CHANGE AND THE EVERYDAY POLITICS OF COMMUNITY BASED ORGANISATIONS.

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Abstract

Membership based organisations are an increasingly important institutional form, encountered both in the social theories we use and in the practices of people we study. An examination of these organisations brings to the fore the importance of the relational in the construction of well-being. Using ethnographic insights into a pro-poor organisational form active in Bangladesh, the paper argues that the success of the organisation can be traced to its ability to become the primary location and expression of agency for its members. The paper then proceeds to explore the form of agency facilitated through the organisation and demonstrates how this is imbued with traces of relations of power that are more characteristic of clientelistic practices. This creates a conundrum: can you exercise greater agency from a position that encourages the persistence of clientelistic behaviour? In exploring ways in which the conundrum might be fruitfully answered, the paper links three key themes: embeddedness, autonomy and well-being.
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To entertain the idea that patronage itself is exploitative, is to admit that there is no structural safety net at all and that the poor are adrift within an amoral social and economic system that is utterly indifferent to their well-being and survival. It is to suggest that hope is absurd and that “good fortune” is an illusion” (Scheper – Hughes 1992: 108-109)

INTRODUCTION

Recently, a telephone operator submitted a plan to erect a lattice mast in the area where I live. Worried about environmental destruction, health hazards and potential property devaluation, local residents responded by calling a public meeting, initiating a campaign against the proposal and exploring the possibility of setting up an action group. The idea of bringing people together to act collectively especially in the face of perceived threats, is something so basic as to constitute part of what it means to be a human being. It seemed logical therefore to set up an action group in order to mobilise and work collectively. The alternative route was to admit to defeat. The appeal of collective action has not been lost to scholars, practitioners and activists committed to advancing the cause of poor men, women and children around the world. Various forms of poor people’s organisations have emerged over the years including cooperatives, associations, class based groups and, more recently, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). While the particular organisational forms may change with time, the perceived value of organisation and the logic of collective action are more enduring (Hirschmann 1984).

Although real differences exist between the different pro-poor organisational forms, they have all been associated, to a greater or lesser extent, with a specific ethos or modus operandi. Hence poor people’s organisations evoke images of an alternative mode of being and interaction in which poor people, often through struggle and creativity, establish the conditions necessary for an improved quality of life and well-being. This perspective rests firmly on a set of assumptions, often quite
normative, about the emancipatory capability, the collectivist tendencies and the democratic inclinations of poor people (Green 2000). If nothing else, pro-poor organisations carry a huge burden of expectation.

Membership Based Organisations of the Poor (MBOPs) are not a new phenomenon. However the interest (academic and practitioner) in the potential contribution MBOPs can make to the task of advancing the cause of poor people is recent and growing. One must ask why. In my view the timing of this resurgent interest is worth noting. For the past 15 to 20 years, large amounts of money, resources and energy have been invested in supporting NGOs throughout the world. However the anticipated ‘associational revolution’ (Salamon 1994) associated with NGOs has not occurred (unfortunately) and the desired impact at a relevant scale (Edwards and Hulme 1992) has not materialised. We have therefore entered a period in which development agencies, practitioners and activists have had to revise their strategies, and think hard about how and in which direction to proceed. Part of this revision has led to a renewed interest in other civil society organisational forms that have been overlooked during the period when NGOs were held to be the ne plus ultra of civil society approaches to poverty eradication and development (Kanbur 2001). With waning enthusiasm for NGOs, the search is now on for new or complementary alternatives. The focus on MBOPs cannot be divorced from this search.1

RELATIONSHIPS AND WELL-BEING

In a recent exploratory study, carried out in Bangladesh, on people’s perceptions of what constitutes a good quality of life, most of the responses stressed the significance of intimate and close relationships (Choudhury, Camfield and Devine 2005). At one level, this may appear a normal response but in the context of Bangladesh, it raises important challenges to our understanding of the

