation meant the state could outsource more of its services through the NGOs, thereby diminishing state involvement (White, 1999).<sup>220</sup> At the programmatic level, ‘partnership’ between the state and NGOs also reduced the resentment bureaucrats had previously felt about the privileged, donor-protected status of the NGOs (Karim, 2011). Bureaucrats could now go on ‘liens’, i.e. take unpaid leaves from their jobs to work for donors and NGOs with lucrative salaries and perks previously unavailable to them (Lewis, 2008). The boundary between the NGOs and the state thus became very blurred.

This partner relationship continues today with both explicit and implicit forms of coordination between the state, donors and NGOs. A leading bureaucrat I came across, the author of parts of NSSS’ 2018 Action Plan, was on lien to a donor agency,

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<sup>219</sup> NGOs were not only unaccountable to the poor, they were also in conflict with business associations and labour unions (Hashemi, 1995; Lewis, 2011; Stiles, 2002).

<sup>220</sup> At this time, Wood (1997) warned that Bangladesh was becoming a ‘franchise state’ where the state franchised out its responsibilities to the NGOs and Karim (2011, p. 5) found that “NGOs form the everyday face of the state in rural society”.

acting as an intermediary between the government and the donor. With both parties getting insider access to each other, greater coordination was possible. Similarly, the UNDP office for its own NSSS project<sup>221</sup> sat inside the Planning Commission, opposite the General Economics Division, which was the government department in charge of drafting the NSSS. Bureaucrats and UNDP personnel constantly interacted, with officials from both sides walking into each others' offices to chat, discuss plans, use computer facilities, brainstorm etc.<sup>222</sup> It helped that whilst the average office room of most bureaucrats did not have air conditioners, the UNDP's outpost at the Planning Commission did, which made the office a welcome refuge for bureaucrats in Dhaka's stiflingly hot weather.

A less overt but more influential mode of coordination among the three groups manifests in the homogeneity of their labour pool, which is a limited community of university-educated professionals, possessed of comparable knowledge and skillset – a paradigmatic epistemic community (Haas, 1992). The result is a revolving door of officials who will have worn multiple hats during their career, carrying ideas about best practices and norms from one institution to another. A major author of the NSSS, for instance, previously worked for the World Bank. Another had worked for DFID. An interviewee argued, “There was a lot of traffic between the government and BRAC. Some people work for BRAC for a few years, then they work for the government or for international NGOs.”<sup>223</sup> This shows that even after a particular phase passed, it left behind norms and institutions that have a lingering effect.

### ***Capitulation (2001-present day)***

By the 2000s a degree of disillusionment with NGOs had set in globally due to questions surrounding their performance and accountability (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015; Edwards and Hulme, 1996). At the local level, BNP was voted into power in 2001. Whilst their alliance with ADAB allowed Awami League to ignore the NGOs as a rival power centre, BNP could not safely do so. Thus, when the next set of confrontations happened between the state and NGOs, the state emerged

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<sup>221</sup> Called the Social Security Policy Support programme, it's staffed with bureaucrats from the Cabinet Division and General Economics Division, and UNDP officials. Source: retrieved on February 18, 2021 from <http://socialprotection.gov.bd/team-showcase/our-team/>

<sup>222</sup> Observations at SSPS office, Planning Commission, 2018

<sup>223</sup> Interview with Consultant 5 (2017)

victorious, cementing the NGOs' role as weak actors. It is in this phase that the NSSS developed.

Proshika campaigned for Awami League in the 2001 national election that brought BNP to power (World Bank, 2006).<sup>224</sup> When Awami League announced it would overthrow the government with a mass showdown in the capital in 2004, Proshika was accused of collaborating with Awami League by making thousands of its poor beneficiaries from across the country descend on the capital to join an opposition platform – a charge that was essentially true (Blair, 2010; World Bank, 2006). Arrested in May 2004, Proshika's president was taken to trial for sedition. Proshika's partisanship angered many in the NGO community, who feared the government's fury would spill over into the wider sector, and rang the death knell for ADAB (World Bank, 2006). Donors fell in line too, with the World Bank (2006, p. 36) arguing:

Looking forward, this story has lessons for government, donors, and NGOs... NGOs ought to refrain from engaging in any form of partisan political activity and should also be aware that advocacy campaigns can jeopardize their service delivery activities. Donors need to retain institutional memory and further develop the capacity to properly monitor NGO activities and financing.

The next bout in the contestation saw a failed bid by civil society actors to reclaim their lost power. The internecine conflict between Awami League and BNP had led to a massive breakdown in political processes in the country, so a military-backed technocratic government assumed power in 2007 (Karim, 2018a). The new government had the blessings of the donors and leaders of civil society organisations because they believed “the only way to realize civil society's reform agenda [was] to install civil society as ‘rulers’”, however undemocratic the process may be (Lorch, 2017, p. 195). With a former World Bank economist at its helm, several of the advisors who served at the rank of Cabinet ministers, including one former ADAB chair, were well known NGO actors. Receiving the blessings of the military and the civil society, Professor Muhammad Yunus—Nobel laureate and founder of the Grameen Bank—even launched a new political party (Karim, 2018a). However, after summarily failing to instate any of a long list of ‘good governance’ reforms or remove

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<sup>224</sup> Tellingly, in 2002, a government audit triggered charges of financial irregularities against Proshika, an accusation its main donor—European Union—joined it in denying (Lewis, 2010).



the heads of BNP and Awami League from politics, the government quietly stepped aside within two years.

In its wake, the technocratic government left behind a renewed determination amongst political parties to bring civil society organisations to heel. Proving it wasn't only BNP that disciplined NGOs, the increasingly authoritarian Awami League government that came to power pursued Dr Yunus with a vengeance (Karim, 2018a). Against the vocal protests of Western governments and donors, the Awami League government took him to court with allegations—disproven at trial—of financial irregularities, stripped him of his chairmanship of the Grameen Bank on a technicality, and, by 2013, effectively took over the Bank. The intent, successfully executed, was to send a clear message to NGOs that their entry into national politics would not be tolerated – they could exist but only as service delivery organisations.

Political settlement analysts chart prior political mobilisations in order to gauge the relative holding power of groups in a contestation (Gray, 2018). This section has shown that political mobilisation by the NGOs attracted reprisals from political parties, which the NGOs could not withstand. Their capitulation demonstrated the weak holding power they have relative to the state. By the time the NSSS was negotiated, the NGOs were very aware of their weakened status. In interviews, several NGO officials made it a point to assure me that they were not even remotely politically connected.<sup>225</sup> One explained, “[All national NGOs] maintain a standard – they stay away from politics. It's tough to survive here if you're close to politics, so NGOs very consciously steer clear of it.”<sup>226</sup>

### **7.2.2 The logic of exclusion in the NSSS**

Developments across the acceleration and capitulation phases account for the puzzling decisions in the NSSS regarding NGO and donor involvement and influence. In particular, the NSSS developed in the capitulation phase. Examining the state of donors and NGOs in this phase provides insights into the limited role NGOs played in

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<sup>225</sup> Interviews with NGO 2 (2018) and 8 (2019)

<sup>226</sup> Interview with NGO 2 (2018)

the NSSS, despite their much-lauded contributions, and why repeated exhortations from major donors to confer with NGOs were ignored. This is discussed below.

### ***Donors and exclusion***

Notwithstanding their doomed foray into national politics when they sought to translate their large beneficiary population into vote banks, NGOs have always lacked independent power resources. Instead, the power resource they wielded was their access to donors, who could be relied upon to defend NGO interests vis-à-vis the state. It is therefore striking that, unlike the period between 1975-2001, repeated donor interventions for NGOs during the NSSS negotiations proved fruitless. There are two explanations for this: the first is extrinsic to donors and arose due to changes outside their immediate control, whilst the second is intrinsic to them at the time of the NSSS negotiations.

The extrinsic explanation for diminished donor influence is that donors do not have as much financial power as before compared to the state. Ironically, this development is a result of the donor-mandated neoliberal reforms on Bangladesh's economy. Khan (2014) explains that foreign aid impacted Bangladesh primarily through donors' conditionalities, which forced economic liberalisation in the country, rather than through the amount channelled to NGOs, even though this too was substantial. As discussed in Chapter 3, the liberalisation policies generated some productive industries, like the readymade garments industry, and consequently led to high levels of economic growth.<sup>227</sup> Thus, although donor aid inflow soared in the past decade (see Figure 7.2), the economy has grown at an even faster pace thanks to regional and global factors (see Figure 3.3). As a result, donor funding has come to constitute progressively smaller shares of government expenses over the years. Figure 7.4 shows that, between 2001 and 2016, foreign aid as a share of government expenses has nearly halved from 21% to 11%. As the donors' financial clout has diminished, so has their influence on Bangladesh's government. The diminished influence is why—although the World Bank used its financial incentive to steer the NSSS towards targeting policies (see Chapter 5)—interviewees from neither the Bank nor other

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<sup>227</sup> Remittances from overseas workers, mostly employed in the Gulf countries, have also helped build a healthy reserve of foreign exchange since the 1990s (Lewis, 2011).

donors believed they could unilaterally dictate their priorities to the government.<sup>228</sup> A World Bank official in Bangladesh shared, “The Bank doesn’t have much political clout in Bangladesh – we don’t really go there.”<sup>229</sup> This statement marks an extraordinary shift from earlier decades when donors freely dictated policies to Bangladesh (Faaland, 1981). Due to their overall low influence, the government could ignore donor exhortations to include NGOs in the NSSS.



FIGURE 7.4: Net ODA received as a share of government expense, 2001-2016<sup>230</sup>

The intrinsic explanation for diminished donor influence on NSSS’ formation is that during the NSSS negotiations, donors were too fragmented and donor officials at times too unfamiliar with the context to have a collective impact. I have already presented some evidence of donor fragmentation in Chapter 5 where the World Bank’s pursuit of targeting put it at odds with other donors. Besides the Bank’s workfare programme with the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, there were two other major donor initiatives affecting social protection policies: the UNDP’s collaboration with the Planning Commission to produce the NSSS, in which it was supported by DFID and AusAid; and DFID and AusAid’s project with the Ministry of Finance to help set up a system to track social protection expenditures and

<sup>228</sup> Interviews with Donors 1, 2, 3, 4 (2018), and UN agency official 3 (2018) and 10 (2019)

<sup>229</sup> Interview with UN agency official 3 (2018)

<sup>230</sup> Source: World Bank; retrieved on January 19, 2021 from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ODAT.XP.ZS?end=2016&locations=BD&start=2001>

impact. Interviewees conceded that these three donor initiatives largely operated in silos and pursued their own ends, which diminished the impact they might have had by acting in tandem with each other.<sup>231</sup>

Previously useful partnership institutions also proved futile. The locus of partnership activities was the Local Consultative Group, where donors met bureaucrats at regular intervals to coordinate their activities, and an organisation that furthered donor interests during the PRSP negotiations (Rahman, 2018), also proved ineffective as each donor sought to lobby for just their own programmes.<sup>232</sup> The UNDP's consultants had warned: "[there is an] absence of a robust conversation between the NSPS-relevant parallel initiatives.... The Local Consultative Working Group on Poverty had not been able to coordinate these different initiatives."<sup>233</sup> The effect of this fragmentation is evident in the text of the NSSS, which acknowledges each major donor's work individually and distinctly, without any overlap (GED, 2015, p. 80). DFID's role is cited as a significant support for BRAC and its projects. The World Bank's workfare programmes, targeting schemes, and conditional cash transfers are explained. UNDP, DFAT and the EU's projects are mentioned separately as well. In addition to this, the frequent transfers of staff to different countries meant donors lost institutional memory that might have made them better skilled at negotiating with the government.<sup>234</sup> The combination of donor fragmentation and staff attrition meant there was no unified coherent donor entity the government might have found difficult to refuse. As a result, donor exhortations to include NGOs in the NSSS were ignored.

### *NGOs and exclusion*

The fact that NSSS, which was drafted between 2012-2015, largely ignored the NGOs is also not particularly surprising if we consider their diminished holding power relative to the state in this 'capitulation' stage. Bureaucrats shared that the decision to invite any individual or organisation into the policymaking arena is now controlled by the government based on "value judgements" about their abilities and political identity.<sup>235</sup> Even when NGOs are allowed into the policymaking arena, it is usually on

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<sup>231</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017) and Consultant 1 (2018)

<sup>232</sup> Observations at Local Consultative Working Group on Poverty meeting on May 30, 2018

<sup>233</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014, p. 6

<sup>234</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by UNDP, August 2014

<sup>235</sup> Interview with Civil servants 1 (2017) and 2 (2018)

ceremonial terms. For example, during NSSS’ development, a national dialogue was arranged with civil society organisations in early 2014. At the event, an extremely small number of NGOs were invited, and the record notes indicate most attendees did not speak at all (see Table 7.3, asterisks mark those who spoke).<sup>236</sup> And yet, in NSSS’ foreword, GED’s highest-ranking bureaucrat claimed, “These consultations were conducive to ensure participation of different stakeholders and to reach consensus about the principles and framework of the Strategy” (GED, 2015, viii). The findings in this chapter demonstrate the claim to be somewhat less than accurate.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Participants/organisations</b>
Government	*Minister of Planning, *State Minister for Women and Children Affairs, *GED, Cabinet Division, Planning Commission
NGO	*Sushilon, *RDRS, *Nagorik Uddyog, *Urban Forum (CUP), PKSf, Helvetas, HelpAge International, local NGO from Khulna, ActionAid, NETZ
Media	Somoy TV, Bangladesh Betar, BTV, Channel I, Stv, Dainik Jugantor, Dainik Jonokontho, bdnews24
Donor	UNDP
Think tank/ consultancy firm	*PPRC, *Centre for Urban Studies, *BIDS; Maxwell Stamp Ltd., PRI
Business association	*DCCI, BKMEA, BGMEA

TABLE 7.3: Participants at the national dialogue with civil society organisations

The stakeholders I interviewed offered a range of justifications to defend the exclusion of NGOs from social protection policymaking, which reflect deeply seated views of the NGO sector. A bureaucrat voiced the civil service’s sentiments that they considered NGOs beholden to the state and therefore not equal partners: “[NGOs] don’t give tax to the government. They should be paying a huge amount of tax. But the fact that they don’t pay it means the government is effectively giving the money to them as a grant.”<sup>237</sup> One of the main authors of the NSSS argued the document was participatory even without substantial civil society involvement because “NGOs [just] do delivery. We don’t handle the delivery system in the NSSS. So it’s not a contradiction.”<sup>238</sup> This seems to be disingenuous, however, since delivery systems must also operate according to some overarching strategy. And if NGOs were indeed

<sup>236</sup> Internal record notes on the February 20, 2014 dialogue signed by the Minister of Planning, AHM Mustafa Kamal, on March 11, 2014

<sup>237</sup> Interview with Civil servant 4 (2018)

<sup>238</sup> Interview with Consultant 1 (2018)

irrelevant to the NSSS, devoting an entire section to them, however small, seems inconsistent. Perhaps the real reason was that many NSSS' stakeholders simply held a dim view of NGOs, as exemplified by an international expert who said, "BRAC has no money of their own; the money comes from donors. They [only] implement programmes. ... I think they're probably more influential outside Bangladesh than inside."<sup>239</sup>

The exclusion of NGOs from policymaking was not completely driven from outside the NGO sector though. Where the government is concerned, the NGOs were unwilling to raise their heads above the parapet also, choosing to only focus on protecting their own projects.<sup>240</sup> A contemporaneous analysis of the NSSS found:<sup>241</sup>

...civil society stakeholders also appear to be more focused on the interest of their specific client groups amongst the poor and the vulnerable rather than taking a strategic view of social protection and national development.

Although a small minority of NGOs submitted written comments on the NSSS to the government,<sup>242</sup> an international consultant with prominent links to BRAC who interacted regularly with large NGOs at the time found they did not want to be involved with the NSSS process:<sup>243</sup>

Most NGOs—and certainly the larger ones—were getting their own funding from donors and running their own forms of social protection. [These NGOs] wanted to keep clear of a government strategy. If they had taken any interest in what we were doing, it would've been wondering whether donors might shift resources [away from them] to the public sector...

The NGO sector's expectation that government strategy and NGO activities can run independently of each other is debatable in the long run. Government policy has an agenda setting function that in the future may force NGOs to legitimise their activities

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<sup>239</sup> Interview with Consultant 5 (2017)

<sup>240</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)

<sup>241</sup> Political economy analysis report commissioned by, August 2014, p. 10

<sup>242</sup> I only found memos from Save the Children, BRAC, HelpAge, and GIZ providing feedback on NSSS but was told by government officials that there were some others. I independently verified that CARE had also been involved but was unable to get a full list of all involved.

