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# Participatory Exclusion – Elite capture of participatory approaches in the aftermath of Cyclone Sidr

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## **Participatory Exclusion – Elite capture of participatory approaches in the aftermath of Cyclone Sidr**

Nadiruzzaman, M and Wrathall, D

### **Abstract**

‘Nature does not discriminate, but humans do’ – a deliberately echoed sentiment in an area affected by Cyclone Sidr - problematizes the practice of resource distribution in post-disaster situations. While relief and rehabilitation services have the objective of ‘building back better’, the possibility of elite-capture of resource distribution channels, jeopardizes humanitarian initiatives. This paper explores the political economy of post-Sidr interventions from an ethnographic account. The paper establishes links between power networks and access to resources in the study area, finding that marginality is a product of ongoing disaster interventions which favour the relatively well-off over the structurally poor. Ultimately, humanitarian assistance channels resources through established power networks, thus reinforcing them and producing uneven resilience among different social strata. This paper offers important insights for redesigning the distribution of humanitarian assistance.

**Keywords:** Humanitarian assistance, participation, patron-client relationship, marginality, Cyclone Sidr

“Those who died in Sidr were blessed by God, as they escaped from being in a living hell like us” – Anwara, an elderly lady shares her grieves while explaining her post-Sidr experiences.

### **A. Introduction**

Post-disaster relief in various forms such as food and money, is designed to help those most in need. The concept of relief oscillates along a spectrum between two extremes– one portraying the receiving end as relief-dependent and helpless (*viz* disaster pornography) and the other

viewing recipients as determined, optimistic and resilient people who wish to return to prosperity with little assistance from outside. Both of these extremes are of course donor-centric imaginaries. This research was designed to discover the first hand experiences of affected people during the relief process. The paper considers the following questions. How is relief

allocation determined and by whom?  
Where does control over relief originate?  
How do the power groups operate, compete and negotiate, locally, regionally and nationally within this process? Who is eliminated from the loop?

In traditional cyclone management (GoB, 2007; 2008bcd), the focus is on building cyclone shelters and embankments; disseminating warnings; and distributing post disaster relief and rehabilitation supports. This focus sharply distinguishes between disaster and development management and views disaster through a separate lens. Despite poverty being identified as one of the key triggers in causing disaster (Blair, 2005; Chambers, 2006; Gaillard et al., 2010; Sen, 1981; Wisner, 1993; Wisner et al., 2004), disaster management is erroneously separated from ongoing development activities. However, the experience of disaster and the need for relief is embedded in social, economic and political marginalization, which can limit people's livelihood options, force them to explore alternatives, limit their capacity to cope with adverse situations and make it harder to withstand disaster damage.

Gaillard et al. (2010) criticize the 'paradigm of extremes', where technocrats from diverse disciplinary backgrounds mainly emphasise narratives of hazard-induced destruction, while the 'unnatural'

day-to-day pressures (O'Keefe et al., 1976) on people's livelihoods, which make them more susceptible to any extreme event, remain unacknowledged. Everyday livelihood pressures include: access to resources, income earning opportunities, resource scarcity, unequal distribution, wider market pressures, power struggles, environmental variability, patron-client networks and corruption. Thus, the practicalities of people's livelihoods do not exist in isolation from the wider political economy (Adger and Brown, 2009).

Cyclones have a very visible effect on human life. But what we see as the physical manifestation is not necessarily a reliable indicator of the collective footprint of long-term social, economic, political and natural processes. The aims of this paper are: (1) to show how power networks influence distribution of resources; and (2) to show that a received or uncritical understanding of community participation can lead to counter-productive post disaster and humanitarian outcomes. This paper explores local political dynamics and power relations that are linked to resource distribution and livelihoods, revealing embedded social, economic and political marginalization at the study site, which held people back from recovering after Cyclone Sidr. In fact, politics and power relations between individuals, groups and

communities determine access to resources, livelihood opportunities and shape the relationship with the surrounding environment. The paper concludes by arguing that political and power-laden interests inform the local social order and - during cyclones - resource distribution (Arens and Beurden, 1977; Bode, 2002; Ellis, 2012).

## **B. Participatory exclusion**

The conceptual key to understanding how participatory approaches can be employed as active tools of exclusion is marginality. The term ‘marginality’ connotes something at the edge, insignificant and inferior. The Macmillan English Dictionary (2007, p. 921) defines it as a transitive verb, ‘to marginalize’, to make someone or something seem unimportant or irrelevant, or to prevent someone from having power or influence. The use of the term in vulnerability studies is rooted in the 1980s environmental justice movement and echoes explicit ethical terrains in locating environmental problems across the globe, such as the lack of entitlements during the Bengal and the Sahel famines (Sen, 1981); failed market mechanisms in the manifestation of droughts in Nigeria (Watts, 1983); or the political economy of soil erosion and land degradation in Nepal (Blakie, 1985; Blakie and Brookfield, 1987). From its initial uses, researchers

have applied the term in the Bangladesh context including, Arens and Beurden (1977), Barkat (2000), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) (1983), Bode (2002), Blair (2005) and Hartmann and Boyce (1983), exploring marginality through the lens of social justice in regard to shifting poverty and access to resources. The fundamental insight on marginality is that vulnerability arises from differential access to resources and opportunities and an understanding that power mediates this access (Bryant and Bailey, 1997). Therefore, a group’s relative entitlement, enfranchisement and empowerment form the basis for access to resources within their society and this interrelated tripartite explains vulnerability. Consequently, societies disproportionately impose a condition of ‘permanent emergency’ on the most excluded members of society, which is merely revealed by natural hazards (Mustafa, 1998; Watts and Bohle, 1993; Wisner, 1993).