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1 Another organisational form that has benefited from the widening of the ‘civil society approach’ is Faith Based or Religious Organisations.
dynamics of people’s lives.\textsuperscript{2} Over the years, there has been a dominant ‘development focus’ in the way Bangladesh has been studied and presented. This has had the effect of drawing attention to issues such as the significance of social structures and the wider political economy, the kind of issues that can be turned into logical targets for ‘development external intervention’. But how significant are these issues for people? The findings from the initial quality of life research indicate that people hold on much more to the promise and uncertainties of immediate relationships and linkages than they do to wider politico-economic concerns since it is the former that are most significant in the struggle to secure a good life and deal with the many rough edges of adversity.\textsuperscript{3} A similar conclusion is offered by Williams \textit{et al} (2003) in their research into the participation of the poor in India’s Employment Assurance Scheme. In an important corrective to some of the participatory development models, the authors argue forcibly that

\begin{quote}
On a day-to-day basis it is therefore empowerment in relation to the lowly \textit{panchayat} member, shopkeeper, or political ‘fixer’, rather than \textit{vis a vis} the distant District Magistrate, that is most likely to matter to the poor. These local inflections of power matter, and perhaps deserve greater attention within the discussion of ‘uppers’, ‘lowers’ and ‘power reversals’ (Williams \textit{et al} 2003: 187)
\end{quote}

The centrality of local and immediate relationships to well-being is reinforced when one begins to explore the dynamics of poverty in a context like Bangladesh where material resources and assets are scarce (Jansen 1987). Poverty, understood as a particular form of well-being outcome (McGregor 2004), is as much a statement about the type, quality and experience of relationships that people have, as it is about the lack of material resources. While we are accustomed to thinking that people can be poor in material assets, knowledge and even power, we are less familiar with the idea of people being ‘poor in people’ (White 1992) or poverty as a reflection of poor relationships (Wood 2003). And yet this idea is central to the way people in Bangladesh understand and experience poverty, evidenced in the important distinction they make between \textit{amar kichu ney} (I have nothing) and \textit{amar keu ney} (I have noone). In both cases people express a situation of poverty

\textsuperscript{2} This finding is not specific to Bangladesh. In his analysis of human motivations, Manvers (undated) makes a similar but more general observation and uses this to interrogate the political project seeking universal principles of justice.

\textsuperscript{3} The point raises a question about the relationship between local and wider priorities, a core area of enquiry of the Well-being and Development research group (McGregor 2004).
and vulnerability. However while the former indicates a sense of material deprivation, the latter points to a state of vulnerability and hopelessness that is far more profound and debilitating (Devine 1999). ‘Not having anyone’ is the condition in poverty that people try most desperately to avoid.  

In what ways are relationships and networks significant to the way poor people manage their everyday lives? First, they are used instrumentally to strengthen claims on a range of goods or services. This is a form of analysis that has been developed in methodologies associated with livelihood analysis and resources profiles (McGregor 2004) where attempts are made to show how people deploy social networks and contacts to access a range of goods such as employment opportunities (Williams *et al* 2003), credit (McGregor 1994), medicine and health treatment (Scheper-Hughes 1992), food and daily necessities (Auyero 2000), and even physical protection (Khan 2000). The value of local relationships however goes beyond their ability to provide opportunities for material goods. There is also a deep symbolic value to social relationships and networks in that they offer a structure that gives meaning to lives. In her analysis of child rights approaches in development, White (2002) talks usefully of a strategy in which individuals extend an ‘idiom of belonging’ to the people, networks and organisations they value. This strategy creates a bind between the individual and other persons or organisational forms; it legitimises the relationship, makes it meaningful and relevant (Scheper-Hughes 1992). In the context of South Asia, this is illustrated for example when people bestow the title of ‘brother’, ‘uncle’ or ‘aunty’ on people who do not belong to the strict family context. The idiom of belonging is also used in Bangladesh in the way people identify themselves and others with reference to their membership of particular organisations. So for example it common to hear people identify themselves or others as ‘BRAC-ER lok, PROSHIK-AR lok, CARITAS-ER lok’ and so forth (Devine 1999). This kind of identification sets boundaries *vis a vis* the outside, but more importantly it reinforces the process of

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4 This need not only be applied in contexts of poverty. Scheper-Hughes’ (1992) account of life in a shanty town in Brazil also notes how people are never left alone and if one were completely bereft of relatives, neighbours would send someone to live with the ‘poor, solitary creature’ (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 99).