<sup>243</sup> Interview with Consultant 6 (2018)

within the state's framework. In 2018, for instance, the Cabinet Division invited several major NGOs to the Bangladesh Social Security Conference. They were lumped into the same category as banks and mobile financial services and invited to explain how they contributed to social protection in Bangladesh.<sup>244</sup> In response, the NGOs presented those of their projects that matched NSSS' framing of social protection. Whether this explicit alignment with national policy is a normatively positive development—given Bangladeshi NGOs' history of subservience to foreign entities—remains an open question. It does nevertheless emphasise that after the anomalous decade of the 1990s, the state has firmly re-established dominance over NGOs in Bangladesh.

### **7.2.3 The transfer of ideas**

The final part of the puzzle is how, despite the limited role of NGOs in the NSSS and the relatively diminished power of donors, some of their programmes—the graduation model and grievance redress programmes among them—still appear in the NSSS. I explain this puzzle using ideas, a key variable in political settlement analysis. Ayana, Arts and Wiersum (2018) find that even in non-pluralist semi-authoritarian regimes, like Bangladesh, NGOs engage with the policy process, albeit in restricted ways. For instance, they rely on personal networks and depend on actors stronger than them to transmit their ideas. During the NSSS negotiations, NGOs sporadically managed to translate some of their ideas into government policy through donors and bureaucrats. Since these were not institutionalised channels, their success was serendipitous, demonstrating that this pathway of exerting influence is weak and irregular.

#### ***Donors lobby for NGOs***

Perhaps the biggest contribution the NGOs made to the NSSS is the graduation model. The model, which BRAC pioneered in 2002 before it spread to over 40 countries worldwide, has been the subject of considerable debate (Soares and Orton, 2017). In the graduation approach, extreme poor households are given a package of one-time productive assets, like livestock, combined with regular cash or in-kind transfers for a year or two, along with access to financial literacy training (Devereux

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<sup>244</sup> Cabinet Division report on Bangladesh Social Security Conference 2018

and Sabates-Wheeler, 2015). Impact evaluation results (Goldberg, 2017), including randomised control trials (Banerjee et al., 2015), find there are improvements in a range of indicators for the participating households, from income and food security to financial inclusion and mental health.

Questions, however, have been raised about the extent of inclusion errors in the experimental samples, the sustainability of the programme's impact after graduation, and the real values of the improvements (Soares and Orton, 2017). For instance, in one memorable example, a 37% increase in earnings corresponded to an increase of just US\$ 0.06/day (Kidd and Bailey-Athias, 2017). An expert interviewee shared that BRAC had originally designed these programmes for the extreme poor demographic for whom "it was graduation *into* microfinance, not graduation *out* of poverty. In the selling to an international audience, it changed."<sup>245</sup> This idea that one can 'graduate' out of poverty after a limited period of transfers has proven deeply controversial. The graduation model is a softer version of the 'pull yourself up by the bootstraps' philosophy of microfinance that makes poverty alleviation an individual exercise without tackling the structural forces creating poverty (Karim, 2011).<sup>246</sup> As I discussed in section 7.1.2, whilst early drafts of NSSS included some of these reservations about the graduation approach, the final draft after intervention from donors and BRAC contained a full-throated endorsement.

The reservations about the graduation model were removed from the NSSS to appease the donors, who were concerned about the criticism's reception in their home countries. Donor decisions are significantly impacted by the political economy considerations of a given donor's home country (Martens et al., 2002; Yanguas, 2018). Dietrich (2016), for instance, finds that donors who are more market-oriented and who value market efficiency, such as the US and UK, are more likely to outsource their aid to non-state actors, like NGOs. Donor countries will even increase funding for those multilateral organisations whose policies will benefit the donors' domestic economic groups (McLean, 2014). Domestic political forces in donor

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<sup>245</sup> Interview with Consultant 5 (2017)

<sup>246</sup> Additionally, Behrendt (2017) has argued that whilst graduation programmes may be acceptable for NGOs to operate, they are less than ideal for states to roll out under the guise of social protection. They can, however, be one arm of a range of interventions that form a revolving door of repeated entry and exit of beneficiaries rather than a one-way exit (Roelen et al., 2017).



countries urging the reduction of foreign aid budgets leave aid professionals with an overwhelming incentive to present development as a technical exercise in which their interventions are largely successful (Yanguas, 2018). An influential international consultant on the NSSS effort, who was intimately connected with DFID in the UK, reported British political imperatives were at work during the NSSS negotiations:<sup>247</sup>

Having to account quite strongly to UK taxpayers constrains what DFID can do. At that stage, DFID and its minister in the coalition government that was in power in 2012-13<sup>248</sup> believed it could get support for social protection from the British public. It could report that it was helping the government of Bangladesh...

In this scenario, a Bangladeshi government policy document raising questions about the graduation model would have been politically risky for DFID domestically because the agency is one of BRAC's main donors.<sup>249</sup> An author of the NSSS recounted:<sup>250</sup>

DFID couldn't accept [criticisms of the graduation model] because it would be politically really embarrassing. I mean it would be terrible if DFID had to admit, "We've wasted all this money." [They] wanted to get it into the Strategy to get endorsement for them continuing to fund these kinds of programs. So we had to put it in – that was more donor pressure.

BRAC boasts that it is now "DFID's largest single contributor of reportable development results."<sup>251</sup> Tellingly, in their discussion with me, DFID sought to explain their position on the graduation model as a model that works specifically in Bangladesh because BRAC, the NGO receiving their largesse, is an exceptional organisation.<sup>252</sup>

I don't think there's interest in exporting the graduation model as is from Bangladesh to elsewhere. I think the general view would be that they kind of work in Bangladesh for some reasons that are quite contextual, but they don't work elsewhere... In the BRAC model, BRAC essentially does everything. But everywhere you don't have BRAC, right? DFID

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<sup>247</sup> Interview with Consultant 6 (2018)

<sup>248</sup> I believe this was a lapse in the interviewee's memory; the relevant events took place in 2013-14.

<sup>249</sup> Interviews with UN agency official 2 (2018) and Donor 3 (2018)

<sup>250</sup> Interview with Consultant 7 (2017)

<sup>251</sup> Source: BRAC, retrieved on February 28, 2021 from <https://www.bracuk.net/who/partners/creating-a-more-effective-development-partnership/>

<sup>252</sup> Interview with Donor 3 (2018)

Bangladesh is still interested because we're kind of persuaded that the model has traction and we have decent results, at least in Bangladesh.

Given the domestic imperative to justify their expenditures, DFID took the initiative to put together comments on the draft NSSS from major donors, including itself, and BRAC into a consolidated document to share with the government – a form of ‘influence by association’ that elevated BRAC’s feedback above comments sent individually by other NGOs.<sup>253</sup> In discussions, DFID also continued to lobby for the inclusion of BRAC’s programme in the NSSS. Since this was not an issue the government had any particular stake in, the General Economics Division provided no opposition.<sup>254</sup> Consequently, DFID’s efforts succeeded and the graduation model was emphatically endorsed in the NSSS. Thus, one of the ways NGOs get their ideas accepted in the policymaking arena is by articulating them through the donors, who—even in their attenuated form—carry more weight with the government than NGOs.

### *NGOs lobby through bureaucrats*

NGOs often attempt to get policy ideas institutionalised independent of donors too. Lewis and Madon (2004) found that in areas where patron-client relationships are the norm, NGOs engaged in informal forms of advocacy alongside more formal ways. Formal advocacy is undertaken by bringing grassroots voices to the fore whereas informal advocacy happens when NGO officials use their personal network with state officials to influence government policy, based on their perception of what agenda is best to pursue. The latter is more common in Bangladesh. The best example for this form of advocacy may be seen in the inclusion of the grievance redress programmes in the NSSS.

The grievance redress programmes secured a place in the NSSS through NGO intervention via bureaucrats. Grievance redress mechanisms in social protection programmes allow recipients to complain to the provider if they face problems (Haq et al., 2016). Even within NGO programmes, such mechanisms are rare in Bangladesh (Rohwerder and Rao, 2015). As I discuss in section 7.1.1, reference to grievance

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<sup>253</sup> Memo on draft NSSS from Development Partners and BRAC, compiled by DFID, December 8, 2013

<sup>254</sup> Interview with Consultant 1 (2018)

redress randomly appears in the NSSS as an issue the government believes NGOs can be involved in. When I interviewed members of an NGO that carried out a key project on grievance redress, they revealed that they had managed to insert the issue in the NSSS serendipitously as a result of their personal connections with bureaucrats involved in drafting the policy. They described how the accepted practice for lobbying for a policy was to physically go from ministry to ministry meeting bureaucrats, hoping something fruitful would transpire from these attempts:<sup>255</sup>

We first went to the Ministry of Women Affairs.<sup>256</sup> But we didn't get access there... They didn't find us important... Then we went to Social Welfare Ministry... Several ministries knew that there was to be a Strategy. When we were talking to the Social Welfare Ministry, we found out a Strategy was being drafted. That's when we decided to link up with him [i.e. the bureaucrat they were conversing with, possibly the Secretary of the Ministry of Social Welfare]. They prefer this way.

This 'preferred way' that the NGO official described is out of bounds for the majority of organisation. Interviewees pointed out that even NGO officials tasked with liaising with the government fail to gain entry into the ministries.<sup>257</sup> In this particular case, that the NGO was led by an elite 'civil society leader' helped gain access.<sup>258</sup>

Bertrand, Bombardini and Trebbi (2014) find that lobbyists tend to nurture and leverage personal connections with policymakers to achieve their goals. It may be said that this dynamic aptly describes how NGOs operate in Bangladesh. For example, NGO officials who were able to influence the inclusion of policies concerning adolescent girls into the NSSS reported they had succeeded by producing research supporting the need to focus on adolescent girls, sharing their findings in two national workshops attended by NGO and government officials. However, other NGOs also produce such documents and arrange dissemination events on a regular basis with little success in impacting policy.<sup>259</sup> Interpersonal relationships tipped the balance in favour of the successful NGO: "We personally talked to the Secretary; personally talked to the concerned person at GED. Personal connection is a big factor.

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<sup>255</sup> Interview with NGO 2 (2018)

<sup>256</sup> Formally called the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs

<sup>257</sup> Interview with NGO 8 (2019)

<sup>258</sup> Interviews with NGO 2 (2018) and 8 (2019)

<sup>259</sup> Interviews with NGO 3, 4, 5 and 6 (2018)

We had contact with them regularly; we talked to them; we visited their office.”<sup>260</sup> The fact that two NGO officials in these meetings were Westerners was an influencing factor because “naturally, when a foreigner comes it adds value in the eyes of the government. They pay closer attention to internationals than nationals.”<sup>261</sup> Hossain (2004) also found the views of foreigners counted more than local voices in Bangladesh, perhaps a reflection of some Bangladeshis’ internalised colonialism and racism. At any rate, it was a combination of personal links and research dissemination that helped the NGO secure their goal of including adolescent girls in the NSSS (see Table 7.4). Thus, the effect of personal linkages cannot be overlooked.

Document	Language in the NSSS
Original sentence in NSSS 4 <sup>th</sup> draft, June 4, 2014 (p. 70)	The Government will provide 500,000 women per year with additional capacity development and enterprise support for a period of two years, along the lines currently provided by the VGD scheme and through graduation approaches.
Revised sentence in NSSS final document, July 2015 (p. 52, emphasis added)	The Government will provide 500,000 women <i>and adolescent girls</i> per year with additional capacity development and enterprise support for a period of two years, along the lines currently provided by the VGD scheme and through graduation approaches.

TABLE 7.4: Adolescent girls were included in the NSSS as a result of NGO advocacy

### 7.3 Political settlement on NGOs and donors

The new political settlement on NGOs and donors in Bangladesh positions the state as the most powerful actor. The developments in the capitulation phase of NGOs, which were the result of decisions made in the growth and acceleration phases, ensured that by the time the NSSS was negotiated, NGOs and donors had considerably less power resources at their disposal than the state. Donors and NGOs are weaker than ever before and have lost control over institutions, like the Local Consultative Group, which previously gave them routine access to policymaking spaces. Rental streams previously guaranteed from policymaking access disappeared as a result. As Figure 7.5 shows, donors and NGOs use the power resources available to them—aid, lobbying, advocacy, and access to powerful actors—to promote ideas in the form of projects that would allow them to regain the rental streams. When ideas sporadically gain traction, they protect some rental streams. However, unlike institutions, ideas are not a strong pathway, and therefore their influence is inconsistent and unreliable. The

<sup>260</sup> Interview with NGO 1 (2018)

<sup>261</sup> Interview with NGO 1 (2018)

historical rootedness of the new political settlement points to its durability because it demonstrates that the weakness of the NGOs have arisen over time and thus their absence in the NSSS is not the result of a one-off policy decision.

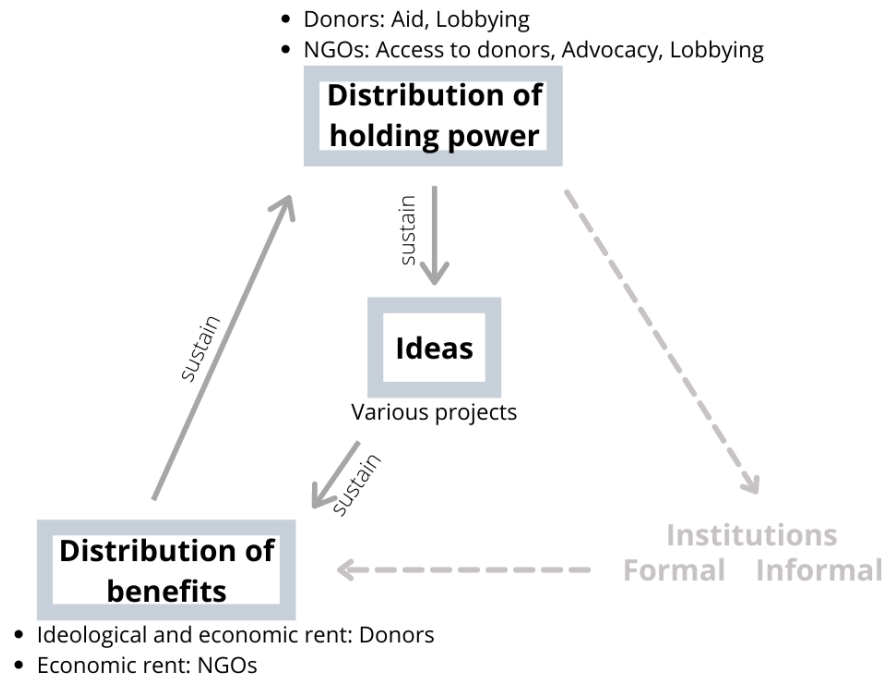


FIGURE 7.5: Political settlement on donors and NGOs in Bangladesh

When they succeed in translating an idea into policy, NGOs gain economic rents because the large NGOs employ thousands of people and are involved in profit-making enterprises as well (Karim, 2011). For donor agencies, the rents are ideological as well as economic. The ideological rent is that the proliferation of NGOs allows service delivery to be outsourced to the NGOs and away from the state. The reason for considering this an ideological rent is that it strengthens the hegemonous grasp of neoliberalism on the system, which is an ideological project the donors strongly support (see Chapter 3). The ideological grip of neoliberalism is such that even services that are uniquely entitlement-based, such as grievance redress—which would seem to be an activity only the duty bearer, i.e. the state, should be able to carry out effectively—is outsourced to NGOs. The economic rent is reaped from the donors’ home countries where the agency’s budget is dependent on being able to show successes in the aid receiving countries (Yanguas, 2018).

As for the implications of this new settlement, it would be premature—and indeed incorrect—to predict that the strengthening of the state will benefit Bangladeshis, especially the poor. This is because the increasingly authoritarian state in Bangladesh is not developmental in nature, and state institutions are being turned into extractive tools to enrich politicians and state officials (Khan, 2017). The disappearance of rival power centres like donors and NGOs, however compromised they might have been, is likely to empower the political rent-seekers even further.

Additionally, the NGO sector was already highly pyramidal with only a few large NGOs gaining the major share of funding (Devine, 2003). The new political settlement implies that further power consolidation is likely to happen at the top of the NGO pyramid. This is because personal connections are scarce resources (Bertrand, Bombardini and Trebbi, 2014) and if NGO rental streams become entangled with personal connections, as appears to have happened, organisations without these connections may wither away. It can be argued that Bangladeshi officialdom has always had a personalised, relational nature, and therefore what I describe is hardly a new phenomenon. Whilst this characterisation of Bangladeshi officialdom is correct, NGOs have always had donors as an alternative source of support. This is the first time since the inception phase that donors and NGOs have both lost power together, which is a new development. I have described three NGOs that were successful in transmitting their ideas at the policy level: BRAC, and the two NGOs I interviewed. It is very possible that despite my best efforts I could not unearth other NGOs that also managed to influence the NSSS. Still, even if we imagine a hypothetical scenario where one hundred NGOs impacted the NSSS, and a further hundred had the ability to but chose not to, it would still be less than 0.08% of the 2527 NGOs listed by the NGOAB as operating in Bangladesh today.<sup>262</sup> This portends ill for the development of a large pluralist arena of associational activity.