Those at-risk become marginalized along at least four pathways: geographically – they live in marginal, hazard-prone areas; socially – they are poor and discriminated against in terms of class, ethnicity, age, kinship and network; economically – they lack access to resources; and politically – their voice is not heard and excluded from

political processes (Robbins, 2012).

Gaillard et al. continue:

“...people (from the Global South) are vulnerable to the impacts of hazards because they are marginalised...geographically because they have been forced by economic and social forces to live in places that are threatened by natural hazards (e.g. steep slopes, ravines, flood plains). They are socially and culturally marginalised because they come from minority groups whose culture and local knowledge is considered ‘inferior’ and they may not even speak the dominant language. Economically they are marginalised because they are poor and have little or nothing to invest in safer houses or to fall back on for recovery after disaster; and marginalised politically because their voice is not recognised in policy debates” (Gaillard et al., 2010, p. 68)

Marginality can exist as a single dimension or as a combination of dimensions, with forms of marginality interacting to produce and exacerbate exposure to risk and to accelerate vulnerability.

The countervailing effects of inclusion and vulnerability are illustrated in many diverse contexts, such as the ignored urban middle-class in flood management in Bangladesh

(Cook, 2010); differential impacts of the 1980s West African drought on excluded sedentary farmers versus nomads (Wisner, 2009); political exclusion of black South African women (McEwan, 2003); exclusion of women from development planning, poverty and resource struggles in the North Lampung (Elmhirst, 2001); the exclusion and production of deprivation and death in 1995 Chicago heat wave (Klinenberg, 2002); and many others. All of these findings echo marginality as exclusion from the power and decision-making process that determines individuals’ or groups’ access to resources.

Sustainable livelihoods research has popularised the use of participatory interaction with communities to address pressing problems. According to sustainable livelihoods approaches, cycles of marginality can only be arrested by ensuring hands-on participation in decision-making processes (Mercer et al., 2008).

Though marginality and processes of marginalization must be distinguished from extreme poverty (Cook, 2010; Elmhirst, 2002; McEwan, 2003), livelihood research identifies a correlation between levels of poverty and access to resources (Elmhirst, 2001; Howell, 2001; Wisner, 2009). The above theoretical discussion suggests a two-way communication between the policy makers and the community to create

an appropriate disaster policy, which must advocate a participatory research approach to understand the lives of poor, at-risk people. The government of Bangladesh has recognised the need for participatory approaches for sustainable development, and has already made gestures towards this kind of approach in community risk assessments that seek to ‘build back better’ (GoB, 2007; GoB, 2008abd; Rector, 2008). Theoretically, a participatory approach needs to be emancipatory by defusing power relations and ensuring joint ownership between the researcher and the community (Pelling, 2007); however, as this paper demonstrates, this is not the orientation of participatory methods in post-disaster circumstances.

### **C. Power Networks and Relief Distribution**

Henry Kissinger, the former US Secretary of State (1973-77), is infamous among Bangladeshi people, and is often referred to, for labelling Bangladesh as ‘a basket case’ for failing to use international aid efficiently and transparently. Certainly, the quote has to be contextualized in the geopolitical climate of the Cold War, the US stance against Bangladesh over its 1971 liberation war and its aftermath under the Mujib regime. However, Arens and Beurden (1977), in a rather powerful and nuanced way, showed how poor rural marginal groups are trapped within tightly

knitted patron-client networks. This research has been echoed in Hartmann and Boyce’s (1983) *A Quiet Violence* and BRAC’s (1983) *The Net*. These findings have focused on power structures within a rural setting and have inspired Bode (2002) and Lewis and Hossain (2008ab), who later contributed to the idea of the ‘patron-client network’ by portraying the flexibility and evolution of the network in terms of its structural rigidity, extent, spatiality and the philosophical stance of the researcher. Until the 1980s, local power elitism was thought to be inherited, well-knitted and historically confined within a few families. However, later scholarship revealed that traditional local leadership can be challenged by newly emerged power networks, which evolve through their affiliation with the wider institutional networks of partisan politics, NGOs, businesses and so on.

This paper considers the power networks’ deliberate use of exclusion and marginality in ordering resources in a post-disaster context as its starting point. Taking into account these power networks, Figure 1 raises questions about: (1) the type of power relation between the NGO ‘researcher’ and the respondents; (2) the power relations among the respondents where age and gender are clearly very influential factors; (3) an appropriate environment where the respondents are

comfortable to interact; and (4) issues of research ethics associated with this focus group. The basic argument of this paper is that superficial forms of inclusion (namely participatory action research) can be actively employed to exclude specific

peoples from access to resources that become available in the aftermath of a cyclone and thus reinforce marginality. In fact, the tools of participatory development have been expropriated by local elites to create a sort of ‘participatory exclusion’.



*Figure 1: Focus Group Discussion with SIDR victims*  
*Source: Rector, 2008:8*

#### **D. The terror of Cyclone Sidr**

On 15 November 2007, coastal Bangladesh was devastated by Cyclone Sidr, a Category 4 storm, which swept across the western coast and ripped through the heart of the country with 155 mph (248 kph) winds which triggered up to 20 feet (6 metre) tidal surges (Paul, 2009). The number of deaths caused by Sidr is estimated at 3,406 with 871 missing and over 55,000 people sustaining physical injuries (GoB, 2008d). An estimated 1.87 million livestock and poultry perished and

crops on 2.4 million acres suffered partial or complete damage. The storm also caused power outages that resulted in a near-countrywide blackout lasting over 36 hours (Natural Hazards Observer, 2008).