5 BRAC, PROSHIKA and CARITAS are three big NGOS in Bangladesh. BRAC-ER lok therefore indicates those who are members of BRAC.
building “cross cutting ego-centred linkages” (White 2002: 1098) that become the basis for social action (Matravers undated).

The argument of this paper rests on the premise that the relational milieu constitutes the primary cultural terrain upon which people construct their well-being. The implication of this is that a proper understanding of institutional forms like MBOPs, requires us to explore their location and significance within this relational milieu. Using ethnographic insights of a membership based initiative, I will pursue two lines of enquiry. First I will argue that the success of the initiative lies in the fact that the organisation has become a primary location and expression of agency for poor people (Bossevain 1974, Auyero 2000). I will explore various dimensions of this agency. Second I will then offer an analysis on the quality of agency by exploring its significance against the background of the relational milieu through which poor people have to negotiate their livelihood options.

The organisation referred to above is called Shammo. In Bangladesh the notion of MBOPs has been problematised again because of the dominance of the ‘development focus’ referred to earlier. Thus organisations that fall under the general civil society umbrella have become over the years a favourite target for donors wishing to pursue pro-poor development strategies. However in order to receive external funding support, organisations are required to register with the NGO Affairs Bureau. The obvious result of this is that many civil society organisations have ended up legally registering as development NGOs. Shammo is such an organisation. In what ways then can Shammo be considered a MBOP? In my view there are two key features to be considered. First Shammo is a MBO by its formal constitution. This makes it very distinct from other organisations registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau. Its executive committee is made up of members - all of whom were or are landless farmers – who retain ultimate control of the organisation. Second,

\[6\] Shammo is a pseudonym and means ‘equality’ – a name which gives some indication of the organisation’s ethos.
Shammo is an organic institutional form, created from within a community in order to negotiate external and highly uneven power relationships. It was not therefore imposed by outsiders even if later its contacts and need for external support grew stronger. In their lifetimes, organisations also undergo institutional metamorphoses and this is true of Shammo. Indeed the main challenge facing the organisation today as it competes in the very peculiar Bangladesh civil society struggle for resources and recognition is how it decides to relate to its original organic roots. The insights used in this paper however draw mostly on the earlier history of Shammo when its organic nature was clearly evident. The rationale for this is that there are invaluable and wider lessons to be learnt from Shammo’s experience about the cultural-relational significance of MBOPs.

**SHAMMO - A BRIEF HISTORY**

The origins of Shammo can be traced back to the mid 1970s when a group of young men residing in the same village established a local youth club. Although the main aim of the club was to promote recreational and cultural activities for its members, it also carried out some modest relief and welfare activities. Impressed by the enthusiasm of the youth, the headmaster of the local high school put the leaders in contact with an acquaintance of his who worked for OXFAM. He in turn visited the club over a period of time and encouraged the members to move the focus of the organisation away from recreation to helping the poor.

Through their contact with OXFAM, the members of Shammo were invited to meetings and workshops that introduced them to new contacts and exposed them to ideas and practices used by the wider development community. Most of the meetings reflected and developed ideas related to ‘conscientization’ and mobilisation in with the emphasis lay on the need to understand, identify and confront the structural causes of poverty (Freire 1972). This type of exposure gave Shammo a methodology that fitted their intention to work more with the poor. As a result they began to organise meetings with poorer households and encourage the formation of smaller membership groups known in Bengali as *samities*. This initiative proved to be very successful and the number
of samities grew rapidly. In the space of a few months, 50 samities of between 10 and 15 members were established. Almost all of the members were landless farmers.