## Conclusion

The literature has long viewed NGOs and donors to be crucial to Bangladesh's development (Karim, 2011; Lewis, 2011). In this chapter, I sought to answer the

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<sup>262</sup> Source: <http://www.ngoab.gov.bd/site/page/3de95510-5309-4400-97f5-0a362fd0f4e6/>, retrieved on February 22, 2021. The NGOAB figure is considered an undercount because many NGOs operate without NGOAB registration, which is primarily needed to receive foreign funds.

question: *What political concerns shape the role of civil society organisations and donors in Bangladesh's social protection system?* I examined the NSSS to find that despite robust efforts to the contrary, NGOs and donors do not figure as major actors in how the document envisions social protection in the country. Despite that, NGO- and donor-linked projects make somewhat random and arbitrary appearances in sections of the document. The puzzle posed by these features of the NSSS essentially has two broad answers. First, from the very inception of Bangladesh, the state, the donors and the NGOs have been in constant negotiation with each other, vying for dominance (Karim, 2018a, 2018b). In its latest iteration, the state is in ascendance, with donors and NGOs less powerful than before. As a result, the NSSS could ignore the NGOs without repercussions, despite donor exhortations to include them. Second, having surrendered institutional routes for rent-seeking to the state, donors and NGOs now try to effectuate their ideas in the form of state policy, attempting thereby to sustain their remaining rental streams. The consolidation of power in the state means that there are fewer centres of checks and balances against an increasingly authoritarian regime. It is, however, debatable whether donors and NGOs would have contributed to the development of a robust, pro-poor democracy in Bangladesh anyway, given that historically they have had a less than stellar role in the country. In the next chapter, I focus on a group even more excluded than NGOs: labour.

## CHAPTER 8

### ***“WHO GETS THE BIGGER PIECE OF THE PIE?” THE POLITICS OF EXCLUDING LABOUR FROM SOCIAL PROTECTION***

*“The widely accepted assertion that, only if you let markets be, will everyone be paid correctly and thus fairly, according to his worth, is a myth.”*

Ha-Joon Chang, 2010, p. 30

The year 2013 marks a watershed moment in the history of the industry that has proved pivotal to Bangladesh’s economic development: the ready-made garments industry. Already rocked by the 2012 Tazreen factory fire, which killed over a hundred workers, the industry faced an existential crisis when, on April 24, 2013, the Rana Plaza building collapsed on the outskirts of Dhaka, killing over a thousand workers and injuring over two thousand others (Anner, Bair and Blasi, 2013). The reverberations of the worst industrial accident in the country’s history were felt around the world – the already fierce criticisms against sweatshops escalated, putting global clothing brands at reputational risk for their continued operation in Bangladesh. To their credit, the Bangladesh government immediately recognised the gravity of the crisis. Although many of the regulations have now been rolled back, the Rana Plaza disaster was a critical juncture during which a host of regulatory changes were ushered in, including stricter enforcement of building safety standards, upgrades to the labour law, and greater opportunities to unionise (Trebilcock, 2020).



However, the critical juncture did not prove fruitful for social protection. The ready-made garments industry employs nearly four million workers primarily drawn from the ranks of the rural poor who migrate to the urban hubs for employment. These workers survive under conditions of extreme precarity, with exceedingly low wages and almost no social protection (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). At the time the Rana Plaza collapsed, the NSSS negotiations were on going. With the stark human tragedy of dead and mutilated workers fresh in the national imagination, the NSSS drafts recommended legislating mandatory contributory social insurance for all formal sector workers. Contributory social insurance is shared between the employers and the employees, with the state also participating in some instances (Nef, 2015). The system runs on the principle of social solidarity – the contributions are neither proportional to the payouts nor means-tested. Two years later, an ILO-led initiative drew on the NSSS and attempted to introduce employment injury insurance for workers in the garments industry. Employment injury insurance (henceforth, EII) is a subset of social insurance. In Bangladesh, compensation for injuries in the workplace is considered employer liability – a small lump sum is meant to be paid, with costs fully borne by employers (Neuland, 2016; Prentice, 2018). This poses efficacy and enforceability challenges since employers simply refuse to pay. The ILO effort specifically sought to rectify this gap by institutionalising an employment injury insurance scheme for the industry that had already seen the life-changing injuries from Rana Plaza’s collapse.<sup>263</sup> And yet, both the NSSS and EII efforts failed.

In this chapter, I analyse the processes through which these policy efforts failed in order to answer the question: *What political concerns shape the role of labour in Bangladesh’s social protection system?* Since the vast majority of Bangladeshis work in informal employment and are thus ineligible for contributory social insurance (Figure 8.1), focusing on formal sector workers to answer this question may seem reductive in scope. However, the discussion in this chapter is about a 4m strong subset of formal sector workers who work in the garments industry. By virtue of their connection to the global garments supply chain, there is enormous international

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<sup>263</sup> In the event of an industrial accident, international law demands that the affected worker, and at times her family members, receive compensation. The Rana Plaza collapse led to the creation of a ground breaking US\$ 30m fund by global brands from which affected workers were compensated according to ILO Convention no. 121 standards (Prentice, 2018). However, such ad hoc, ex post provisions are not only costly, they are also unlikely to happen for smaller accidents that do not attract global media attention.

scrutiny on this subset of workers. This makes them the canary in the coalmine for the working condition of all workers (Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003). Put another way, if the most powerful group of workers cannot win concessions despite operating under the watchful gaze of the world, the chances of other workers succeeding are vanishingly slim.

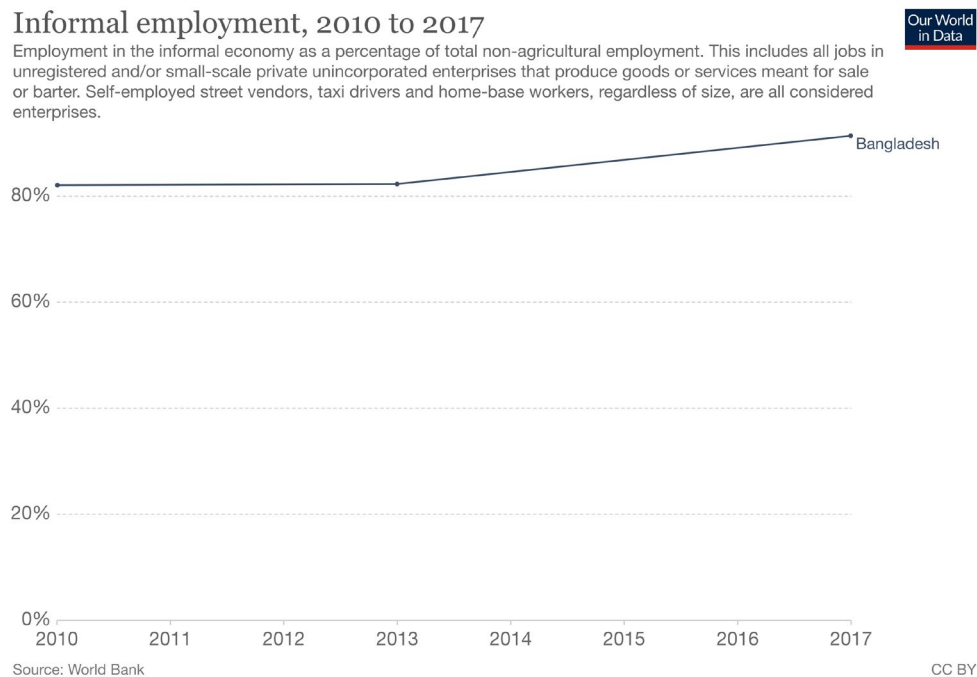


FIGURE 8.1: Share of employment in the informal economy, 2010-17<sup>264</sup>

The previous chapter described how excluded actors managed to insert themselves into policymaking by transmitting ideas through international donors. By zooming into the final reform contestation in the NSSS, this chapter describes how the pressure of international capital gives rise to mechanisms of exclusion that bar the most vulnerable actors from being included in social protection policies. The chapter is divided into three main sections. I begin by describing the outcomes of the NSSS and EII negotiations and explaining why their failure is a puzzle. I then discuss the reasons and processes through which these failures arose. I argue that Bangladesh has historically developed a weak labour movement and a strong state-business nexus. When coupled with the disproportionate power of international brands, these factors stymie social protection policy efforts. In the final section, I present the labour

<sup>264</sup> Source: OurWorldInData.org retrieved on December 28, 2020 from <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/informal-employment-of-total-non-agricultural-employment?tab=chart&time=earliest..latest&country=~BGD>

exclusionary political settlement and discuss its implication for the institution of tripartism. Previous literature has argued that labour is excluded from Bangladesh's political settlement (Ahmed, Greenleaf and Sacks, 2014; Hassan, 2013). This study contributes to the literature by outlining the reasons for the exclusion and describing the processes through which exclusion happens.

## **8.1 Social insurance for labour in Bangladesh**

There were two efforts to instate social insurance for labour in Bangladesh: the NSSS, as well as the EII effort, which drew on the NSSS. Using successive policy initiatives helps gauge the durability of the settlement since the same policy outcome at different times indicates the settlement reproduces itself (Khan, 2018a). In this section, I describe the NSSS effort, and then the NSSS-linked EII effort, following which I explain why their policy failures are puzzling. With regards to the NSSS, the policy authors evidently understood the need for social insurance in Bangladesh, and their position was particularly informed by the plight of the workers in the garments industry. Whilst the provision of mandatory social insurance for formal sector workers was retained over successive iterations of the document, it was removed from the final version after a crucial Cabinet meeting.

The provision for social insurance appeared early in the NSSS' development when the zero draft argued (NSSS zero draft, 2013, p. xi):

[Bangladesh's] approach to [social protection] will need to broaden from the concept of safety net to a more inclusive concept of a social protection strategy that also incorporates formal employment policies as well as social insurance schemes that fits much more cogently with the needs of a modern urban-based economy...

Crucially, and unsurprisingly given it was written mere months after the Rana Plaza collapse, the zero draft noted, "This need is already felt in the context of the risks faced by the Ready-made Garments sector" (NSSS zero draft, 2013, p. xi). The draft was very pragmatic about the structural challenges it would face (NSSS zero draft, 2013, p. xii):

The main challenge in extending social insurance schemes in developing countries is that only a small proportion of the population is in formal sector employment. Social insurance mechanisms function best when payments into schemes are mandatory. Yet, this can realistically only be achieved with formal sector employees.

Nevertheless, it recommended the government should (NSSS zero draft, 2013, p. xiv):

Introduce legislation to establish a National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS) that makes it obligatory for all private enterprises in the formal sector to offer a contributory pensions programme for all employees. NSIS will provide pensions as well as addressing other contingencies (such as disability, sickness, unemployment and maternity).

Elsewhere in the document, it noted the insurance scheme should be jointly financed by employers and employees, and cover accidents along with sickness (NSSS zero draft, 2013, p. 81). Two years later, when the penultimate draft of the NSSS was sent to the Cabinet for approval on April 6, 2015, the document—despite significant changes in other areas, as discussed in previous chapters—still retained the basic schema outlined in the zero draft with regards to social insurance. The NSSS draft (before Cabinet meeting, 2015, p. 40) highlighted that:

In the formal sector, two missing areas of Social Security for working age group are the absence of unemployment insurance programme and the injured workers insurance. The importance of the later [sic] has emerged in a big way following a series of devastating fire and building collapse events in the ready-made garments industry.

As a result, the draft recommended introducing (p. xvi):

...legislation to establish a National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS), to be managed under the Insurance Development & Regulatory Authority (IDRA) under the provision of the Insurance Act-2010, which makes it obligatory for all private enterprises in the formal sector to offer a contributory pensions programme for all employees. The NSIS will provide pensions as well as address other contingencies (such as disability, sickness, unemployment and maternity).

The Cabinet meeting of April 6, 2015, however, proved fateful. The minutes of this meeting states, “It is necessary to further investigate the issue of compulsory contributory pension scheme for private enterprises”, before recommending additional

consultations with public and private agencies.<sup>265</sup> Beyond the official minutes, the actual intent of the Cabinet directive becomes clearer when we look at the revisions the NSSS underwent directly afterwards. I obtained an internal copy of the document where all changes made after the meeting were marked in red and yellow. It was striking that all mentions of legislating compulsory contributory insurance scheme were methodically replaced by vague terms like “explore the possibility of” that were deliberately devoid of any actionable time-bound commitment (Table 8.1 lists some major instances of these alterations). The Cabinet demanded to see the revisions before finally approving the ‘watered down’ version about two months later.<sup>266</sup> Officials involved with the process believe this episode demonstrated the government’s aversion to introducing social insurance for workers.<sup>267</sup>

<b>NSSS draft before the Cabinet meeting, March 19, 2015 (emphasis added)</b>	<b>NSSS draft after the Cabinet meeting, April 16, 2015 (emphasis added)</b>
<p>Plans for the National Social Insurance Scheme (pp. 75-76):</p> <p><i>The basic principles for the design of the NSIS will be:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The pension should be actuarially sound and financed entirely from contributions, with no subsidies from the Government.</i></li> <li>• <i>The age of eligibility for the NSIS will be set during design to ensure the fiscal sustainability of the scheme.</i></li> <li>• <i>The Government will maintain current pension commitments to Government servants.</i></li> </ul> <p><i>A minimum pension will be established for those who have contributed for at least 10 years, irrespective of the level of their contributions. This will ensure that the first pensions can be delivered by 2032, a few years after over-60s reach 10 per cent of the population. The NSIS is a core component of the Government’s long-term vision for Social Security in Bangladesh and will play a major role in enabling Bangladesh deal with the challenge of ageing.</i></p>	<p>Plans for the National Social Insurance Scheme (p. 75):</p> <p><i>The NSSS in the main covers social allowances, with special emphasis to integrate the poorest and the most vulnerable members of society. However, with transition to Middle Income Country status there is a need to pay attention also to contributory social insurance. The NSIS would be a core component of the Government’s long-term vision for Social Security in Bangladesh and play a major role in enabling Bangladesh deal with the challenge of ageing.</i></p>

<sup>265</sup> Minutes of April 6, 2015 Cabinet meeting, signed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, April 7, 2015

<sup>266</sup> Minutes of June 1, 2015 Cabinet meeting, signed by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, June 2, 2015

<sup>267</sup> Interviews with UN agency official 1 (2017) and Civil servant 2 (2018)

<b>NSSS draft before the Cabinet meeting, March 19, 2015 (emphasis added)</b>	<b>NSSS draft after the Cabinet meeting, April 16, 2015 (emphasis added)</b>
Programme for the working age population (p. xvi):  <i>Introducing legislation</i> for providing unemployment, sickness, maternity and accidental insurance as a part of the National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS).	Programme for the working age population (p. xvi):  <i>Exploring possibilities</i> of providing unemployment, sickness, maternity and accidental insurance as a part of a National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS).
Action plan (p. xxiii):  <i>--Establish NSIS Commission to recommend options</i> <i>--Introduce NSIS legislation</i> <i>--Initiate NSIS implementation</i>	Action plan (p. xxiii):  <i>--Initiate study to determine the viability of a NSIS</i> <i>--Recommend options for a NSIS</i>

TABLE 8.1: Representative instances of significant language changes in the NSSS drafts before and after the April 6, 2015 Cabinet meeting

Two years later, the ILO drew on the ‘watered down’ language of the NSSS to justify launching a new initiative to instate an employment injury insurance (EII) scheme.<sup>268</sup> The effort was funded by the German and Italian governments and was a legacy of the Rana Plaza collapse. The ILO (2019, p. 1) believed there was political commitment behind the scheme:

Honourable Prime Minister’s commitment to establish a national EII scheme expressed to the ILO Deputy Director General in April 2015, to the ILO Director General during his mission in Dhaka in December 2016 and at the occasion of the celebrations held on 1 May 2017. In different public occasions, the Prime Minister reiterated her commitment.

In line with ILO practice, the EII scheme was fielded as a tripartite effort – the employers and the labour unions would negotiate, with the government as a referee (Ishikawa, 2003).<sup>269</sup> ILO would provide technical guidance. However, within three years of its inception, the officials I interviewed reported the project was in its death throes because actionable time-bound commitments were not forthcoming from employer representatives in the tripartite meetings. A UN agency official present at the negotiations complained:<sup>270</sup>

<sup>268</sup> Interview with UN agency official 5 (2017)

<sup>269</sup> The scheme’s particular design is beyond the remit of this thesis – Prentice (2018) provides an overview of options, and ILO (2019) details the recommendations for Bangladesh.

<sup>270</sup> Interview with UN agency official 5 (2018)

All parties agree on the importance of the initiative, that it is important for our country. But one thing they don't agree on is when to start. Worker representatives believe we should start as soon as possible but the employer representatives have communicated to us that they are not ready to start a scheme like this – they may need a lot more time.