The Joint Damage Loss and Needs Assessment Mission, led by the World Bank, estimated the total cost of the damage caused by Cyclone Sidr at US\$1.7 billion, a figure that represents about three per cent of the total gross national product of Bangladesh (GoB, 2008d). More than two-thirds of the disaster damage was

physical and one-third was economic with most damage and losses incurred in the private sector. Nearly two million people lost income and employment in the most severely impacted districts.<sup>1</sup> The effects of the cyclone were highly concentrated in the districts of Bagerhat, Barguna, Patuakhali, and Pirojpur (see Figure 2). All affected coastal districts already recorded higher poverty rates than the national average (GoB, <sup>2</sup>2008d).

The villages along the Boleshwar River have experienced huge damage and loss, our field site is one of those villages. The cyclone affected every family in our field site. Interviews with the survivors and emergency relief agencies reveal that many of the survivors had only the clothes that they were wearing, no food to eat and no money to buy anything. Intruding salt water had contaminated drinking water ponds; crops and seeds, fishing boats and nets were either destroyed or washed away. Sidr had swept away all they had.

On 9 July 2008, eight months after cyclone Sidr, the functional administrative unit (called *Upazila*<sup>3</sup>) of our field site published

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<sup>1</sup> Districts are the second largest administrative unit in Bangladesh, with an average population of 2.5 million.

<sup>3</sup> Upazila, is the most functional tier of the Bangladesh Local Government system, it consists of several Unions. The Union is often abbreviated as UP (Union Parishad), the lowest tier of the Local Government structure in Bangladesh. A UP is divided into nine areas called Wards. One or more villages form a Ward. Any resource from the government or outside can

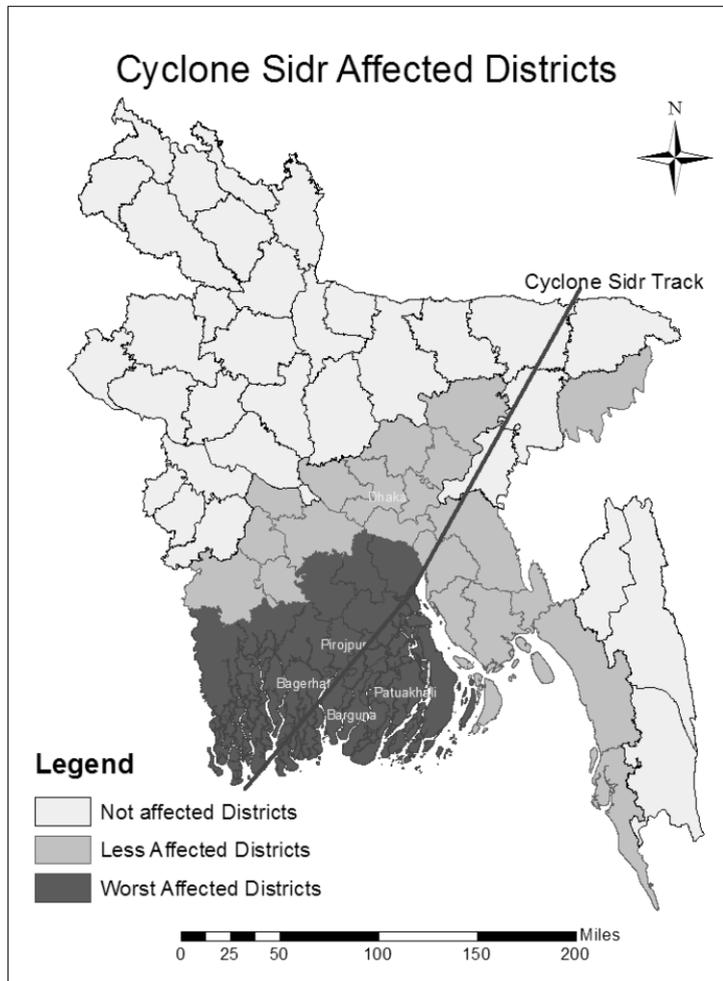
a report on the accomplished and ongoing rehabilitation projects within its jurisdiction. According to that report, around Taka 111 million (approximately £1m) of cash had been distributed among affected families. In addition, they had been provided with emergency relief, such as dry foods, children's food, water, water purifiers, garments, blankets, tents, kitchen items, and so on. Parallel to this emergency relief distribution, the *Upazila* also received seeds, power tillers, irrigation pumps, livestock, sewing machines, trawlers and nets to enable them to start engaging in different livelihood activities and restart their lives. Naturally, the amount of relief received in no way matched the economic losses. In Bangladesh, any major disaster relief comes from the government through the Prime Minister's relief fund, in addition to NGOs who also provide relief money from individual philanthropists and international donors. To bridge the gap between losses and resources, government agencies and NGOs frequently run rehabilitation schemes, for example, old-age and widows' allowances, Vulnerable Group Development (VGD), Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF), food for work, vulnerable child funds, elderly education

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flow to the local level only through the Upazila. It has a quasi-administrative structure with a government bureaucrat as a chief executive (called UNO), an elected Chairman and the local Member of Parliament (MP) as the executive advisor of the Upazila council.

programmes and vocational training schemes. However, it is important to

explore the distribution mechanisms of these resources.



*Figure 2: Cyclone Sidr Affected Districts*  
*Source: Nadiruzzaman and Paul, 2013*

From post-Sidr official reports, we know the financial sum of aid relief spent under some categories and sub-categories.

However, we do not know whether relief was allocated according to need or through kinships and affiliations within power networks. The ethnographic strategy of

inquiry in this paper was designed to characterize the mechanisms of allocation for relief resources.

This paper uses two cases to illustrate the power dynamics in relief allocation and gives insight into participatory forms of allocation as a mechanism for exclusion.