The first samities were located in a few villages surrounding an open water body known as ‘Boro Bagher Beel’. The Beel was a large lake that was used for fishing. In 1962, Government authorities decided to drain the Beel by digging a canal to a nearby river. As a result, over 820 acres of low-lying agricultural land emerged which legally became khas land. Initially, the local elites showed little interest in the land and encouraged the landless poor to clear and dredge the whole area so that it could be used by them for subsistence agricultural activities. The task of dredging took almost 2 years and as soon as the land was ready for farming, the elite leaders had a change of heart and decided to forcibly take possession of the land. They then divided the land among themselves and obliged the poor to farm it as day labourers.

In 1972, the Government of Bangladesh issued a number of key presidential orders containing provisions for the redistribution of land such as khas among landless households. On that occasion, many of the poor households in the villages surrounding the Beel were officially allotted parcels of land from the Beel, and received the relevant legal documents from the local administrative authority. However none of those allocated land managed to take possession of what was theirs by right. Instead local elites took advantage of their political position to bypass Government orders and carry on using the land for their own benefit as before. The ability of elites to act in this way is derived from the overall policy context (Grindle and Thomas 1991) in which actors at national and local levels collude to retain de facto if not always de jure control over key

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7 Khas refers to ‘unoccupied land’ which the Government legally owns but which has not been acquired for specific purposes. There are various sources of khas land including accredited lands, land vested in the Government as ceiling surplus and so forth. Traditionally khas land is distributed to beneficiaries identified by the Government.

8 A key piece of legislation, known as the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, was introduced in 1950. However in this instance the main beneficiaries of khas land distribution were members of the armed forces, families of refugees and so forth. In 1972, landless households were included on the list of beneficiaries for the first time.

9 Normally households are given approximately one acre of land.
assets as part of an overall strategy of power accumulation. In terms of *khas* land assets, the following observation captures the policy context succinctly:

National politicians and bureaucrats are often themselves large landowners and even if they are not, they depend on rich peasant both for political support and to ensure that the countryside remains reasonably tranquil. To attack the interests of this dominant class would be political suicide for any of the political parties (Hossain and Jones 1989: 180).

Poor people ‘participate’ in this collusion through a complex system of vertically aligned and hierarchically ordered patron-client relationships. Thus we have the creation of a system of social cohesion based on class relations of dependency (BRAC 1983, Wood 1994, Davis 2004). In the face of this, the ability of the poor to exercise agency or act collectively is severely constrained. Among other aspects, the logic of patronage demands from clients loyalty more than voice (Hirschmann 1970) and allows a politics of privilege to determine the recognition and implementation of formal rights.

Almost all of Shammo’s original members had been cheated of their land and their inability to pursue their entitlement claims was a direct reflection of their dependence on those who had taken possession of the land. Not surprisingly therefore, when analysing the causes of their poverty during the early *samity* meetings, members inevitably raised the issue of *khas* land and the ease with which the elites had dispossessed them of what was theirs by right. *Khas* distribution and land rights in general therefore became the focus of Shammo’s work, and throughout the 1980s the organisation was involved in a prolonged struggle with local elites over the Boro Bagher Beel.

It is not possible to go into the details of that struggle here. Suffice to say that by the early 1990s, all the land of Boro Bagher Beel had been distributed among landless households. Although there were constant threats and the occasional open conflict with elites, Shammo’s members had become so numerous and united that they were able to overcome and then smother the immediate threat to their land posed by the elites. This is quite a remarkable turnaround and indeed unique in the
context of Bangladesh. Throughout the 1980s, many membership organisations, NGOs and donors\textsuperscript{10} were very committed to *khas* land distribution.\textsuperscript{11} However by the early 1990s, that enthusiasm had waned as a result of a number of factors including, a donor shift away from social mobilisation activities (Devine 2003), general frustration at the slow pace of even small gains in *khas* land activities, and the fear of harassment and violence that often accompanied *khas* land struggles. Shammo then was one of the very few organisations that remained committed to *khas* land issues. Its success however came at a very high price. Thus Shammo’s history is littered with incidents of village sieges, jail sentences for many of the members, deaths, murders, rape and many other examples of violence and general harassment.