Another official described stalling techniques whereby the tripartite asked the ILO to conduct numerous studies without getting any concrete commitments from the business representatives in return.<sup>271</sup> As with the NSSS, the EII offshoot of the NSSS also failed to deliver social insurance for workers.

There are several reasons why the failure of the policy initiatives is puzzling. First, social insurance is not just a policy instrument for developed countries, developing countries like China, Vietnam and Cambodia—all Bangladesh's competitors in the garments industry—also have various types of such insurance schemes in place (ILO, 2017). By not having mandatory social insurance, Bangladesh is a latecomer even by developing country standards.<sup>272</sup> Second, from a theoretical perspective, although the role of labour is considered foundational in the introduction, expansion and continuation of advanced welfare states (Huber and Stephens, 2001; Korpi, 1980), as I discussed in Chapter 2, the impact of neoliberal global capitalism may mean labour will not have the same influence in developing countries. Despite that, studies in developing countries have found that even when social protection is denied to informal sector workers, it still gets extended to organised labour due to their substantial mobilising power (Seekings and Natrass, 2015). This makes denying insurance to 4m garments industry workers, who have substantial mobilising potential, a very puzzling decision. Finally, the garments industry in Bangladesh is under enormous global scrutiny. This was especially true at the time these two policy efforts were undertaken, which was soon after the Rana Plaza collapse. To deny workers social insurance that is already available to their colleagues in similar countries seems like an unnecessarily bold step for the government as well as the employers operating under international scrutiny. In the next section, I explain the reasons behind these puzzling failures.

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<sup>271</sup> Interview with UN agency official 8 (2019)

<sup>272</sup> A notable exception is the state-funded civil service pensions (see Chapter 4).

## **8.2 The reasons for excluding labour**

There are three reasons why social insurance failed to win policy support. At the national level, the relevant factors are an ineffective labour movement along with a strong state-business nexus. At the international level, global capital wields the threat of exiting the country to ensure the cost of producing clothes is kept oppressively low. Thus, even when employers, employees, and the state are brought to tripartite negotiations, they are unable to make decisions outside the bounds drawn by global capital. All three factors are historically rooted, and thus have a degree of stickiness.

### **8.2.1 Ineffective labour movement**

The weakening of labour has both a global logic as well as a local calculus. I first draw on the theoretical literature to explain the global context of labour's weakness. I then discuss the historical particularities of Bangladesh's labour movement to explain the evolution of their weak holding power. Finally, I describe the specific mechanisms of exclusion that were successfully employed during the two policy initiatives being studied here. The global context, historical trajectory, and the current realities of the labour movement in Bangladesh have severely limited labour's holding power. In the absence of adequate holding power, labour cannot effectively bargain for social protection.

Prior to the rise of networked capitalism, the conflict between capital and labour was managed by instituting state-level processes of collective bargaining by representative peak organisations (Davis, 2018). Although the need for formal recognition of these organisations ensured the state could control who it legitimised, state intervention also created a buffer between labour and capital that yielded positive results (Schmitter and Lehmbruch, 1979). State legislated social insurance not only allowed labour power to reproduce without participating in production, at times state intervention also protected wage dependent labour from capital's despotic control (Burawoy, 1985). The turn to neoliberal global capitalism, however, has undermined these consensus-based forms of labour regulation. The exit option available to multinationals means the prospect of capital flight strengthens capital even as it makes labour vulnerable (Jonas, 1996). Although negotiations can sometimes gain



concessions for workers, they can also potentially cause losses due to outsourcing, subcontracting, and factories relocating to new sites where labour is both cheaper and less organised (Pattenden, 2016).

This global weakening of labour has birthed a new way of regulating labour called labour control regimes (Anner, 2015; Jonas, 1996; Pattenden, 2016).<sup>273</sup> These can range from the direct use of violence to capitalising on workers' sense of precarity to limit independent workers' mobilisation (Jonas, 1996). Anner (2015) argues that along with low costs and good infrastructure, most garments exporting countries also offer various forms of labour control to the global clothing brands in a bid to make themselves attractive in comparison to their competitors. Investors are drawn to these propositions because they offer a way to limit the disruptions labour protests can cause to the smooth functioning of the production supply chain.

Over the years, labour management and control has generated endemic weaknesses in the mainstream labour movement in Bangladesh, which today manifests as political partisanship of labour unions. Labour unions first appeared in the Bengal delta during the British colonial period and were promptly assimilated by leftist and nationalist political parties into the broader anti-colonial struggle (Rahman and Langford, 2012). Each of the umbrella labour organisations aligned with a major political party, leading to a multiplicity of actors divided along party political lines. This early tendency to withdraw from the factory floor to fight in the national political arena, as well as forming internal divisions along partisan lines, would go on to set the pattern for unionism in Bangladesh that persists till today. Subsequently, unionism in the Pakistan-period, whilst robust, was subsumed into national political demands for provincial autonomy and, ultimately, independence (Khanna, 2011).

After independence, the socialist experiment of the early 1970s meant most industries were nationalised, which yet again politicised unions but this time, instead of their

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<sup>273</sup> Due to the nature of my findings, where gender did not appear as an explanatory factor during fieldwork or subsequent analysis, this thesis does not discuss the social reproduction of labour (Bhattacharya, 2017). However, given the centrality of women who form the majority of the labour force in Bangladesh's ready-made garments industry, many influential scholarly work has discussed social reproduction in the industry at length (Kabeer, 1991; Kabeer, 2000; Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Mahmud, 2003; Siddiqi, 2009). Baglioni and Mezzadri (2000) have also made calls to incorporate social reproduction within labour control regime theories.

prior oppositional stance, unions became attached to the ruling party (Rahman and Langford, 2012). Afterwards, although at first banned under martial law during the period of military dictatorships, labour unions were reinstated with new forms of regulatory oversight, such as mandatory labour union registration, the present-day consequences of which I discuss below (Khanna, 2011; Rahman and Langford, 2012). Even after democracy was re-established, their satellite status vis-à-vis political parties embroiled labour unions in highly clientelist relations (Siddiqi, 2016). They became “characterized by corruption, nepotism and the development of a self-interested labour aristocracy” (Ahmed, 1995 as cited in Rahman and Langford, 2012, p. 89). This historical evolution of labour unions explains why interviewees—from labour activists to UN agency officials—displayed little confidence in unions. Reflecting the opinion of most interviewees, a UN agency official pointed out, “Trade unionism is closely affiliated with, and almost in the arm pits of, political parties.”<sup>274</sup> A labour activist echoed similar sentiments, recounting incidences she had witnessed where collusion between union leaders and factory owners’ associations sabotaged efforts to improve working conditions.<sup>275</sup>

These weaknesses of the labour unions have meant they have been unable to offer robust resistance to the labour control mechanisms deployed over the years. In recent decades, the most egregious form of labour control used in the country has been coercion, which runs the gamut from killings, physical assault, sexual harassment and summary dismissals to even sedition charges against workers (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Massive spontaneous protests by garments factory workers in the capital and its outskirts demanding higher wages in 2006 (Siddiqi, 2016), 2017 (Ashraf and Prentice, 2019), and 2018-19 (Worker Rights Consortium, 2019) were met with violent state-led reprisal and mass dismissals. Multiple interviewees believed that dismissed workers find it difficult to return to work at garments factories even after changing their names and identities because employer-conducted fingerprint checks reveal who blacklisted workers are.<sup>276</sup> Workers have resorted to occasional violence too amidst the growing realisation that militancy was one of the few remaining tools that produce results (Ashraf and Prentice, 2019). One labour activist lamented,

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<sup>274</sup> Interview with UN agency official 4 (2017)

<sup>275</sup> Interview with NGO 7 (2018)

<sup>276</sup> Interviews with NGO 7 and Labour activist 2 (2018)

“Unless [the people in power] face pressure, unless someone sits on their throats, unless you take a hammer to their heads, they don’t care about anyone but themselves.”<sup>277</sup> Experts also had similar realisations, which led one interviewee to report, “Whenever there are any big strikes, even some casualties, you can finally make [the factory owners] sit at the table to negotiate minimum wages.”<sup>278</sup> A factory owner shared that this was indeed their policy: “We wait until we face pressure, then we release the pressure bit by bit with small concessions.”<sup>279</sup>

Whilst coercion was not used in the NSSS and EII negotiations, I suspect the reason other—arguably softer—mechanisms I describe below proved effective is because the threat of coercion justifiably coloured the worldviews of labour activists. One activist cut short her meeting with me warning the Detective Branch was en route, albeit for a matter not linked to our meeting.<sup>280</sup> Another complained, “Security agencies record my phone conversations. They check my emails. They call me to ask where I am going.”<sup>281</sup> Even the activist demonstrably on better terms with the authorities reported being intimidated by security agencies in years past.<sup>282</sup> These and similar events potentially affect what issues labour activists are willing to agitate for – unless the status quo gets unbearable, risking one’s life for social insurance seems imprudent. Consequently, I focus below on the two mechanisms that were directly used to sideline during the NSSS and EII negotiations workers: exclusion and co-optation.

### ***Exclusion***

Exclusion happened during the NSSS negotiations when labour unions were not invited to any of the consultation meetings, not even the meetings that included representatives from the two top garments business associations. I have closely scrutinised the meeting minutes and attendance sheets of a large number of the formal meetings held during the NSSS negotiations. They contained the names and affiliations of the people who attended the meetings. As a rule, the vast majority of meetings was attended by bureaucrats and included neither labour unions nor business

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<sup>277</sup> Interview with Labour activist 2 (2018)

<sup>278</sup> Interview with UN agency official 6 (2017)

<sup>279</sup> Interview with Factory owner 1 (2018)

<sup>280</sup> Labour activist 3 (2018)

<sup>281</sup> Interview with Labour activist 2 (2018)

<sup>282</sup> Labour activist 1 (2018)

associations. An exception was the National Dialogue held on February 20, 2014 at the Planning Commission chaired by the then Minister of Planning, A H M Mustafa Kamal. Although the country's most powerful business associations—Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA)—sent representatives, as did the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry, there was no one from any labour organisation.<sup>283</sup> Given the importance placed on meetings with ministers, it is highly unlikely—impossible, in fact—that unions were invited but simply neglected to attend.

Such exclusion of labour from policy matters directly relevant to it is a regular phenomenon in Bangladesh. One of the most egregious examples was the exclusion of labour unions from the 'Alliance', which was one of the two high profile transnational governance initiatives undertaken after the Rana Plaza collapse to regulate occupational safety and health of workers in Bangladesh's garments industry (Kabeer, Huq and Sulaiman, 2020). The Alliance ran on the principles of corporate social responsibility whilst its rival initiative, the Accord, operated on the principles of industrial democracy (Donaghey and Reinecke, 2018).<sup>284</sup> The Accord, therefore, incorporated unions whilst the Alliance excluded them to satisfy the sensitivities of the virulently anti-union US brands. Thus an important way labour is excluded is they are simply denied access to key spaces where negotiations happen. Possibly as a result, no labour activist I interviewed was aware of the existence of the NSSS.<sup>285</sup> As a matter of fact, although the EII effort was officially justified through reference to the NSSS, most of the stakeholders in the EII negotiations whom I interviewed did not know of the NSSS effort till I informed them. This ignorance points to the effect exclusion has on limiting coordination even between potential allies.

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<sup>283</sup> Attendance sheets of the February 20, 2014 National Dialogue which included the names and organisational affiliations of the attendees

<sup>284</sup> I do not discuss the Accord and Alliance at any great length in this document because they did not present as major issues in my findings. However, there is a rich and recent body of literature comparing them (Donaghey and Reinecke, 2018), as well as recording workers' (Kabeer, Huq and Sulaiman, 2020), factory managers' (Rahman and Rahman, 2020) and multinational buyers' (Oka, Egels-Zandén and Alexander, 2020) perspectives on the initiatives. Trebilcock (2020) assesses their outcomes.

<sup>285</sup> Interviews with Labour activists 1, 2 and 3 (2018) and NGO 7 (2018)

## *Co-optation*

A range of moneyed actors capitalises on the funding and resource shortages in Bangladesh's labour movement by co-opting unions (Rahman and Langford, 2012). Anti-internationalisation critiques, in particular, argue various foreign agenda are supplanting the indigenous voices of labour in the country via co-optation (Khanna, 2011; Siddiqi, 2016; Zajak, 2017). Co-optation has meant foreign actors have the power to set the agenda on labour issues. A UN agency official, for instance, insisted:<sup>286</sup>

It's an issue of culture... they probably don't know what they are losing [without social insurance]... It isn't an issue that will come bottom up. It's an issue that needs to be explained to the workers. You need to explain it to show it's important.

Whilst in this case the demand for employment injury insurance came from both within and outside the country, the assumption that foreigners know more about the realities of labour than the workers themselves is concerning. The phenomenon has created a bifurcation between co-opted leaders who sit on formal negotiations under the aegis of international actors, such as the ILO, and more independent leaders who speak from the factory floor (Ashraf and Prentice, 2019). In interviews, there was a belief amongst the more independent of the labour activists that the co-opted leaders' locus of accountability had shifted away from the workers to external actors who grant them perks, such as foreign trips.<sup>287</sup> Due to the prohibitive expense of foreign travel, most Bangladeshis consider opportunities to travel abroad an attractive bonus (Karim, 2001). Similar to the bureaucrats in Chapter 4, labour leaders involved with the EII were taken on 'study tours' abroad and were very appreciative of the perks.<sup>288</sup>

Beyond co-optation by international actors, it was the co-optation by factory owners and political parties that proved to be a more immediate concern. Co-optation is made easy by the practice of registering trade unions—first instituted during the period of martial law described above—which allows the government to deny registration to unions in order to delegitimise them (Siddiqi, 2016). After Rana Plaza, intense

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<sup>286</sup> Interview with UN agency official 8 (2019)

<sup>287</sup> Interview with NGO 7 (2018)

<sup>288</sup> Interviews with Labour activist 1 (2018) and UN agency official 5 (2018)

international pressure forced the government to make changes to the labour law (Rahim and Islam, 2020). Among other provisions, these changes institutionalised greater freedom of association in factories. Although the legal changes led to a big wave of new unions seeking official registration, the tide has turned since then. In the first half of 2015, for example, when the NSSS was being finalised and the EII project was gestating, 75% of trade union registration requests were rejected (Zajak, 2017).

Unlike independent unions, co-opted unions that present no obvious threats to capital or the state find it easy to be registered (Siddiqi, 2016). Being able to officially register with the government is crucial because the ILO only collaborates with registered unions, meaning only registered unions are invited to tripartite negotiations.<sup>289</sup> So labour activists involved with the EII process had almost certainly passed the ‘test of political loyalty’ that registration itself poses. This was demonstrated to me when one of the labour leaders in the EII negotiations invited me to meet him at the party office of the then Minister of Social Welfare. This would be an unfathomable invitation unless one has deep ties to the Minister’s party.<sup>290</sup> In interviews, factory owners similarly reported that they controlled the unions in their factories, which is a characterisation labour activists agreed with.<sup>291</sup> Co-optation raises serious questions about the extent to which the three parties of the tripartite are actually independent of each other and therefore able to honestly represent the interests of their constituencies.

In summary, this section has argued that the endemic weaknesses of the labour movement have historically granted them low holding power, which is exploited to exclude them from negotiating social protection for workers.

### **8.2.2 State-business nexus**

The cost containment pressures imposed by neoliberal global capitalism means export-dependent poor countries are very sensitive to international market pressures and the threat of capital flight (Rudra, 2008). These countries, of which Bangladesh is an archetypal example, limit social protection for low skilled, low wage workers to

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<sup>289</sup> Interview with UN agency official 5 (2018)

<sup>290</sup> Labour activist 1 (2018)

<sup>291</sup> Interviews with Factory owners 1 and 2 (2018), Labour activist 2 (2018), and NGO 7 (2018)

appease business interests (Rudra, 2007). A state-business nexus exists in Bangladesh that ensures measures like legislation to mandate social insurance for workers is removed from the policymaking agenda. In this section, I trace how the state-business nexus evolved in Bangladesh and how it affects policy efforts today.

There are several explanations for why the state and business may work in tandem. For instance, state officials and the business elite might share the same class interests, which encourages state officials to legislate in business' favour (Miliband, 1969; Scott, 1991). The state may also capitulate to business interests out of a concern for protecting the revenue streams that businesses offer without which the state's spending capacity will be curtailed, affecting electoral politics downstream (Block, 1977; Lindblom, 1977; Offe and Ronge, 1982). In terms of the mechanisms through which businesses exert pressure on the state, Culpepper (2010) argues business prefers to influence the government quietly from outside the limelight since this reduces the pushback they have to face from the public. Farnsworth and Holden (2006) argue that businesses may curry political favour through lobbying and financial donations. Business actors may be installed in influential positions of the state, especially in cases of public-private partnerships on welfare-focused institutions. The state may even outsource its welfare service delivery to businesses, making it responsible for welfare provisioning. A mechanism more familiar to developing countries, although certainly not limited to them, is state capture (Hellman, Jones and Kaufmann, 2000; Grzymala-Busse, 2008). Business can get institutional structures modified in their favour by either insidiously using their influence or bribing state officials, as Shai (2017) argues for South Africa. Drawing on Thai politics, Bunkanwanicha and Wiwattanakantang (2009) demonstrate an even more egregious mechanism whereby business owners seek out and ascend to top political office with direct control on the levers of power. This final mechanism was in effect during the NSSS negotiations.