The first case is that of Asiya, a widow at the field site, is living in a 10x15 square foot single-room house with six children. Her eldest son is only fourteen years old and is the main income earner for this seven-person family. Asiya's husband was severely injured when cyclone Sidr struck and was hospitalised the following day. The family could not afford to keep him in hospital for more than two days and consequently he returned home and died a week later. However, Asiya has not received any money from the emergency relief fund meant to be distributed among the households who lost family members in the cyclone. Nor have her children received money from the Sidr orphan scheme. Nevertheless, fund administrators ruled differently in the case of Moushumi, a 12-year old granddaughter of an influential community figure, living a few doors away from Asiya. Moushumi despite not meeting criteria of either fund became a beneficiary of both. Moushumi's grandfather defends her eligibility for those two funds:

“Moushumi's father absconded after her mother's death. I am bearing all her costs. Besides, she is quite grown up now and I need to arrange the costs for her wedding. And, you know, *Haulader Bari's*<sup>4</sup> wedding

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<sup>4</sup>*Haulader* is a surname and *Bari* means house. However, when these two nouns sit together, it

needs to be a little lavish, which others (within the village) would notice.”

By contrast, Asiya explains her future plans as:

“You see, I had to borrow a *pira*<sup>5</sup> from my neighbour to offer you to sit. My eldest son is only fourteen and he works as a labourer in the forest and out at sea. If he falls sick, we will starve, so I am sending my second eldest son with him, who is only twelve, to increase our income and build some savings. If everything runs smoothly over the next four years, I will buy a small boat and some fishing nets so that they can go fishing in the river.”

The two divergent stories of Asiya and Moushumi bring to the forefront the question of objectivity, intention, ethics and governance of relief distribution. Their

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connotes a *gusthi* (Bode, 2002), generally a patrilineal kinship network. Despite its members living in different houses and maintaining separate individual household accounts, they are connected together through the communal essence of their kinship. The oldest parental home of a kinship lineage, despite being split among its decedents, as a whole is often referred to as the physical entity of that kinship. For example, *Haulader Bari* (see Figure 3) refers to a family kinship which dominates the power network at the field site, although it does not have any definite spatial location because the main compound was washed away by the adjacent river many years ago and since then its members have lived on their own lands discretely plotted within the village. The house of the oldest influential member of that kinship is now considered as the new icon of the *Haulader Bari*.

<sup>5</sup> A flat wooden plinth offered to guests to sit on.

stories hint at how power, not humanitarian impulses, plays a paramount role in the allocation of relief distribution in Bangladesh.

## **E. Methods**

Data presented here are based on the following ethnographic methods, participatory observational data, daily interactions and interviews with key informants. Data were gathered in three different ways: (1) as a participant observer (Arens and Beurden, 1977); (2) learning through talking to people (Crang and Cook, 2007); and (3) archival research. There were some unfavourable practicalities to tape recording interviews and focus group discussions. Therefore, observations and informal discussions were the main research tools. The researcher lived with the community for a relatively long period of time, working as a school teacher. Having been distinguished (as harmless) from other 'outsiders' such as NGO workers, government officials, journalists and philanthropists, the researcher had an opportunity to understand the local power dynamics, through participating in social and familial events and to work as a mediator to draw a quotidian picture of daily rhythms. This study is conducted in accordance with the ethical principles set forth by the Graduate Committee of the

Geography Department, Durham University.

The research was designed to investigate the meaning and context of disaster responses in every day lived experience. To understand the thrust of any interventions with regard to disaster preparedness, we engaged with fundamental questions: How was the intervention designed and for whom? What were the considerations in designing them? Who participated in the design process? What was their political positionality? Who was excluded and why? This analysis provided a multidimensional view for exploring how respondents experienced these phenomena and gave insight into how the phenomena are intricately connected together as a whole system, or more appropriately, as an ecology.

### **1. Field sites**

The data are based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in a southern coastal village in Bangladesh. The fieldwork (September 2009 – April 2010) was conducted by the first author, after two consecutive cyclones in November 2007 (Cyclone Sidr) and May 2009 (Cyclone Aila). The field site village has been experiencing frequent riverbank erosion, the river has pushed in approximately half a mile in the last few decades leaving many

people landless. Since the storms, the field site has only a small amount of cultivable land. As a result, many people have become wage labourers, illegal tree fellers in the nearby forest and fishermen in the river or in the Bay of Bengal. This village was one of the hardest hit by Cyclone Sidr in terms of death toll and destruction; several hundred people died and only four houses of brick and cement were left standing. The village mosque was also a

concrete structure but it was located by the river and Sidr left no trace of its existence. Following Cyclone Sidr, several downstream villages along the Boleshwar River have received significant media attention and thus greater intervention by government and NGOs for reconstruction. The affected community has a well-knitted kinship network and local political power dynamics, which has facilitated access to development and rehabilitation resources.

*Table 1: Field Site Population in Four Consecutive Census Years*

Area	Census Year			
	1974	1981	1991	2001
The Field Site	1524	1756	2241	2314
Affiliate Union	15949	19693	25252	24090
Affiliate Upazila	71177	85810	107856	114083

According to the statistics, the field site village experienced significant change over twenty years (1981-2001). Its overall population increased (see Table 1), its unemployment rate remained the same (approximately 16 per cent), the number of agricultural farmers dropped dramatically from 141 to 62, household labourers increased from 406 to 567, and importantly, dependence on the forest increased from 50

to 451. This picture indicates an economic polarization at the local level which points to increased poverty and reliance on nature for resource extraction.

## **F. Findings**

The following paragraphs discuss the local power networks in the field site and their influence on relief distribution. Lack of knowledge about local political power

dynamics can marginalize the ultra-poor. Government and NGOs utilize rehabilitation funds to try to address all levels of vulnerability, but strong patron-client relationships, a paucity of accountability and inefficient or insufficient monitoring systems create bottlenecks in flows of relief schemes. Here, power includes agency in a decision-making environment with respect to activity, dispute resolution, resource allocation, or the practice of social norms, which is typically expressed at the level of a collection of households, a *samaj* (explained below). This power or agency can be expressed informally through social networks and formally through institutional affiliations.