**ORGANISATION AND AGENCY OF THE POOR**

The fact that the members of Shammo managed to take control of the *khas* area and protect the rights of landless households to use the land is in itself an important indicator of success. However it is not the only indicator of success and arguably not the most important one. In order to collectively pursue entitlement claims and then defend these against richer and more powerful elites, there must have been a change in the configuration of the core patron-client relationship that underpinned the existing system of social cohesion. The argument pursued here is that Shammo effectively became the site around which that process of re-configuration occurred. This enabled the organisation to become the primary location and expression of a new form of agency for its members. This is the most important dimension of the organisation’s success because agency refers here to that which is constitutive of the fundamental relation that links people and society. This relation - the outcome of ongoing interactions between individuals and the structures surrounding them (Giddens 1976) – is core to the ability of people to act, interact and exercise control over their

\textsuperscript{10} The level of initial enthusiasm was very high. In fact, the first NGO network in Bangladesh (comprising of NGOs and MBOPs) was established by organisations working on *khas* land distribution issues.

\textsuperscript{11} A key moment occurred in 1987 when the Government initiated a Lands Reform Action Programme that was co-managed by the land NGO network (see previous foot note) and the Ministry of Land. This was in effect the first opportunity civil society organisations had to operate at such high levels of the polity. Naturally they were keen to take as much advantage as possible of the situation.
environments. There are three key elements that taken together\(^\text{12}\) facilitated the creation of a new form of agency for Shammo’s members:

- the construction of a new form of shared identity, sufficiently secure and reliable for members to shift their allegiance away from the domination of traditional elites;
- the ability to secure tangible improvements in the lives of the members;
- the fostering of an utopian space (de Certeau 1984) in which future aspirations and the potential for further reconfigurations of power relations are nurtured (Appadurai 2004).

**Belonging and Identity**

I am our *samity* leader and so many women from this *para*\(^\text{12}\) come to me when they are in trouble. Many of them are widows and have no-one to look after them (*tader keu ney*). I just tell them that I was like that before I joined the *samity*. Of course my life is still hard, but at least now I know that with the *samity* I have people (*amar keu ache*) I can rely on – they are my friends. I tell these other women to come and join the *samity*, but I think they are still too frightened. Other groups and NGOs have started work here but you only see them once a week. They usually come to collect money. They don’t really know what is happening here and we don’t know them that well (Rokeya)

For organisations like Shammo, success lies fundamentally in being accepted as something which people can identify with, that people see as being relevant to their lives. It is important therefore not to lose sight of the obvious: MBOPs have little significance if they do not have members. In its area, Shammo is but one of many networks or organisations that work with people. Success reflects the fact that a significant number of people have chosen the organisation as their primary reference in the struggle to ensure a better quality of life.

Rokeya’s words help take our thinking forward. She portrays Shammo as a friend, something that is close, can be relied on and knows what is happening in her life. This sense that the organisation

\(^{12}\) These elements co-exist and indeed depend on each other. Analytically however it is possible to separate them

\(^{13}\) Para is a neighbourhood cluster within a village.
can be trusted and touches people’s real concerns in life should not be downplayed for it may be more important than the ability of the organisation to deliver material benefits. Williams et al (2003) observation that party workers were valued because they were considered friends and close to the poor, Schepers-Hughes’ (1992) findings that patrons are judged to be ‘good’ because of their nurturant and caring qualities, and Auyero’s (2000) discovery of a moral relationship between ‘self-sacrificing’ brokers and their clients, all point to the satisfaction of a need in life that is not captured and indeed goes beyond the immediate exchange of resources. This is portrayed in Rokeya’s statement that she has friends to rely on.