The state-business nexus is a relatively recent phenomenon in Bangladesh that was an outcome of aid donor-mandated economic liberalisation. Given colonial rulers wrestled power out of the hands of the Indian subcontinent's Muslim polity, Bengali Muslims—the predominant ethnic and religious orientation of present-day Bangladeshis—did not own many businesses during both the British and Pakistani

eras (Kochanek, 1996). Even after independence in 1971, the business community as an interest group did not fare well due to the socialist drive to nationalise most privately owned industries (Kochanek, 1993). The turn to economic liberalisation was a significant break from this trajectory. By the mid-1980s, much before democracy was established in the early 1990s, Bangladesh had undergone “the most extensive denationalization of the public sector in the Third World” (Kochanek, 1993, p. 98). The reforms encouraged the emergence and mounting prominence of business interest groups with political aspirations (Kochanek, 1996).

Ready-made garments manufacturers first appeared during this period; the two most influential garments owners associations, Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (henceforth, BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), were established in 1983 and 1996 respectively. Although garments owners associations did not wield much political clout in the beginning, as business associations rose in prominence, so did they. By the mid-1990s, the ruling party gained control over the leadership of the business associations (Hassan, 2013). The newly established link between the ruling party and businesses through the apex trade bodies gave the latter easy access to state power. Since then, the garments industry has leveraged this connection to grow astronomically and become the second-largest source of foreign currency after remittance. It has arguably made BGMEA the most powerful business association in the country whose members can bend the government’s will to fit their needs (Muhammad, 2011). As a result, the power resources they wield are difficult to match by anyone else in the domestic arena, least of all labour. The influence of the garments factory owners was particularly visible in the NSSS and EII negotiations through two processes: state capture and tripartite capture.

### *State capture*

Khanna (2011) finds that garments factory owners have confidence in the unconditional support of the state because of their crucial role in the economy. It is possible that their confidence stems less from the economy’s reliance on them and more from their proximity to political power. Alam and Teicher (2012) use the biographies of elected politicians to show that, from 2001, industrialists and business



owners, who constitute the majority of parliamentarians, have captured the Bangladeshi state. Hossain (2012) also argues that parliamentarians are likely to have personal connections to the garments industry. Hira (2017) finds that the government and garments factory owners have developed incestuous links, with BGMEA and BKMEA sitting on formal committees at the Ministry of Commerce and Labour that set labour policies. In 2009, the BGMEA hosted a reception for 29 garments factory owners who had been elected to the new parliament. The then BGMEA president urged “the 29 MPs to create a ‘Caucus’ to play a prominent role in the parliament to resolve problems in the industry”, adding, “we just want a pro-business policy”.<sup>292</sup> Subsequently, ex-BGMEA presidents Anisul Huq and Atiqul Huq became powerful mayors of Dhaka north city council consecutively, whilst ex-BGMEA president, Tipu Munshi, serves as the current Commerce Minister. A newspaper investigation revealed Shahriar Alam, the State Minister for Foreign Affairs appointed in 2014, also owns garments factories.<sup>293</sup> An ex-BGMEA executive I interviewed believed above a hundred (i.e. nearly one third) sitting MPs are associated with the garments industry,<sup>294</sup> whilst factory owners declared only those who have political aspirations lead the BGMEA.<sup>295</sup> A UN agency official summed up the situation as: “There is no politician who is not an entrepreneur.”<sup>296</sup>

The preponderance of garments factory owners within the parliamentarians explains why, even though the provision of social insurance in the NSSS passed uncontested during repeated checks by bureaucrats in the Cabinet Division,<sup>297</sup> it was removed once it came to the attention of the Cabinet ministers. Three days before the fateful April 6, 2015 Cabinet meeting, a national newspaper reported on the NSSS’ proposal for social insurance.<sup>298</sup> The prospect of social insurance created anxieties amongst business leaders; the head of the country’s apex trade body complained to the reporter that he was not aware of the government’s plans. A UN agency official recalled, “Many of the ministers are themselves factory owners. So they said, ‘Has this been

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<sup>292</sup> *BGMEA honours 29 garment-owner MPs*, bdnews24, January 12, 2009

<sup>293</sup> *The Guardian view on Bangladesh: when charity goes wrong*, The Guardian, January 21, 2019

<sup>294</sup> Interview with BGMEA official 1 (2018)

<sup>295</sup> Interviews with Factory owners 1 and 2 (2018)

<sup>296</sup> Interview with UN agency official 2 (2018)

<sup>297</sup> Cabinet Division memo on NSSS draft, January 7, 2014 for instance makes no mention of any opposition to social insurance

<sup>298</sup> *Bangladesh govt plans mandatory pension scheme for private sector*, Rejaul Karim Byron for The Daily Star, April 3, 2015

discussed with the private sector? Do they agree?’’<sup>299</sup> A civil servant with first-hand knowledge of the deliberations shared:<sup>300</sup>

Since the Ministers represent the private sector, [after the newspaper report] they discussed that at best we can retain one or two sentences in the document... we can’t detail the proposal out so much... So we removed nearly one to two pages of details.

The ministers resisted any attempt to pass any policy that would legislate compulsory social insurance for private enterprises. The shift to using language like “explore possibilities” was, in fact, a diplomatic way to signal refusal without having to actually say so (see Table 8.2).

<b>NSSS draft before the Cabinet meeting, March 19, 2015 (emphasis added)</b>	<b>NSSS draft after the Cabinet meeting, April 16, 2015 (emphasis added)</b>
Comprehensive pension system for the elderly (p. xvi):  <i>Introduce legislation</i> to establish a National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS), to be managed under the Insurance Development & Regulatory Authority (IDRA) under the provision of the Insurance Act-2010, <i>which makes it obligatory for all private enterprises in the formal sector to offer a contributory pensions programme for all employees</i> . The NSIS <i>will</i> provide pensions as well as address other contingencies (such as disability, sickness, unemployment and maternity).	Comprehensive pension system for the elderly (p. xvi):  <i>Explore possibilities</i> to establish a National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS), to be managed under the Insurance Development & Regulatory Authority (IDRA) under the provision of the Insurance Act-2010, <i>based on the principle of employers and employees jointly paying contribution</i> . The NSIS <i>would</i> provide pensions as well as address other contingencies (such as disability, sickness, unemployment and maternity).

TABLE 8.2: Language changes relating to legislation in the NSSS drafts before and after the April 6, 2015 Cabinet meeting

The ministers’ efforts appear to have succeeded. The mid-term progress review of the NSSS’ implementation notes that the project has stalled on multiple fronts (Razzaque et al., 2020, p. xxv):

As of April 2019, the study [on National Social Insurance Scheme (NSIS)] has not been commissioned yet. Consequently, the piloting of the NSIS is being delayed. Therefore, chances of meeting the NSSS-stipulated deadlines of January 2020 for formulating NSIS law and January 2021 for rollout nationally seem very slim. The NSSS-suggested

<sup>299</sup> Interview with UN agency official 1 (2017)

<sup>300</sup> Interview with Civil servant 2 (2018)

study for Private Voluntary Pensions has not been undertaken... the idea of the NSSS-proposed pension authority is still at the conception stage.

The report blames the delays squarely on political factors, noting that the bone of contention is the issue of joint employer-employee contribution. As a result, “without a strong political commitment and further high-level decision, it will not be possible to pass the law and roll out the NSIS” (Razzaque et al., 2020, p. 67). Social protection for formal sector workers in Bangladesh is thus held hostage to the whims of the very employers who will have to contribute to them.

### *Tripartite capture*

Social dialogue, or tripartism, includes “all types of negotiation, consultation or simply exchange of information, usually between the representatives of government, employers and workers on issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy” (Fashoyin, 2004, p. 344). For tripartism to be effective, all involved bodies must be considered legitimate, so the participants of such processes ought to represent the broader interests they embody and be independent of each other (Beguin, 1959). The role of the government is that of a facilitator who enforces norms of fairness so that the dialogue can take place between equal parties (Ishikawa, 2003). Tripartism is ILO’s signature and preferred method of negotiation to solve labour disputes and set related policy (Beguin, 1959). Although Bangladesh ratified ILO Convention no. 144 dealing with tripartite consultations in 1979, tripartism has only gained a foothold in the country since the 2000s (Hossain and Akter, 2015). Whilst some formal tripartite forums exist, it is common for ad hoc tripartite negotiations to be arranged to meet particular goals, which was the case for the EII negotiations.

Tripartism in Bangladesh has been criticised for the incompetence of the participating actors (Faruque, 2009), bureaucratic complexity and corruption (Khan and Wichterich, 2015), and government dominance of the negotiations (Hossain and Akter, 2015). BGMEA and BKMEA have been accused of deliberately sending mid-level staff who did not have decision-making authority to the negotiations, to stall or derail the negotiations (Hossain and Akter, 2015). The ILO has been criticised for having limited funding and no statutory powers to enforce compliance (Hira, 2017). The ILO-led EII negotiations suffered from these endemic malaises. As I discussed

earlier, the labour representatives at the meetings were co-opted and the government negotiators, instead of being neutral referees, represented business interests by virtue of state capture. Against the combined power of the state and business working together, the ILO did not have any tools at its disposal to force compliance.<sup>301</sup> This allowed the representatives of the factory owners to refuse to cooperate and set an implementation date, thereby derailing the entire EII effort.<sup>302</sup> Instead of having contending parties negotiating for their own interests, tripartite forums in Bangladesh essentially have all three parties representing business interests, completing a process of tripartite capture by business.

### **8.2.3 Hypermobile global capital**

Even when a state-business nexus exists, it does not immediately follow that business will work against extending social protection for labour. To impose costs on competitors, for instance, business may even support the expansion of social protection (Swenson, 2002). In many instances, social protection was introduced in modern welfare states through cross-class alliances that included capitalists, whose motivation was to offload their workers' social protection costs on to public finances (Mares, 2003). The reason business does not react in these ways in Bangladesh is because of the country's vulnerability to hypermobile global capital. Countries with export-led industrialisation strategies, like Bangladesh, which depend on manufacturing products that require a low skilled workforce, are disproportionately exposed to the cost containment pressures ignited by market liberalisation (Rudra, 2007). If they cannot keep costs low, capital can freely use the exit strategy and relocate to areas with lower wages and looser regulations. In these countries, social protection expenditure will fall (Rudra, 2008). In this section, I trace the historical evolution of networked capitalism in the clothing industry that entangled Bangladesh. I argue this mode of production impacts why the NSSS and EII stakeholders were reluctant to extend social insurance to workers.

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<sup>301</sup> Interviews with UN agency officials 5 (2018) and 8 (2019)

<sup>302</sup> Interviews with UN agency officials 5 (2018) and 8 (2019)

The rise of the familiar global clothing brands on the high streets is a historically contingent phenomenon driven by international agreements on free trade. Since the 1970s, a distinct form of networked capitalism developed in the clothing industry where in-house production was abandoned in favour of production in subcontracted supply chains (Wills and Hale, 2005). Companies, almost exclusively located in the global North, were able to leverage the lower costs, freer regulations, trade quotas, and cheap labour to buy cheap products from subcontracted manufacturers in developing countries. Although this happened across many industries, the garments industry, due to its low start-up costs and its labour-intensive production process, was particularly able to very swiftly leverage the globalised subcontracting opportunities (Wills and Hale, 2005). In the beginning, the development helped both the Southern manufacturers, for whom otherwise inaccessible markets became accessible, and the Northern corporations, who sourced products at a cheaper cost. But these multinationals, as the name implies, now had an almost infinite array of possibilities of where to spend their money. Consequently, the garments industry supply chain shifted from a producer-driven commodity chain to a buyer-driven one (Appelbaum and Gereffi, 1994). As the geographic spread of manufacturers grew, the retailers continuously consolidated their power. This ultimately generated value chain monopsony, where the lead firms accumulated decisive decision-making power over their smaller manufacturing counterparts in the developing countries (Anner, 2015). The lead firms can now freely dictate the price of the products, forcing the small manufacturers to compete against each other globally (Anner, 2020).

However, the rise of networked capitalism did not immediately usher in global free trade for the apparel industry. The 1960s-70s saw stiff resistance from domestic producers in developed countries who stood to lose the most from their markets being flooded with cheap clothes from abroad (Hurley and Miller, 2005). As a result, the producer groups lobbied fiercely for policies to protect their domestic manufacturing base. Consequently, in 1974, countries signed the Multi Fibre Agreement, which ratified a system of complex quota and tariff regimes to limit the import of apparel and textiles (Hale, 2002). Originally meant as a temporary measure to allow rich countries time to prepare for the inevitable opening up of their markets, the Multi Fibre Agreement presented an enormous opportunity for countries like Bangladesh (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Khan, 2017). It essentially carved up the world into

areas where clothes could be manufactured and exported from duty-free (Hurley and Miller, 2005). It is no coincidence that the earliest garments manufacturers appear in the Bangladeshi landscape in the late 1970s, soon after the Multi Fibre Agreement came into effect and made Bangladesh a beneficiary of duty-free access to foreign markets (Hossain, 2012). To leverage this new market, by the early 1980s, Bangladesh began instating pro-market reforms, including encouraging foreign direct investment and establishing export processing zones for the garments industry (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004). Khan (2011) argues that since these developments happened in Bangladesh under the clientelist authoritarianism of military dictatorships, the regime's stability lengthened the time horizon for investors, allowing the nascent industry to learn and mature at an optimal pace.

Within a decade, in 1994, the Multi Fibre Agreement was replaced with the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (Hurley and Miller, 2005). This Agreement was specifically designed to stagger the phase-out of the quotas over a decade, thereby making the apparel trade fully free. It was ratified because by then the advantage the powerful Northern business interests garnered from the free trade of garments outweighed domestic opposition in favour of protectionism (Hale, 2002). The demise of the Multi Fibre Agreement in 2005 was seen as an existential threat to Bangladesh's garments industry. China had entered the World Trade Organisation in 2001, and by 2003 eviscerated all competition to emerge as the world's number one garments exporter (Anner, 2015). As 2005 approached, researchers ominously predicted (Hale, 2002, p. 39):

There will also be major losses in countries in the South which are no longer able to compete. The future for the thousands of garment workers in Bangladesh, for example, is extremely uncertain.

Unexpectedly, this did not happen. Since 2005, Bangladesh's garments industry has only grown from strength to strength, surviving even such seismic crises as Rana Plaza. It rode out the storm by offering the lead firms, amongst other benefits, some of the lowest wages in the world, which gave it an unbeatable edge over the competition (Alam and Natsuda, 2016; Alam, Selvanathan and Selvanathan, 2017). The assault on labour rights, including the absence of social insurance, is therefore not an accident of non-compliance to labour regulations but the deliberate product of a

global system that makes it necessary for costs to be kept extremely low for Bangladesh to remain competitive in the industry (Anner, Bair and Blasi, 2013; Bair, Anner and Blasi, 2020). At all times, the focus is on stopping the global clothing brands from exiting Bangladesh – one interviewee who worked closely with the ministries recounted that the government’s mantra in the months after Rana Plaza was, “Stay engaged, stay engaged, stay engaged”, essentially imploring the global brands to give Bangladesh another chance.<sup>303</sup> As a result, when faced with the increase in costs that the introduction of social insurance would impose, stakeholders largely reacted with reluctance: due to anticipated reaction and due to ideas.