## **2. Power through Formal and Informal Agencies**

Kinship is one of the fundamental building blocks in a wider social order and is primarily expressed through the male family line (*ghusti* is the local term, related to *bari*, see footnote). The *ghusti* often has some physical expression in a residential neighbourhood, called a *para* - where people from the same family tree inhabit composite dwellings. Marriage within and between *ghusti* or *para* often plays a major role in extending *ghusti* networks and strengthening social capital (Bode, 2002). Thus, large farm households are likely to

retain an elongated joint structure; in contrast, poorer households are likely to have a segregated nuclear structure. The headman of a mid-scale farm household usually exercises power within the household and its threshold - the neighbouring households, which directly and/or indirectly depend on the big farm household and obey its decisions - together these households compose a *samaj*. Factions of interests among several powerful individuals within a *ghusti* can clash, split apart and different factions from previous rival *ghusti* may merge together. This factionalism in leadership eventually divides former *samaj* into several parts. For example, Islam (2002) suggests that ten Muslim *samaj* in 1947 divided into 17 in 1975-76 and further separated into 34 in 1985.

Disputes over control of resources can drive the *samaj* to break up but these may be resolved through a *shalish*, a constitutionally endorsed rural version of the judicial system, represented by a panel to adjudicate over disputes: *Shalish* has both formal and informal versions. Formally, *shalish* was first accommodated at the *Union Parishad* (UP) level judiciary system in 1961 by the 'Shalish Court Ordinance', which was then replaced by the 'Village Court Ordinance' in 1976. According to the Act, after a case is filed in

the village court, the UP Chairman calls the *shalish* and asks both groups/persons to attend. In addition, s/he asks both of them to appoint two jurors and one elected member of that UP, making a jury of five members. If the UP Chairman refuses to chair the court or if any confusion arises over her/his neutrality, the *Upazila Nirbahi Officer* (UNO) will appoint another elected member of that UP to conduct the *shalish*. If the verdict is a 4:1 vote majority there will be no chance to appeal, but at 3:2 an appeal can be placed in the formal lower court within 30 days of the verdict (Chaodo, 2006). However, the Act has never been implemented successfully, resulting in a long queue of formal court cases (Chaodo, 2006). However, in practice, an informal norm of *shalish* is widely accepted. Generally, in a dispute, both groups call upon a few local elites to speak on their behalf. Such an advocate is called a *salishdar*. The *salishdars* sit together, argue in favour of their clients and agree upon a final decision, which the disputed groups abide by. The wave of politicized local government institutions has weakened the reputation of the *shalish*, though this Act legally brought the elected body to prominence instead of simple influence of wealth and power. These dynamics of informal local power have a reciprocal relation with the formal local institutions like the Ward, UP and Upazila.

The main reason for labelling formal and informal institutions as reciprocal is embedded in the history of local leadership in rural Bangladesh (Nadiruzzaman, 2008). Both institutions have mutually shaped each other and leadership has changed mainly through individuals' command and control over particular resources, which were the key drivers of the economy. For example, since the beginning of cooperative cultivation in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, cooperative managers, model farmers and tractor drivers started emerging as new leaders. Promotion of partisan political activists of different political regimes at the local level of reformed local government institutions, brought new faces to the forefront and, where convenient, also engrossed existing *ghusti* leaders (Bode, 2002; Nadiruzzaman, 2008), making local power dynamics difficult to determine. Here the issue is not why power is moving from one hand to another, but rather how this shift of power is only helping those within the power loop, at the expense of the grassroots' entitlements.

### **3. Role of Development Agencies in Local Power Dynamics**

It is not only the government or the political parties who patronize the rural elites; NGOs often contribute to bias in the political system. NGOs recruit local

volunteers to help implement projects, for instance in the selection of beneficiaries and information dissemination and thus, they empower those volunteers with information, new connections and access to resources. These volunteers predominantly come from the affluent section of the community. Figure 3 and 4 show risk assessment and rehabilitation meetings of two different NGOs. Interestingly, the dominating faces and names in these pictures almost completely overlap with Figure 5, which is a flow diagram explaining the local power dynamics of the field site. NGOs do not actively exclude volunteers from marginal groups but poor people do not have much free time for volunteering as their primary concern is to meet their basic needs, for example, ensuring they have enough to eat. NGOs have limited opportunity to work independently and the upper strata of the beneficiary community consume a proportion of their service deliveries -The previous case of Asiya and Moushumi is an example of this. Besides, NGOs are strategically forced to compromise their objectivity because of both informal political pressure and formal obligations to the Upazila administration. Thus, the local political dynamic is often reflected in NGO operations even though, strictly speaking, relief operations are outside the

administrative jurisdiction of local authorities.

Government and NGOs do not address basic marginalization processes in their disaster preparedness framework. For example, the Boleshwar fishing community is threatened by a particular kind of fishing net practice, which is the consequence of a vicious local power structure. After the devastation of Cyclone Sidr, the Boleshwar people received fishing equipment either as aid or a loan. But their continuing struggle for survival is symbolized by the issues around the *dhora jal*, a local fixed drift net. Despite being in the majority, the *vasha jal* (floating fishing net) users are frequently disadvantaged when their gear gets caught up in to the *dhora jal*, which are illegal but supported by corrupt local officials. Therefore, marginalized fishermen remain caught in a cycle of economic vulnerability.

#### **4. Role of External Power Network in Development Schemes**

Like any typical rural political setting, our field site's power network and development decisions are highly influenced by its affiliate Upazila. Figure 6 gives a brief picture of different power networks on the basis of 2009 Upazila election. In the UP election 2003, Anwar Panchait, Mozammel and Ismail Khalifa contested the

chairmanship of the affiliate Union, and it was Anwar Panchait who assumed power. Mosharof was elected Ward member in the same election, against four others (Shahjahan, Awal Jomaddar, Lutfor Rahman and Ishaq Shikdar) from the then ruling party, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Being an activist of the then opposition Awami League (AL), Mosharof had to maintain a liaison with Anwar. Even the chairmanship of the school committee changed from Ishaq Shikdar (BNP) to Khaleque Haulader (AL).