There are a number of ways in which Shammo communicates with the deeper concerns of its members. The most obvious medium in this regard are the numerous samity meetings where members discuss a range of issues ranging from politics to government development issues, to local affairs, to the situation of particular members or households. These meetings can be informal or formal, planned or unplanned. Recently the value of these kinds of meetings has been questioned by academics and practitioners. The argument is that the meetings are time consuming, difficult to motivate, and vacuous in content and ambition (Hashemi 1990). In the case for example of NGOs in Bangladesh these samity meetings are now known locally as ‘collection meetings’. This reflects a radical change of emphasis from the days when the meetings were meant to promote greater awareness and conscientisation (Devine 2003).

For Shammo’s members however the meetings remain important because they offer space and time where people can discuss issues that are important to them, and if necessary or possible, identify appropriate courses of action. This means that there is an active and open link between the organisation and people’s daily lives and concerns. The meetings are strewn with references to

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14 Hashemi (1990) offers an insightful description of three samity meetings he observed: a) one where his presence was announced in advance; b) one where members were warned he may appear; and c) one where he simply turned up unannounced. The contrast between (a) and (c) was massive with low attendance rates, poor formal participation and little substantial content or discussion characterising (c). Hashemi then argues that the samity meetings were effectively irrelevant and only ‘staged’ successfully when outsider observers were in attendance.
issues that really matter to members and in this way, the organisation is locked into members’ daily struggle for survival. Through this process, a sense of belonging and identity is constructed. To use the language and analysis of labelling (Wood 1985, Escobar 1992), Rokeya’s relation to Shammo is one in which she feels more ‘person’ than ‘client’ or ‘beneficiary’: in which her history and context is acknowledged and not ignored; in which her life is not broken up into ‘sectors’ or ‘areas’ that then become discrete targets for managed intervention. This is what is inferred in the notion of ‘taking people seriously’. Rokeya’s final comments about the presence of other organisations and NGOs reinforce the value attached to an organisation’s ability to reach deep into people’s daily lives. Notwithstanding the kind and quality of services the other organisations provide, it is the sense of distance and disengagement from ‘what is really happening’ that distinguishes them from Shammo.

However the ability to engage with the real concerns and lives of poor people is an essential but not sufficient condition for success. Organisations like Shammo have to prove not only that they are responding to poor people’s interests, but that they can also be relied upon (McGregor 1989). Becoming a member of Shammo entailed taking a public and oppositional stance to the elites who were controlling access and use of the khas areas of the Boro Bagher Beel. As mentioned earlier, the reason why poor households had not pursued their entitlement claims against the elites was because as clients they were required to be loyal and subservient to their respective patrons. Those who dared voice dissent were punished swiftly and sometimes, violently. Shammo then had to convince members to shift their allegiance from the patrons to the organisation. This is the pivotal moment for MBOPs like Shammo. Although it is relatively easy to demonstrate the exploitative and predatory nature of patron-client relations (Shammo’s members were already aware of this), it is far more difficult to convince people to remove themselves from these same relations. Good and bad patrons offer a mechanism through which the poor negotiate the satisfaction of basic and everyday needs (Scheper-Hughes 1992, Devine 1999, Auyero 2000). To shift allegiance from a
patron – however exploitative – entails a huge risk calculation and exposes poor individuals and households to potentially debilitating and long term insecurity. In the case of Shammo and the local elites, what was at stake was a zero sum outcome, and for those who shifted allegiance this implied a risk of being left in a situation akin to that of *amar keu ney*.