### ***Reluctance due to anticipated reaction***

Given the depth of the tragedy and the international attention it generated, Rana Plaza was a contingency event that created a potential window of opportunity. Post-Rana Plaza, for example, Bangladesh has demonstrably better garments factories with substantial structural improvements made in fire and electrical safety (Trebilcock, 2020). Nevertheless, despite the enormous costs associated with remediation, local factories not only received zero financial support to carry out the structural improvements demanded by the global brands (Ashwin, Kabeer and Schüßler, 2020), they have also seen their profit margins narrow markedly due to buyer-driven pricing squeezes (Anner, 2020). European and US clothing brands have paid 9-10% less to Bangladesh factories between 2011 and 2016, even though Rana Plaza and its attendant remedial cost pressures on the industry, as well as a 77% increase in minimum wages, occurred in 2013 (Anner, 2020). Whilst these global brands are usually willing to pay for factory audits to identify flaws, they are unwilling to bear the cost of fixing the problems they identify, preferring instead to pass them on to the factory owners (Oka, Egels-Zandén and Alexander, 2020). Anner (2020) argues that such sourcing squeezes have pronounced deleterious effects downstream as manufacturers, in turn, pass the burden on to workers in the form of lower pay and greater repression to quell ensuing worker protests.<sup>304</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> Interview with UN agency official 9 (2019)

<sup>304</sup> Although it can be argued that the brands are paying lower down the chain because falling profits force them to cut costs, the evidence for this is mixed. It is true that, in the UK, several well-known high street clothing retailers have gone into administration in the past few years (Ashwin, Kabir and Schüßler, 2020). On the other hand, since 2015, shareholders of five major Australian clothing brands

Theorists of power consider the possibility of anticipated reaction wherein actors change their actions in anticipation of others' reactions (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Pierson, 2016). I found this to be the case when the idea of social protection was presented to factory owners in Bangladesh. They complained bitterly of zero financial support for the expensive factory remediation they had carried out to meet the demands of global clothing brands, their year on year fall in profits due to being paid less by the brands, and the brands' unwillingness to absorb any costs, including rises in wages.<sup>305</sup> "They are asking us to pay fair wages but they should pay us fair prices first," insisted a factory owner.<sup>306</sup> They reported that brands regularly threaten to move to other countries should the factory's already narrow profit margins not be narrowed even further.<sup>307</sup> A factory owner complained, "[Recently] Marks and Spencer did this just for a price difference of 20 cents per item between our factory and an Indian competitor. They didn't even care that our factory was more compliant with [occupation safety and health rules] than the competitor."<sup>308</sup> These experiences had made factory owners extremely wary of any cost increases, such as social insurance, which would have inevitably increased the cost of production. They were certain brands would not share even a fraction of the cost with the manufacturers. A former BGMEA official shared:<sup>309</sup>

The [global North] brands ask for this and that from us but they are not willing to pay for anything. I even talked to [the former US ambassador to Bangladesh] about this. He said, "You know the buying policy? Cheap and quick. Buyers will go where they will get the product cheap and quick. They didn't come here for charity."

I cannot speculate on whether factory owners would have supported social insurance had global brands not engaged in such exploitative practices – whether local capitalists are more egalitarian-minded than global capitalists remains an open question. The inequality between factory owners and workers suggests greater egalitarianism is unlikely. One factory owner, for instance, calculated that he earned

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have received an average of 81% increase in returns per year (Emran, Kyriacou and Rogan, 2019). Sky-high profits are being amassed in the centre at the cost of workers' lives at the peripheries.

<sup>305</sup> Interviews with BGMEA officials 1 and 2 (2018) and factory owners 1 and 2 (2018)

<sup>306</sup> Interview with Factory owner 2 (2018)

<sup>307</sup> Interviews with BGMEA officials 1 and 2 (2018) and factory owners 1 and 2 (2018)

<sup>308</sup> Interview with Factory owner 1 (2018)

<sup>309</sup> Interview with BGMEA official 1 (2018)



over 200 times more than an average worker in his factory.<sup>310</sup> But the inequality between the worker and the multinational brand she produces clothes for undoubtedly eclipses this figure by many orders of magnitude. For now, local capital's grievances against global capital have empirical support.

### ***Reluctance due to ideas***

Hay, Watson and Wincott (1999) argue that just the idea of neoliberal global capitalism makes governments act in ways that make its effects a self-fulfilling prophecy. I find this to be true of not just governments but of most stakeholders I encountered. Even though brands were never invited to NSSS or EII negotiations, all stakeholders talked of them as constraining influence on behaviour – brand practices dictated policy without their direct involvement because of ideas about what they would do if costs were to increase.<sup>311</sup> An ILO official predicted brands would strongly resist any attempts at official and sustained inclusion in tripartite processes because potentially, especially in the case of injury insurance, it would be tantamount to them accepting liability.<sup>312</sup> Also important were ideas about what brands could not be expected to do. The hegemony of neoliberalism is such that even the suggestion of reining in brand behaviour via regulatory oversight was scoffed at both by ILO officials and factory owners.<sup>313</sup> However, there was a general belief amongst interviewees that brands could be used to force factory owners to acquiesce to demands. During the final stages of the EII negotiations, a UN agency official wondered aloud about asking brands to force factory owners to comply, but in the same breath, dismissed any suggestion of asking brands to share more profits down the supply chain because the brands would never agree to it.<sup>314</sup> Thus, the idea of voluntary compliance with regulations was exclusively applicable to global capital and not extended to local capital, which could be coerced into complying when needed. Global business was considered an untameable force that naturally operated freely; it was everything and everybody else that needed to modify their behaviour.

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<sup>310</sup> Interview with Factory owner 2 (2018)

<sup>311</sup> Interviews with Civil servant 6 (2018), NGO 7 (2018), UN agency officials 6 (2017), 7 (2017) and 8 (2019), BGMEA officials 1 and 2 (2018) and factory owners 1 and 2 (2018)

<sup>312</sup> Interview with UN agency official 8 (2019)

<sup>313</sup> Interviews with Factory owner 2 (2018) and UN agency official 8 (2019)

<sup>314</sup> Interview with UN agency official 8 (2019)

### 8.3 Labour exclusionary political settlement

As Figure 8.2 shows, in this political settlement, an ineffective labour movement is constrained by a state-business nexus as well as the hypermobility of global capital to deny workers their rights. At the international level, the interest groups are multinational firms and the ILO. The power resource available to global brands is the threat of capital flight against which the ILO, having no enforcement capacity, can only use agenda setting to attempt to negotiate on issues like employment injury insurance. At the national level, the interest groups are local business, the state, and workers. Of these, local capital proved most powerful, since it had captured the state as well as the institution of tripartism. The state uses violence to repress workers and its veto powers in the Cabinet to restrict extending social insurance. In response, ordinary workers have begun resorting to occasional violence but were mostly left without adequate power resources. This constellation of factors produced economic and political rents for local and global capital as well as for politicians. It is this constellation that ensures the NSSS could not extend social insurance to labour.

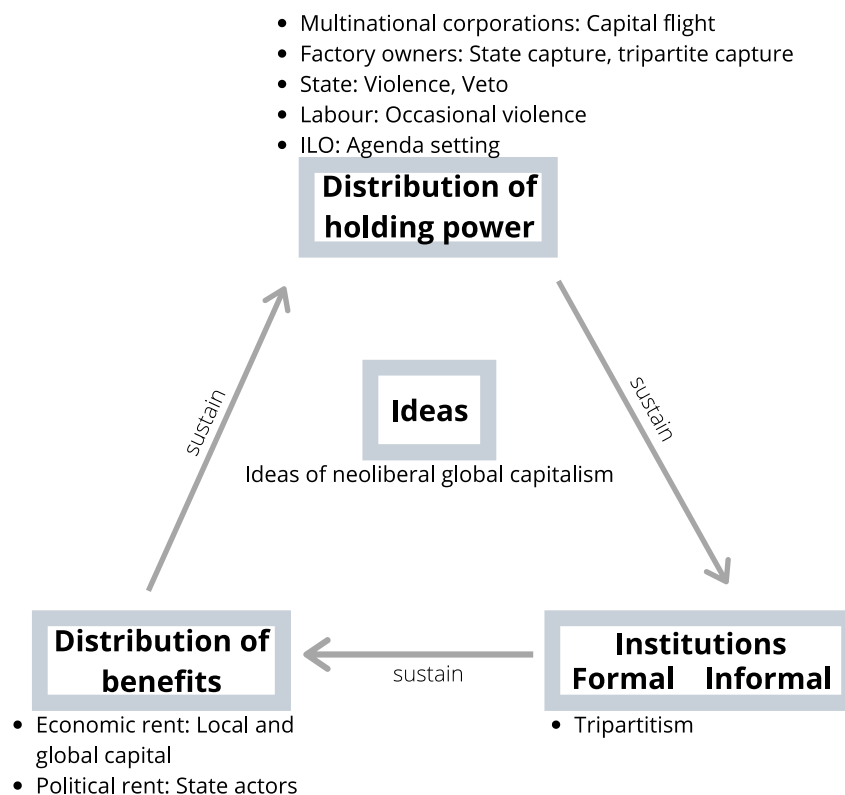


FIGURE 8.2: Bangladesh's labour exclusionary settlement

As discussed in previous chapters, Khan (2010) argues a political settlement must be durable and reproducible. In order to demonstrate durability and reproducibility, I have analysed two consecutive policy initiatives in this chapter, spread across six years (NSSS: 2013-2015, EII, linked to the NSSS: 2015-2019) and traced the historical development of its power and institutional constellation. The analysis reveals a labour exclusionary political settlement in Bangladesh that is largely stable as evidenced by the fact that successive efforts were unable to introduce social insurance for workers in Bangladesh. This study goes further than previous studies by revealing the specific processes of exclusion by which labour and its interests are removed from the policymaking arena.

Before I conclude, I will briefly consider the implications of my findings for the institution of tripartism. First, I have shown that the three key actors of the tripartite—the workers, the state, and local businesses—all essentially negotiate on behalf of business in Bangladesh. The ILO, lacking enforcement abilities, is a weak actor that cannot demand compliance. This calls into question the efficacy of tripartite negotiations to solve genuine worker grievances in the country (Ashraf and Prentice, 2019). Second, the elephant in the room at these negotiations is global brands, ideas about whose reactions modify and constrain the behaviour of all actors in the tripartite. As a labour activist had pointed out, “Who gets the bigger piece of the pie?”<sup>315</sup> However, none of the actors has any effective leverage—or power resource—to wield over brands. Theoretically, workers can walk off the factory floor, halting production, and forcing concessions from factory owners who would otherwise have to absorb the cost of idle machines. Whilst this gives workers some leverage over local capital, it poses almost no threat to global capital, which can simply move production to another locale (Wills and Hale, 2005). At best they may incur some reputational damage. In the absence of robust leverages, workers, and even local capital, cannot demand compromises from global capital; even in the best-case scenario, they will simply receive inadequate concessions, as the whole Rana Plaza episode reveals (Anner, 2020). Thus, tripartism, the instrument ILO still favours, appears unfit for purpose in today’s world of networked capitalism. I would argue its ineffectiveness is what sustains it because, since no one actually considers it a threat

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<sup>315</sup> Interview with Labour activist 2 (2018)

in Bangladesh, it remains unchallenged. On the other hand, by acting as a necessary ‘fig leaf’ to hide the inadequacies of all parties, it allows the system to continue unabated and generate the necessary economic and political rents.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I addressed the question *What political concerns shape the role of labour in the country’s social protection system?* by analysing the puzzle of why the NSSS and a policy effort linked to the NSSS failed to instate social insurance for labour. Rudra (2008) argues that the effect of neoliberal global capitalism on social protection in any country will be the product of its existing political and institutional dynamics. My findings about why, on the issue of social protection, a labour exclusionary settlement exists in Bangladesh support her reasoning. The historical trajectory of the labour movement created endemic weaknesses that prevent it from being effective representatives of workers. Local businesses have over time managed to capture both the state as well as key institutions, like tripartism, which could have otherwise been neutral forums for negotiations. Networked capitalism, in turn, has placed limits on both collective bargaining abilities as well as the imaginations of stakeholders. Amongst these three factors, we can assign rank by doing a simple thought experiment: which of them would have to change for Bangladesh’s garments industry to become more just and equitable? Even if Bangladesh’s labour force were to become stronger, it would still have little effective leverage against global capital. Even if state and business were independent entities in Bangladesh, individually or jointly they would not be able to withstand the threat of capital flight. This means the actor with the most egregious impact is global capital and only real curtailment of its power can change the industry. My key contribution in this chapter has been to describe the processes through which labour is excluded from policymaking. These range from state capture to constraints placed by anticipated reaction. Whilst these mechanisms are deployed in the national arena, they are largely shaped by global capital, which dictates policies without ever appearing in the policymaking spaces.

# CHAPTER 9

## CONCLUSION

*“The country of Bengal is a land where... the dust of dissension is always rising.”*  
Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, 1579<sup>316</sup>

In the past two decades, a wave of national social protection strategies has swept across many countries in the global South. These strategies tend to be very broad in scope as they often encompass most, if not all, of a country's social protection policies, bringing them under one cohesive framework, and deciding on their future trajectory. In theory, they signal the government's commitment to social welfare. Even if these policies fail to take off and remain unimplemented for various reasons, their sheer breadth means their formation process and overall content provide a fascinating lens through which to understand the politics of a country's social protection system.

Strikingly, despite their ubiquity, the research and literature on these strategies remain very sparse to date. This thesis is, in fact, one of the very few studies that interrogate the process of designing a national social protection strategy in the highly complex context of a country in the global South. By focusing on Bangladesh's version of these strategies—the National Social Security Strategy—this study has revealed the interplay of a wide range of actors and institutions as well as many layers of

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<sup>316</sup> As cited in Eaton (1996)

contestations arising from the collision of historical, global, and local forces that shaped the policy.

This thesis does not only offer the immediate explanations for the contestations that moulded the NSSS, but its findings also speak to the wider issues of social protection politics in Bangladesh and the global South in general. The broader relevance of the findings became evident to me during the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, which began after the data collection stage for this study had been completed. The chapter on social insurance for labour, for instance, underscored how the disproportionate power of hypermobile global capital has created a labour exclusionary settlement in Bangladesh. Evidence of this analysis was readily visible during the pandemic. In a deeply shocking move, between March-June 2020 alone, global clothing brands retroactively cancelled orders worth US\$ 724m for clothes that had already been made and shipped from Bangladesh (Anner, Nova and Foxgov, 2020). As a result, a fourth of the industry's workforce—1m workers—lost their jobs while others were forced to return to work in their cramped factories well before lockdown was eased for the rest of the population (Frayer, 2020). The findings about the primacy of food and targeting in the policy sphere were also demonstrated during the fiasco that unfolded as the government tried to rollout targeted food transfers as aid for the poor during the lockdown months. Whilst the reliance on food transfers created long queues and large crowds that threatened public health, the impractical insistence on targeting caused even more egregious harms. Given the predictable difficulty of creating reliable lists of the target population, there were enormous leakages of rice from the system even as the poor failed to access food and were forced to break lockdown (Ali, Hassan and Hossain, 2020). Also entirely in line with this study's analysis, the government did not involve the NGOs when making decisions about its pandemic plans, although in some instances they were used to deliver services (Alam, 2020; Uddin, 2021). As Bangladesh's once-in-a-century pandemic response appeared to dovetail the findings of my thesis, it underscored for me the wider implications of understanding the political settlements on welfare issues.

This concluding chapter offers a summary of the thesis to explain its findings. These are then synthesised to bring three significant contributions this thesis offers the wider

literature. The chapter ends by outlining the limitations of the study and recommending areas of future research.

## 9.1 Thesis summary

The overarching research question for this thesis was *What are the political dynamics behind Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy?* The question intended to capture the fluid and contested nature of social protection policymaking. The study relied on qualitative tools to collect data, including 61 key informant interviews, hundreds of documents generated before, during, and after the policy was finalised, and weeks of participant observation in six settings across three countries (Chapter 1). In addressing the dearth of literature on policymaking processes in Bangladesh, a key contribution this thesis made at the methodological level was bringing the vantage point of the state's bureaucratic machinery to the fore, thereby providing a counterpoint to many studies on Bangladesh that centre non-state actors, who are easier to access. The study adopted an issue-specific political settlement approach, deploying the concepts of power, benefits, institutions, and ideas to study the contestations during the NSSS' formulation (Chapter 2). To test for the durability of the settlements, the analysis was grounded in historical developments showing the organic processes by which power, institutions, and ideas evolved over time (Chapter 3). Policy developments subsequent to the finalisation of the NSSS were also discussed to demonstrate the settlements' reproducibility.

The NSSS began as an outgrowth of Bangladesh's PRSP and took a decade to reach completion (Chapter 4). The dynamics of the strategy's long process of development were approached in this thesis through two subsidiary research questions – one addressing the matter at the level of policy debates and the other at the level of interest groups. Both questions incorporated a concern not only with 'what' happened but 'why' and 'how' they happened. The subsidiary questions are addressed below.

*What political considerations animate the universalism vs. targeting debate in the NSSS?* The NSSS proposes an oxymoronic concept called 'targeted universal' that—although fielded as a compromise between targeting and universalism—is merely another name for targeting (Chapter 5). Driven by its ideological and institutional

goals, the World Bank used its loans as coercive pressure with which to ensure the policy incorporated targeting. On the domestic front, changing to universalism would have disrupted bureaucratic and political rent-seeking. Thus there was no eagerness amongst state actors to contradict the Bank either. Support for targeting was bolstered by unique ideas in the country about the un-deservingness of the rich and the function of social protection as a tool with which to reduce poverty, as opposed to increasing social solidarity. The altruistic idea that the poor deserve social protection but the rich do not result in enacting paradoxically regressive poverty targeted social protection programmes. The resultant targeting settlement is thus a product of both foreign and national rent-seeking.