In the 2009 Upazila council election, a majority of local elites at the field site supported Mozammel but he was defeated by Kamal Akon, who, as a result, cannot expect a warm welcome from the AL-

centric elites of that village. These local leaders have a network with the local Member of Parliament (MP) through Mozammel. It is important to mention here that MPs and Upazila Chairmen have traditionally been rivals, from the outset of the Upazila system. The local MP is an advisor of the Upazila council and at a certain point he has to negotiate with the Chairman for the sake of their mutually assured survival. In such reality, the number of their clients increases according to the number of beneficiaries who they have recommended to receive from various governmental rehabilitation schemes. Eventually, marginal people who do not have access to them and/or have voted for a defeated group, particularly the opposition, become alienated from those schemes.

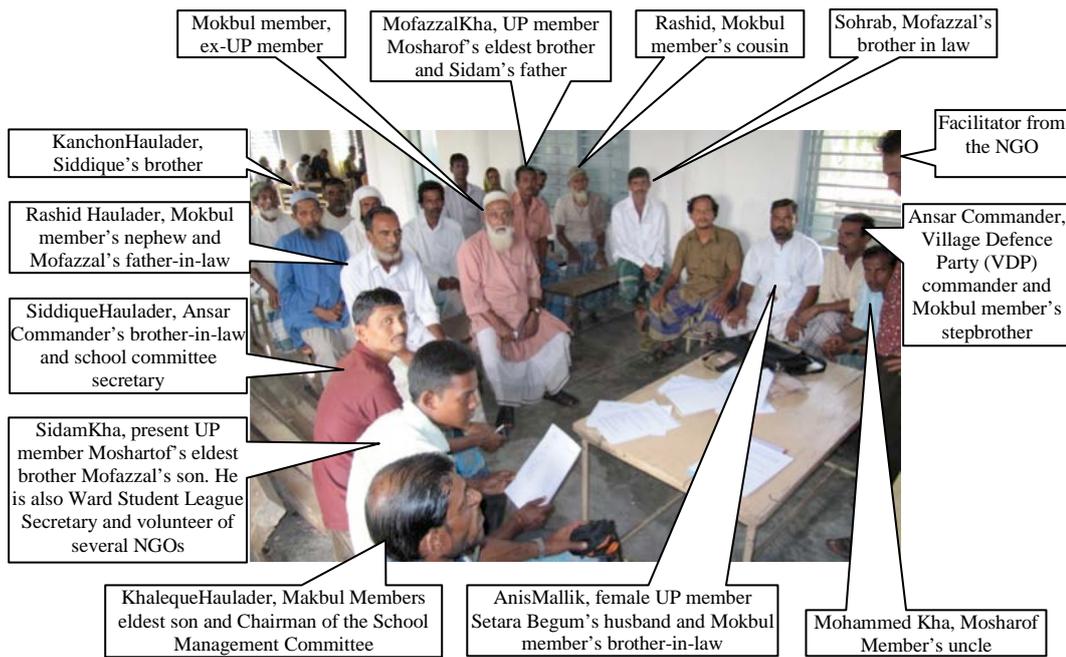


Figure 3: Community Risk Assessment Meeting facilitated by a National NGO, before launching an intervention programme at the field site.  
 Source: Author's own



Figure 4: Meeting on Rehabilitation Support by an International NGO. People who are present in this meeting, but out of focus on the moderator's row, are Mokbul Member, Mosharof Member, Sidam, Asgor and KhalequeHaulader.  
 Source: Author's own

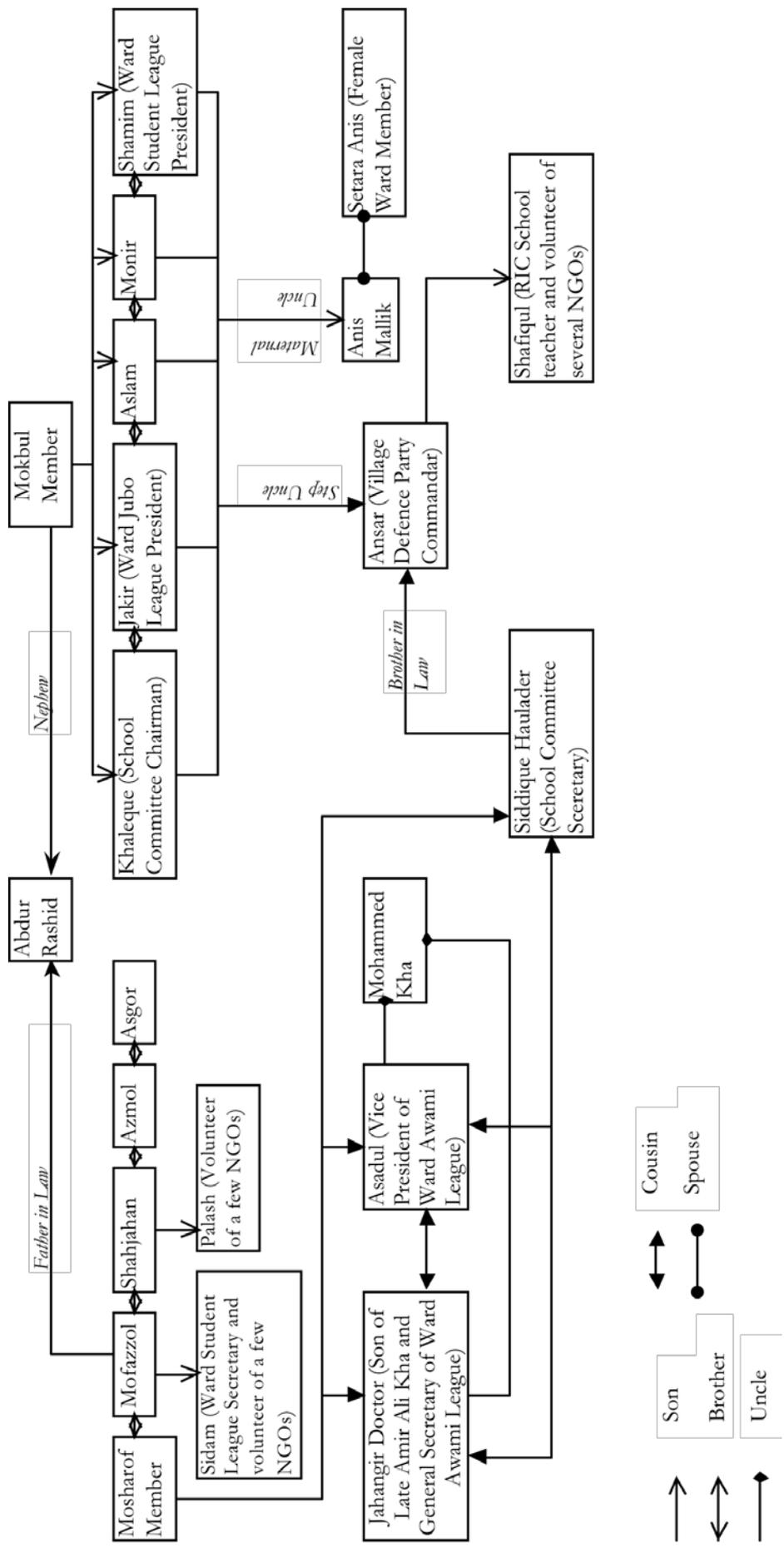


Figure 5: A model of kinship network at the field site  
 Source: Author's own.

Political nepotism is to some extent accepted and overlooked within the elite group. The first author heard many stories of events (which are corrupt in the strict legal sense) discussed loudly in public. For example, a group of journalists were discussing the Upazila Chairman's son's involvement in illegal timber felling inside the Sundarbans and extortion from different governmental relief schemes. Though we do not have, nor did we look for, any hard evidence to prove whether the Upazila Chairman's son was guilty or not, it was interesting to note that the local journalists do not intend to report his alleged acts as, to them, he was within the limit of extortion expected from an Upazila Chairman's son.

Meanwhile, opposition elites tend to 'hold their breath' for future opportunities and avoid internal political strife. Some of them take up factions within the ruling regime. As mentioned earlier, in the Upazila council election in 2009, our field site people supported Mozammel who lost against Kamal of his own political party. Therefore, after assuming office, Kamal Chairman supported rivals of Mozammel's supporters, this rivalry continued until the middle of 2011, when they agreed to cooperate with each other and accordingly, Kamal Chairman extended his full-fledged

support to Mozammel's election campaign for the affiliate Union Chairmanship. This change of strategic partnership at the top affects the previous patron-client relationships, manifested in access patterns and the distribution of resources. Extremely poor people, who are outside the loop and have substantial dependence on aid resources, look out for alternative livelihood options (Ellis, 2000).

## **G. Discussion**

Community participation has become a gimmick word in governmental organizations and NGO interventions. However, 'community' does not necessarily mean a group of people from all strata of the community. Elite groups are able to act and participate on behalf of the poor and influence development activities to serve their own interests. The government has sponsored several rehabilitation schemes, like partial house repair, freedom fighters' benefits, elderly allowances, widow assistance, disability grants, VGD and so on, to strengthen the capacity of poor communities. However, these schemes are fully controlled by local elites, patronized by upper-ranked power elites. There are countless examples of rampant looting in several forms, some of

which are mentioned in this paper. Local UP members and the Chairman are responsible for making beneficiary lists under different schemes and a substantial proportion of the listed beneficiaries of those schemes are the elites and their close associates. After Aila, the government distributed 3000 taka per household for repairing partial damage of affected houses. In the middle of January 2010, the government called for a list of 95 most-affected people at the field site: 42 cards were distributed through the influence of the Upazila Chairman; 9 through a local

Member; 4 by the female Member; and remaining 40 by other local leaders of the Awami League. This distribution did not serve government objectives, nor did it address community vulnerabilities. Through this system, people inherit vulnerability by virtue of their poverty and weak social networks. In contrast to the ideals of emancipatory participation (Pelling, 2007) 'justice' is a matter for the individual charity of the administrator and is certainly not promised or delivered on the basis of rights or a recipient's vulnerability.