*What political considerations animate the food vs. cash transfers debate in the NSSS?* Despite forming a powerful coalition, the World Bank and the Ministry of Finance failed to defend cash transfers against food transfers in the NSSS negotiations but were able to win long-term concessions on the prospect of cash transfers (Chapter 6). This is because several instances of devastating famines dating back to colonial times have created a subsistence crisis contract in Bangladesh, where the elite consider the hungry masses an existential threat to the regime. As a result, public food stocks are maintained which need to be rolled over periodically through food transfers to ensure the stocks do not rot. The relative weakness of rice farmers in this settlement on provisions, however, means with improvements in storage technology the frequency of stock turnover will decrease. Thus, the NSSS proposes a shift away from food to cash transfers in the future. This chapter demonstrated that donor demands do not yield results if they contradict paradigmatic ideas in society.

*What political concerns shape the role of donors, civil society, bureaucrats, and labour in the country's social protection system?* The key finding in this regard was that each of these actors had varying degrees of power centred on specific issues, which were revealed by studying the four reform contestations in the NSSS. Despite the specificity of the contestations, some broad conclusions can be drawn from the thesis' analysis as well.

First, although donors were instrumental in catalysing the NSSS, the policy's ultimate outcome was decided by specific political settlements rather than donor demands



(Chapter 4). Donors were motivated by ideological concerns to promote neoliberalism as well as political economy imperatives of their home countries (Chapter 7). Their power resources were their access to funds (Chapter 5) as well as their ability to set the terms of the debate through the epistemic communities they fund (Chapter 4).

Second, civil society organisations, in the form of development NGOs, were largely side-lined in the NSSS despite repeated donor appeals to include them (Chapter 7). This happened because, over the last decade, the Bangladeshi state has gained power vis-à-vis the donors and NGOs and has marginalised the latter in the policymaking arena. To cope with their diminished influence, NGOs and donors used ideas as an entry point to exert influence in policymaking, resulting in random NGO- and donor-linked programmes finding a place in the NSSS (Chapters 4 and 7).

Third, in contrast to previous research on Bangladesh, bureaucrats were found to be powerful actors in social protection policymaking. This is not only because they led the policymaking process from the domestic side but also because bureaucrats are major rent-seekers themselves. They protect personal rents, in the form of inflated pensions in the social protection budget line (Chapter 4) as well as departmental rents by not allowing any programmatic changes that would diminish their department's budgets (Chapter 5). Besides rent-seeking, they also brought forth the paradigmatic ideas present in Bangladeshi society—such as about the rich not being deserving (Chapter 5) and the importance of food stocks (Chapter 6)—into the policymaking arena. Being gatekeepers to the ministers made bureaucrats powerful too, albeit still subservient to political actors (Chapter 4).

Finally, labour was found to have very weak holding power as a result of global and local pressures (Chapter 8). A labour exclusionary settlement reigns in the country that arises from the weaknesses of the labour movement, the presence of a state-business nexus, and the hegemony of hypermobile global capital. With the constant threat of global capital relocating to other countries hovering over them, local businesses have captured the state to enforce business-friendly policies through their representatives in the state's policymaking machinery. Business-friendly, in this reading, is inimical to extending social protection for labour. Labour has been hamstrung, both internally and externally, to reduce dissent. Whilst previous research

has argued that labour is excluded from the political settlement, the main contribution of this thesis, in terms of labour, was uncovering the exclusionary processes by which the settlement is upheld during policymaking.

## **9.2 Contributions and significance**

Besides the minutiae of the findings discussed in the previous section, the thesis makes three broad contributions to the literature about the political dynamics underpinning social protection systems in the global South. In this section, I synthesise the findings to bring these contributions into conversation with the broader literature. The contributions are significant because they help conduct more accurate and fine-grained analysis of social protection politics.

### **9.2.1 Issue-specific political settlements**

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, political settlement analysis has as so far been conducted as national-level elite settlements (Khan, 2010) and domain-specific ruling coalition settlements (Lavers and Hickey, 2016). Whilst this thesis drew heavily on both approaches for the crucial insights they provide, it proposed narrowing the unit of analysis to specific policy issues to accommodate the heterogeneity in power and institutional constellations that have been difficult to include through previous approaches (Oppong, 2020). The addition of issue-specificity to political settlement analysis is, therefore, a major contribution of this thesis.

The benefit of analysing at the issue-level is evident from the findings. They reveal that an actor who is powerful with regards to one policy issue may not be powerful in another. For instance, the World Bank used its enormous targeted cash transfer project funding as a cudgel with which to embed a targeting logic in the NSSS (Chapter 5) but, despite using the same leverage, failed to convince the government to shift to cash transfers instead of food transfers (Chapter 6). Such variations in outcomes of contestations even when the actors in the contestation are the same (the Bank and the government), the leverage is the same (the US\$ 500m targeted cash transfer programme), and the policy document the contestation is centred on is the same (the NSSS), point to the importance of issue-specific analysis. Similarly, whilst

the state, through its bureaucrats and its ministers, appeared to be the final authority on policies (Chapter 4), even state powers are constrained by other factors in specific policy issues. Ministers, for example, protect their personal interests by acting in accordance with the dictates of global capital (Chapter 8). And the state is compelled to protect the demands of rice consumers in order to retain its legitimacy (Chapter 6). Each policy issue, therefore, has its own power dynamics and the holding power of actors changes in relation to each other between policy issues.

Adopting an issue-specific approach also helps overcome some of the limitations of previous research where actors who were clearly powerful had to be discarded from the final settlement because they were not part of the ruling coalition. For example, previous political settlement analysis (such as Ulriksen, 2020) had argued that bureaucrats were important in policy formation but since they were not part of the ruling coalition, they were not included as part of the political settlement. This thesis argues that, on specific policy issues, bureaucrats act as powerful rent-seekers and, therefore, are indeed part of the political settlement on those issues, irrespective of their inclusion in the ruling coalition (Chapters 4 and 5). It is possible to imagine though that, despite being untethered from the ruling coalition, there are limits to the degree of power bureaucrats can hold. Should the issue-specific settlement become a threat to the ruling coalition, it is likely the settlement will be forcefully dismantled by the rulers. However, as long as it is not a threat, it can function independent of but subordinate to the ruling coalition.

Issue-specific analysis can also help answer the questions raised in the literature about the provenance of the national social protection strategies (Chapter 4). The rising prominence of social protection in the global South policy agenda has been treated with some trepidation by researchers (Schmitt, 2020). Although the expansion of social welfare is considered a progressive development, national governments have also used social protection to further patron clientelism (Hickey and Bukenya, 2019). Conversely, the prominent Western donor-driven aspect of the agenda has revived memories of previous donor-imposed policy failures (Devereux, 2020). Thus, there is an interest in gauging who is the more powerful force driving the national social protection strategies and with what intent. However, the sheer number of programmes that are included in the national social protection strategies means attributing an entire

strategy document to one or the other actor is unlikely to be accurate. Instead, adopting an issue-specific approach helps demonstrate that the debate between donor imposition and national ownership is overly simplistic. On certain issues, donors impose their agenda whereas on other issues national governments have the final say.

### **9.2.2 Policy influence of weak and excluded organisations**

A recurrent theme in the findings was the influence of weak and excluded organisations. Political settlement analysts have argued that the power of organisations excluded from the dominant coalition impacts the stability of the settlement (Khan, 2018a; Lavers and Hickey, 2016). This study's findings extend those arguments to contribute the insight that being excluded from policymaking is not the same as having no influence on the settlement and vice versa. The average rice consumer, for instance, does not appear in the policymaking arena but they drive the logic of food transfers in the NSSS (Chapter 6). Conversely, development NGOs appear in the arena as seemingly influential actors but with demonstrably limited impact (Chapter 7). Even though the international consultants had weak holding power, their foot dragging technique was able to expand the beneficiary selection criteria to include those above the poverty line (Chapter 5). Global capital, on the other hand, never appears in the policymaking arena but has enormous influence on policymaking (Chapter 8). It is, therefore, important to not only question which organisations are powerful in a political settlement and how and why, but also which organisations are not powerful and how and why, and how the powerful and the weak interact with other. All three questions yield important insights about the political dynamics of social protection policies.

Specific types of weaknesses in competing organisations can even induce the powerful organisations in the settlement to take counter-intuitive steps. For example, the organisational weaknesses of rice farmers and garments factory workers enable particular types of exclusionary policies to flourish that are, in fact, objectively contrary to the interests of the powerful organisations in the settlement. An example is that social protection is extended to the amorphous poor, such as through targeted food and cash transfers (Chapters 5 and 6), but not to labour, even though contributory social insurance for labour is less fiscally onerous on the state's coffers

than non-contributory social assistance to the poor (Chapter 8). Similarly, the organisational weakness of farmers means the state procures the bare minimum amount of rice from them, even though this has repeatedly left the country at the mercy of global food markets with famously deleterious impact on the military-based government during the 2007-08 global food price shock (Chapter 6). Overall, this thesis' attention to the weaknesses of excluded interest groups and how they navigate the weaknesses is an important contribution to the literature.

### **9.2.3 History's influence**

Political settlement analysts strongly emphasise historical analysis. They argue history shapes the holding power of organisations (Gray, 2018) along with the institutional milieu the organisations function in (Seekings, 2020b) and the dominant ideas in society (Lavers, 2020a). This thesis has therefore paid close attention to historical developments and processes. In doing so, it has also drawn attention to the historical rootedness of several ostensibly apolitical debates. There is a tendency in the development industry to render as technical debates that are, in fact, highly political (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2007). Debates on social protection issues are also being presented as technical, design issues even though they mask deeply held ideological positions of important stakeholders (Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler, 2007). This thesis contributes to the literature by demonstrating several instances of ostensibly 'design' debates that stem from deep-seated historical and political contestations. Examples are the food and cash transfers debate, universalism and targeting debates, and the contestation about extending social insurance to labour.

Historical developments have helped explain why some institutions are unexpectedly efficacious whilst others are not. This is best demonstrated by comparing the formal institution of tripartism with the informal institution of offloading rice stocks via food transfers. On paper, tripartism is a formal institution that has protected workers' interests in many countries (Fashoyin, 2004). However, in Bangladesh, tripartism is best characterised as a failed institution. All three parties of the tripartite—the representatives of the labour unions, the state, and the business associations—advocate for one party, i.e. business, whilst the most influential party, global capital, is completely absent from tripartite negotiations (Chapter 8). Without addressing the

injustices generated by neoliberal global capitalism, attempts to solve labour's problems are doomed to fail, and yet tripartism fails to even bring global capital to the negotiating table. On the other hand, the informal institution of offloading rice stocks through food transfers is an ingenious and organic solution to the challenge of feeding a country of 163m people without unsettling the rice market (Chapter 6). The reason the informal institution works whilst the formal one does not is because of the historical context, processes, and contingencies that have shaped the political milieu in the country. Drawing on this thesis, it can be argued that future research on social protection would benefit from context-specific historical analysis as well.

### **9.3 Limitations and future research**

The study has three key limitations, which could also be seen as entry points and as potentially offering guidance to the direction of future research. The first limitation is the timeframe of the study, which only covers the policymaking stage of the NSSS and not its implementation process. Since distributional politics is revealed at the point of implementation in many cases (Grindle, 1980), and since implementation is where local-level political dynamics come to the fore, future studies of social protection policies in Bangladesh, and elsewhere, would benefit from incorporating a focus on the political dynamics of the implementation process as well. A comparative study between the politics of policymaking versus the politics of policy implementation can also reveal interesting continuities and ruptures between how central government bureaucrats conceive of social protection and how 'street level' bureaucrats, who form the public face of the state, do (Lipsky, 1980).

Studies analysing power, interests, and ideas can, by their very nature, be criticised since the vantage point of the researcher has a strong bearing on the analysis. In this instance, by focusing largely on actors immediate to the arena of policy contestation, this study has potentially missed many of the hidden aspects of contestations over the NSSS' formation (Lukes, 1974). Several other groups who have either been excluded from discussions about the NSSS or have indirectly influenced the content of the policy could not be incorporated into the present analysis. Examples of these groups are recipients of state welfare, workers in industries other than the garments industry, and rice farmers. One particular group that is conspicuously absent from this study is

the millions of students in religious seminaries across Bangladesh. These students almost invariably come from the poorest section of society and, in the absence of adequate state support, many of these seminaries also function as orphanages. In the last decade, these seminaries have gained a significant political voice (Raqib, 2020). And yet, the seminaries and their poor and orphan students are noticeably absent from the country's social protection policy discourse. Future research can investigate the causes for their absence—on whether this is a demand or supply side issue—because of its implications on the social contract between the politically consequential seminaries and the state.

Kwon, Cook and Kim's (2015) study on the politics underpinning Cambodia's national social protection strategy showed Chinese investment has significantly affected the government's holding power. The Bangladesh government has also benefited from Chinese investment. In one memorable instance, when the World Bank accused the government of corruption and cancelled a major loan to build a bridge across the river Padma, access to aid from non-traditional donors allowed the government to face down Western donors and continue building the bridge (Khan, 2017). This study, however, has solely focused on Western aid donors. Whilst non-traditional donors may not directly engage in social protection policymaking at the moment, their presence may have secondary impacts that have been missed in the analysis. As we enter a period where Western countries become more inward-looking and Asian countries adopt more expansionist policies, understanding the effect of non-traditional donors becomes all the more important. This is an avenue of inquiry future research can pursue.

#### **9.4 “I didn't want to be a purist, I wanted to be pragmatic”**

The above quote from one of the authors of the NSSS<sup>317</sup> neatly sums up the making of Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy. In the face of severe contestations, being 'pragmatic' meant eschewing normative theories and best practice programmes that populate the literature, and in their place proposing a contextually oriented and historically rooted roadmap for social protection in the country. However, being 'pragmatic' also meant adopting regressive, clientelist policies. Whether the NSSS

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<sup>317</sup> Interview with Consultant 1 (2018)

will actually be implemented is an open question at this point—and certainly worthy of future study—but it is difficult to deny that adopting the ‘pragmatic’ position allowed the document and its making to offer us an extraordinary lens with which to study the political dynamics of social protection policies in Bangladesh. At the domestic level, this study signals a need for historical contextualisation and for organic institutional development in policy thinking. At the global level, it draws attention to the mechanisms employed by neoliberal global capitalism to enforce regressive welfare policies in developing countries. The findings, therefore, offer not only insights for students of Bangladeshi politics and policies, but for developing countries more broadly.



## APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

<b>Civil servants</b>		<b>Year</b>
Civil Servant 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Economic Division</li> <li>• Cabinet Division</li> <li>• Ministry of Labour and Employment</li> <li>• Ministry of Finance</li> <li>• Department of Social Services</li> <li>• Ministry of Food</li> </ul>	2017
Civil Servant 2		2018
Civil Servant 3		2018
Civil Servant 4		2018
Civil Servant 5		2019
Civil Servant 6		2018
Civil Servant 7		2018
Civil Servant 8		2018
Civil Servant 9		2018
Civil Servant 10		2018
Civil Servant 11		2018

<b>Local and international NGOs</b>		<b>Year</b>
NGO 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Save the Children Bangladesh</li> <li>• Manusher Jonno Foundation</li> <li>• CARE Bangladesh</li> <li>• Worker Rights Consortium</li> <li>• Right to Food</li> <li>• GIZ</li> </ul>	2018
NGO 2		2018
NGO 3		2018
NGO 4		2018
NGO 5		2018
NGO 6		2018
NGO 7		2018
NGO 8		2019
NGO 9		2019

<b>National and international consultants</b>		<b>Year</b>
Consultant 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy Research Institute (PRI)</li> <li>• Economic Policy Research Institute (EPRI)</li> <li>• Global Development Institute, University of Manchester</li> <li>• Development Pathways</li> <li>• Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC)</li> <li>• Maxwell Stamp</li> </ul>	2018
Consultant 2		2018
Consultant 3		2017
Consultant 4		2017
Consultant 5		2017
Consultant 6		2018
Consultant 7		2017
Consultant 8		2018
Consultant 9		2018
Consultant 10		2017
Consultant 11		2018

<b>Ready-made garments industry</b>		<b>Year</b>
Labour activist 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trade union and federation</li> <li>• Ready-made garments factory</li> <li>• BGMEA</li> </ul>	2018
Labour activist 2		2018
Labour activist 3		2018
Factory owner 1		2018
Factory owner 2		2018
BGMEA official 1		2018
BGMEA official 2		2018

<b>Experts</b>		<b>Year</b>
Expert 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex</li> <li>• ILO</li> <li>• BRAC</li> <li>• Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)</li> <li>• Economics Research Group (ERG)</li> </ul>	2017
Expert 2		2017
Expert 3		2017
Expert 4		2017
Expert 5		2018
Expert 6		2018
Expert 7		2018
Expert 8		2018
Expert 9		2018

<b>International organisations</b>		<b>Year</b>
UN agency official 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNDP</li> <li>• World Bank</li> <li>• ILO</li> <li>• UNICEF/ILO</li> <li>• UNICEF</li> <li>• WFP</li> <li>• EU</li> <li>• DFID</li> </ul>	2017
UN agency official 2		2018
UN agency official 3		2018
UN agency official 4		2017
UN agency official 5		2017, 18
UN agency official 6		2017
UN agency official 7		2017
UN agency official 8		2019
UN agency official 9		2019
UN agency official 10		2018, 19
UN agency official 11		2018
Donor 1		2018
Donor 2		2018
Donor 3		2018

## APPENDIX B: SOCIAL PROTECTION BUDGET & BENEFICIARIES, 2019-20

<b>Social Protection Programme<sup>318</sup></b>	<b>Beneficiary (in million)</b>	<b>Budget (in million BDT)</b>
Pension for Retired Government Employees and their Families	0.63	230,100.00
Grameen Infrastructure Development	0	41,255.30
Honorarium for Freedom Fighters	0.2	33,850.50
Old Age Allowance	4.4	26,400.00
Food Friendly Programme	0.05	26,240.00
Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)	8.34	19,569.10
Vulnerable Group Development (VGD)	14.25	16,989.10
Employment Generation Programme for the Poor	0.83	16,500.00
Test Relief (TR) Cash	2.1	15,300.00
Block Allocation for Various Programme	0.04	14,630.00
Allowances for the Financially Insolvent Disabled	1.55	13,905.00
Food Subsidy	0	13,101.70
Food For Work (FFW)	1.71	12,040.80
One House One Farm	0.9	11,435.00
Allowances for the Widow, Deserted and Destitute Women	1.7	10,200.00
Secondary Education Development Programme (S.E.D.P)	4.45	10,000.00
Community Based Health Care	138.32	9,875.30

<sup>318</sup> Source: SSPS, <http://socialprotection.gov.bd/data/> retrieved on Dec 31, 2020

Development Support for Special Needs	0	9,619.90
Open Market Sales (OMS)	8.94	9,495.20
Maternal, Neo-natal, Child and Adolescent Health	69.8	9,286.90
Haor Infrastructure and livelihood Development	0.19	8,677.30
Secondary Education Sector Investment Program	0	8,500.00
Fund for Micro-Credit through PKSf	26.86	7,850.00
Income Support Program for the Poorest	1.08	7,781.00
Maternity Allowance Programme for the Poor	0.77	7,632.70
T.B., Leprosy, Communicable Non-communicable Disease	302.93	7,528.30
Work For Money (WFM)	1.58	7,500.00
Primary School Stipend	14.4	7,223.60
National Service	0.15	6,819.10
Urban Resilience Project: (DNCC & DDM)	0	6,270.50
Flood Management and Livelihood Improvement Project in Haor Area	0	5,522.30
Gratuitous Relief (GR)	5.68	5,435.90
Preferential Village Water Supply	0	5,021.70
Honorarium & Medical Allowances for Injured Freedom Fighters	0.02	4,801.50
School Feeding Programme	2.5	4,745.90
Ashroyan Project -2	1.07	4,500.10
Skills for Employment Investment Programme	0.23	4,332.00
Rural Infrastructure Development	0	4,196.40
Skill Development and Earthquake Risk Management Fund	0.02	4,000.00
Skill and Employment Programme in Bangladesh	0	3,715.40
General Relief Activities	0.02	3,696.40
Food Assistance in CTG-Hill Tracts Area	0.86	3,115.70
Family Planning Field Services Delivery	33.1	3,100.00
Fund for Climate Change	0.45	3,000.00

Clinical Contraception Services Delivery	3.46	2,860.80
Allowances for Urban Low-income Lactating Mothers	0.28	2,731.10
Block Allocation for Disaster Management	1.47	2,429.50
Maternal, Child, Reproductive and Adolescent Health	74.61	2,350.00
Social Development Foundation	0	2,350.00
Char Development and Settlement	1.02	2,272.70
Multi purpose Disaster Shelter Construction	0.03	2,100.00
Bangladesh Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (National Sanitation Project)	0	2,000.00
Child protection and child welfare	0	1,893.90
Development of the Living Standard of the Marginal People of Bangladesh	0	1,827.00
Gucchagram (Climate Victims Rehabilitation)	0.13	1,645.60
Reaching Out of School	0.56	1,562.60
Coastal Climate Resilient Infrastructure Improvement	0.03	1,555.00
Construction of Flood-Shelter in Flood Prone and River-Erosion Areas	0.26	1,551.20
Assistance for Cancer, Kidney and Liver Cirrhosis Patients	0.03	1,500.00
Tottho Apa: Empowering Women Through ICT Towards Digital Bangladesh	0	1,300.00
Special Fund for Assistance to women development & entrepreneurs	0	1,250.00
Agriculture Rehabilitation	0	1,200.00
Capitation Grants for Orphan Students in Non-gov. Orphanages	0.1	1,200.00
Child and Maternal Health & Health Management Development	0	1,079.00
Secondary Education Stipend	0	1,048.60
Urban Public Environmental Health Care (Devt. Programme)	0	1,038.00
Construction of Multi-storied Building for under privileged Muktiyoddha at Zilla/upazilla	0	1,000.00
Fund for Assistance to the Small Farmer and Poultry Farms	0.1	1,000.00
National Nutrition Services	90	960
Stipend for Disabled Students	10	956.4
Income Generating Activities for Women at Upazila Level	0.03	907.2

Varieties Relief Work	0	810
Construction of Cleaners Colony of Dhaka City Corporation	0.06	700
Second Chittagong Hill Tracts Rural Development	0.53	700
Shamaj Kallyan Parishad	0.08	700
Programme for Improving the Livelihood of Harijan, Dalit, Bede community (Bede and disadvantage community 2017-18)	0.08	671
Service and Assistance Center for Disabled	0.38	650
Grants for Residents in Government Orphanages and Other Institutions	0.02	636.3
Establishment of Autistic Academy in Bangladesh	0	600
Interest free Micro Credit Programme	0.03	580
Support to the Urban Health and Nutrition to Bangladesh	0.11	563.6
Capacity Building of Joyeeta Foundation & Construction of Joyeeta Tower	0	517.7
Ration for Shaheed Family and Injured Freedom Fighters	0.03	510
Lump Sum Provision for Development of Special Areas (Except Hill Tracts)	0.02	500
Oppressed Women and Children Welfare Fund	0	500
Special Assistance for the development of Char, Haor and undevelopment area	0.02	500
Poverty Reduction Through Inclusive and Sustainable Markets	0	494.5
Strengthening Women's Ability for Productive New Opportunities (SWAPNO)	0	430
Improved life Standard for low-income people	0	422
Agriculture Infrastructure Improvement (Bangladesh Agriculture Infrastructure Development Project)	0.09	408.5
Cash Transfer Modernization (CTM)	0	313.2
Grants for the Schools for the Disabled	0.04	280
Trust for the protection of the persons with neurodevelopmental disabilities	0	275
Rural Settlement Construction for improvement of Rural Livelihood	0	254
Housing Support	0.3	250
Programme for Livelihood Improvement of tea-garden labourers	0.05	250
Multi-sectoral Programme to Prevent on Violence Against Women (4th Phase)	0	237.8
Urban Based Marginal Women Development (Urban Based Women Development Project Phase-2 2017-18)	0.05	206.4
National Legal Aid Services	0.08	205

Establishment/Re establishment for the Sarkari Shishu Paribar /Baby Home	0	200
Providing Primary Health, Reproductive Health and Nutrition Services to Underprivileged Woman and Children	0	197
Early Learning for Child Development	0.05	196.3
Employment of Ultra Poor in Northern Areas	0.01	187.4
Strengthening Public Financial Management for Social Protection	0	170.8
Welfare Trust for Physical disabilities	0	150
Universal Pension Insurance Scheme	0	120
Day Care Program for Lower and Middle Income Working Women (Establishment of 20 Child Daycare Center Project 2016-17)	0.01	117.4
Non-Bengali Rehabilitation	0.02	100
Development of Haji Nowab Ali Khan Orphanage'	0	70
Women's Skill Based Training For Livelihood	0	68
Promoting Nutrition Sensitive Social Security & Policy Support Programme	0	63.2
Child Development Center	0	63
Micro-credit for Women Self- employment	0.03	60
Programme for Improving the Livelihood of Trans Gender (Hijra)	0.01	56
Development of living standards of extinct enclaves	0	40.1
Rehabilitation and Creation of Alternative Employment for Beggars Profession	0.01	40
Street Children Rehabilitation Programme	0	40
Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme	0	33.5
Joyeeta Foundation	0.01	33
Generation Break through	0.01	30
Higher Secondary Stipend	0	28.8
Training programs for autistic children and women through pilot training centers	0	28.5
The sustainable socio-economic development and rehabilitation programs of underprivileged and poor disabled and autistic people through special education, health care and various training programs	0	23.7
Fund for the Welfare of Acid Burnt Women and Disabled	0.03	16.5
Construction of Vocational Training and Rehabilitation Centre, CRP-Manikgonj	0	10

## APPENDIX C: BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL DONORS

### *Bilateral donors*<sup>319</sup>

#### 1. North American countries:

- USA
  - United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
  - United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)
  - Mennonite Central Committee (MCC)
- Canada
  - Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
  - International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

#### 2. European Countries:

- Belgium
- Finland
- Germany
  - GIZ
  - KfW
- Switzerland
- The Netherlands
- United Kingdom
  - Department for International Development (DFID)

#### 3. NORDIC Countries:

- Denmark
- Norway
  - Nordic Development Fund (NDF)
- Sweden
  - Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA)

#### 4. Middle East Counties (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE):

- Saudi Fund for Development (SFD)
- Kuwait Fund for Development (KFD)
- Abu Dhabi Fund for Development (ADFD)

#### 5. Asian Countries:

- China
- India
- Japan

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<sup>319</sup> Retrieved on January 10, 2021 from ERD: <https://erd.gov.bd/site/page/758c476a-3427-455f-85ae-daf4fc863e72/Bilateral-Development-Partners>



- Japan International Cooperation agency (JICA)
  - Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC)
  - Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE)
  - Japanese Grant Aid for Human Resource Development Scholarship (JDS)
  - South Korea
    - Korean International Cooperation Agency (KOICA)
    - Economic Development Cooperation Fund (EDCF)
  - Thailand
    - Thailand International Development Cooperation Agency (TICA)
  - Malaysia
    - Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program (MTCP)
  - Pakistan
6. Australia
- Australian Aid - Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

*Multilateral donors*<sup>320</sup>

1. Asian Development Bank (ADB)
2. International Monetary Fund (IMF)
3. Islamic Development Bank (IDB)
  - Islamic Corporation for the Development (ICD) of the Private Sector
  - Islamic Corporation for the Insurance of Investment & Export Credit (ICIEC)
  - Islamic Research and Training Institute (IRTI)
  - International Islamic Trade Finance Corporation (ITFC)
  - World WAQF Foundation
4. Local Consultative Group in Bangladesh (LCG-Bangladesh)
5. United Nations Organizations (UNO):
  - United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
  - United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
  - United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF)
  - United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
  - United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
  - United Nations-Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN-ESCAP)
  - World Food Programme (WFP)
  - United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)
  - Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)
  - International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
  - International Labour Organization (ILO)
  - United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

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<sup>320</sup> Retrieved on January 10, 2021 from ERD: <https://erd.gov.bd/site/page/d9ce537-bc6e-45f1-925c-1d10caaabf41/Multilateral-Development-Partners>

- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
- United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)
- United Nations Volunteers (UNV)
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- International Trade Centre (ITC)
- World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)
- World Trade Organization (WTO)
- World Health Organization (WHO)

6. Middle East Sources:

- OPEC Fund for International Development (OFID)

7. European Commission (EC)

8. Commonwealth:

- Commonwealth Secretariat
- Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation (CFTC)

9. Colombo Plan:

- Colombo Plan Council
- Colombo Plan Staff College for Technician Education (CPSC)

10. World Bank Group

- The World Bank
- International Development Association (IDA)
- International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)
- International Finance Corporation (IFC)
- The Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA)
- The International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID)

## **APPENDIX D: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Participant profile**

- How long have you been working for this organisation?
- What is your role here?

### **General views on the policy**

- Have you heard of the national social security strategy? Or What are your memories of the process of developing the national social security strategy?
- If yes, how do you/your organisation view the policy? Why?

### **Specific contribution to the policy**

- Were you/your organisation involved in writing this policy? (such as by advising, consulting, researching etc.)
- If yes, what was the specific role you/your organisation had?
- What was your aim for this policy?
- What were the challenges you faced? Why?

### **Stakeholders and interests**

- Who were the key actors, in your view, of drafting this policy?
- What were their roles?
- What were your areas of agreement with other stakeholders? Why?
- What were your areas of disagreement with other stakeholders? Why?
- Whose views were prioritised? By whom? Why?
- Whose views were side lined? By whom? Why?

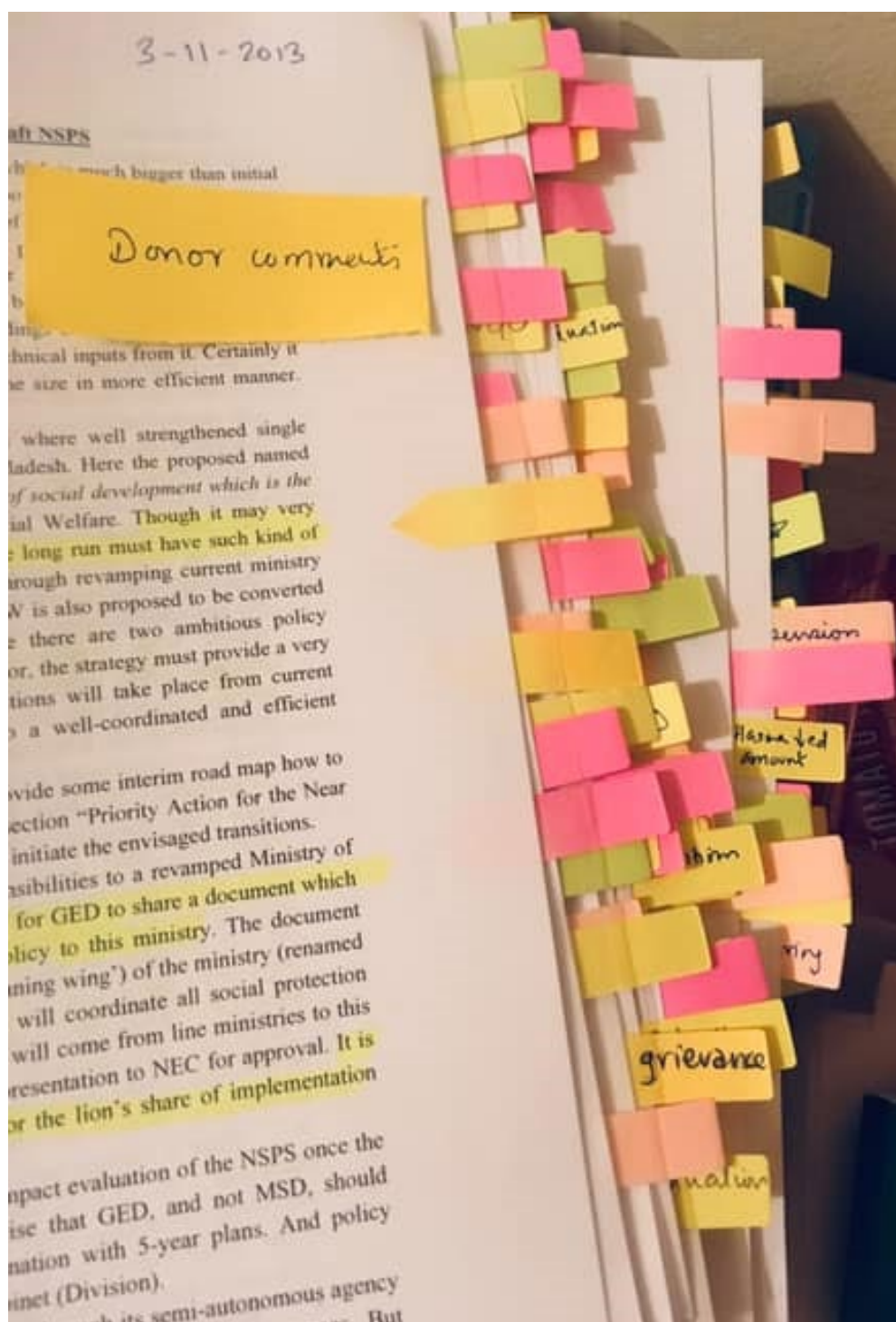
### **Snowball**

- Who else do you think I should talk to?

### **Debrief**

- Do you have any questions for me?

## APPENDIX E: HAND CODED DOCUMENTS



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