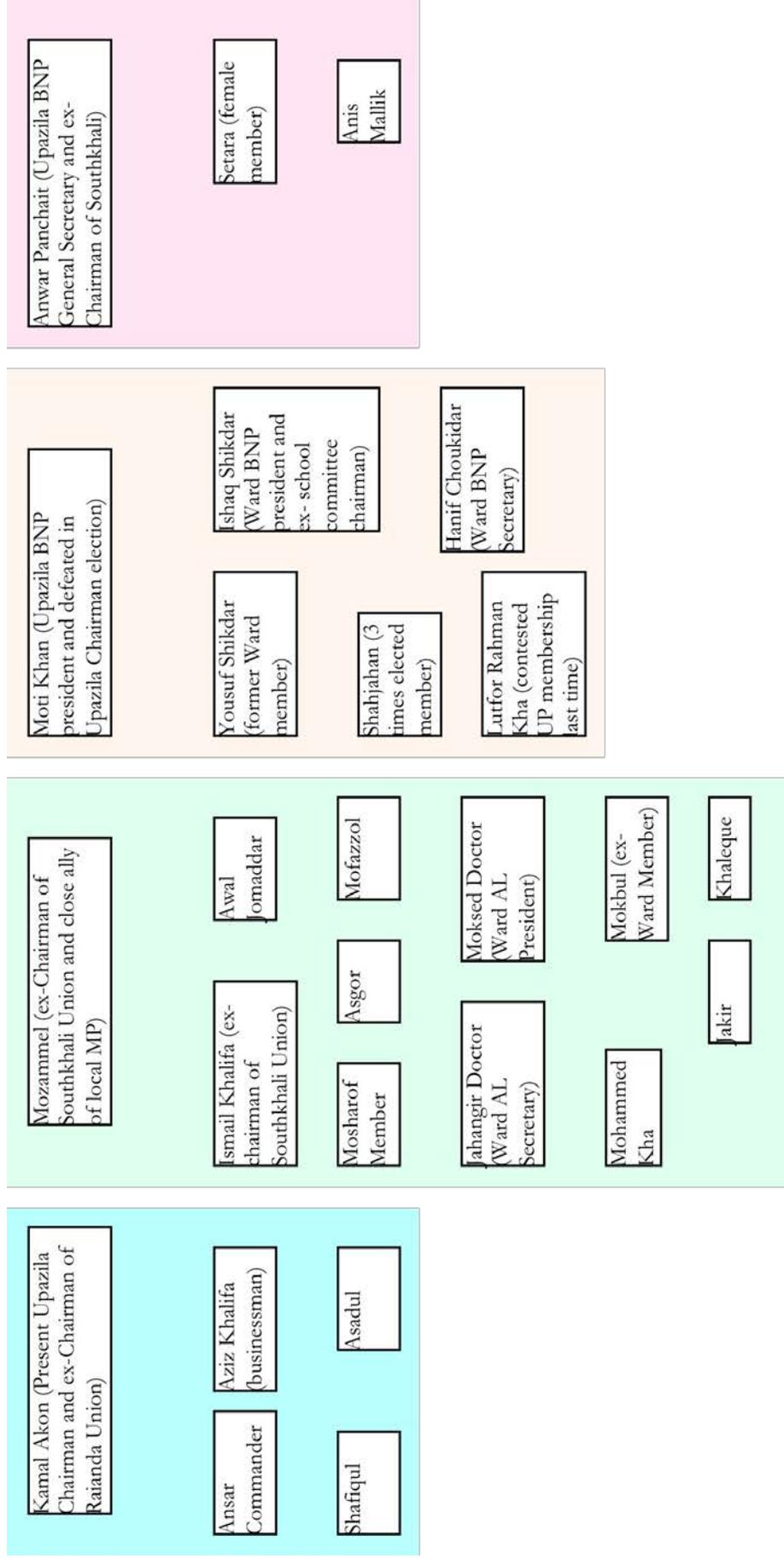


Figure 6: Wider Power Network at the field site after the 2009 Upazila Council Elections (Coloured columns refer to different patron-client clusters)

Source: Author's own

## H. Conclusion

These findings show that apart from a very general exposure to cyclones due to weak infrastructure, all other elements of material loss and allocation of resources filter through unequal distribution, extortion, nepotism, corruption, lawlessness and abuse of political power, which are deeply embedded within the social, economic and political system. These power networks can have material significance in the allocation of relief.

A cyclone generally comes every few years but exploitation prevails at every step of life for ordinary people. As a result, they lose more through ongoing struggles than through cyclones. A cyclone impacts everyone indiscriminately, but not everyone can withstand and recover at the same time and at the same pace. People's marginality is mediated through their daily position within the society and connections with the political and administrative elites. For some, marginality is a temporary circumstance. For example, despite having wealth, some people may still be marginal, due to a political affiliation with the opposition. However, even when in opposition, someone from the elite may still be in a strategically advantageous position. For example, ruling parties often create common causes with an 'opposition ally' in order to undermine a rival faction

within their own political party. Thus, marginality is a matter of one's relative distance from the centre of power. This is manifested in everyday livelihoods, in fishing, in struggles over land, in the right to use certain forest resources, and so on.

In the end, it is not Cyclone Sidr but rather social and economic marginalization through the misappropriation of resource distribution, vested interests, or political and kinship networks, which is pushing people into poverty and has taken the control of their livelihoods away from them. There has been a growing literature since the 1970s challenging naturalistic understandings of disasters and this is underpinned by the search for embedded economic and political inequalities and their role in triggering catastrophes (O'Keefe, et al., 1976; Sen, 1981; Watts, 1983). The poor are often regarded as the most vulnerable to a natural event, with an assumed arithmetic relation between poverty and disaster – with one prompting the other. Rather than accepting this simplistic equation, it is useful to question whether and how people have experienced this relationship between poverty and vulnerability since Cyclone Sidr. Accessing relief and rehabilitation packages, rebuilding homes and exploring income-earning opportunities – all are connected to the capacity of getting people back to

normal life. An individuals' ability to command resources is linked to their social and political identity, such as kinship, social networks, financial capacity and

political connections and rivalry. Thus, resilience, livelihoods, local power dynamics and cyclones are tied together with a common thread.

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Livelihoods are the lattice upon which all human organization hangs, and some of the worst-case scenarios of global change – displacement, conflict and famine – all centrally concern the problems that people face in sustaining productive livelihoods.

The 2013-2014 Resilience Academy is a group of 25 international researchers and practitioners who have recognized that dangerous global change is a threat to the livelihood systems of the world's poor. The Academy met twice, in Bangladesh and Germany, and developed a set of working papers as an evidence base for the concepts and practices that we, as a cohort of colleagues, propose for addressing this pressing challenge.