There was no single moment or message that made members shift their allegiance to Shammo. The process was protracted and non-linear. For members, a key feature of the process however was the experience of gradually securing greater control over aspects of their lives, which previously had been dominated by the patrons. Supporting this process were foundational and catalytic moments achieved through the kind of ‘offensive struggles’ outlined by Bayat in his study of urban organised groups (Bayat 1997). Taking some issue with the James Scott’s idea of struggle as a form of resistance, Bayat correctly argues for greater recognition of those initiatives of the poor that go beyond passive resistance and “place a great deal of restraint upon the privileges of the dominant groups, allocating segments of their life chances (including capital, social goods, opportunity, autonomy and thus power) to themselves” (Bayat 1997:56). In Shammo’s case, the ‘offensive struggles’ usually took the form of direct and conscious action such as open and mobilised campaigns, processions and political vigils, collective physical protection of members from attacks of elites and their gangs, mass repossession of *khas* land and so forth. Securing and then consolidating gains in this way led to membership growth and also shored up the resolve and commitment of existing members. This endowed Shammo with a reputation as an organisation that is reliable. As this increased, the risk calculations of members and potential members also changed. This enabled an increased number to make that all important shift of allegiance.

*Tangible Benefits*

It is too late for me to join…[Shammo]…now. I would not get *khas* land because there is little of it left and there are many *samity* members even in my own village hoping to get land. If I join Shammo,…[the leadership of Shammo]…would have to look after them before…[they]…deal with me. Besides, if I ever publicly go against…[my
patron]…, I know he would throw me and my family out of the house he has given us and I have no other place to go. If I had joined Shammo I would be better off. Others in the village have improved. I made a mistake but I thought I was doing the right thing… (Roton)

The last point of the previous section about the iterative process between gradually taking greater control over aspects of life and increased membership, reminds us that successful MBOPs need at least to offer the hope of tangible improvements to its members. I met Roton for the first time in 1997 and have returned to see him on a number of occasions. He is one of the poorest men I have met in my life: landless, homeless, undernourished and always complaining of being physically weak. Life has taken its toll on Roton – physically and mentally. I was introduced to him by one of his brothers who was a member of Shammo. The two men had inherited their father’s client status. In other words, they started their adult lives working for the same patron household where their father had worked. Yet their paths went in very different directions when the brother decided to become a member of Shammo and Roton decided to remain with the patron.

Roton believed his decision was a good one. Why jeopardise your household's existing welfare options (no matter how limited) for a *samity* with no assets or resources? Why join a group that wants to fight against the patrons? However by the time I met Roton, the situation had changed dramatically. The ability of his patron to mobilise resources had deteriorated significantly and Roton was still as dependent on him for his basic livelihood. It had got to such a point that literally, Roton felt that he had nowhere else to go. His brother had fared much better even if he was still poor. He owned some land, a house, some cattle, and his children went to school. The main difference in the life trajectories of the two brothers is that one became a member of Shammo while the other did not (making them adversaries in the struggle to control Boro Bagher Beel). This has translated into one brother improving his overall standard of life. In what ways then does Shammo help deliver material improvements to its members?
For most of the landless around Shammo’s area, securing employment was and remains the central concern of their well-being. Although the struggles over khas land came to assume symbolic significance for all those attached to the organisation, the initial focus on land arose because agriculture was the main source of employment for members. Those who were fortunate and were allocated parcels of khas land gained therefore an important livelihood platform from which they were able to begin accumulating assets. At a minimum, the allocation of khas land enables farmers to subsist for a significant part of the year on their own land. This has a number of implications about selling labour, buying basic food necessities and so forth. Others however built on their new resource, generated profit and invested by purchasing more land or starting small business enterprises. Roton’s brother is a good example. The problem however was the limited amount of khas land available. Both the numbers and needs of the members far outstripped the amount of land that could be distributed. This leads to the question of how other members secured tangible improvements to their well-being.

One of the characteristics valued most by members is that the organisation provides points of access to key external bodies or organisations, especially to various institutions of the state. Over the years the leaders of the organisation in particular have acquired knowledge and experience of how to approach and influence these institutions. This accumulation of experience began with the initial struggle for khas land that catapulted the organisation and its members into a direct relationship with different elements of the polity. Working initially with institutions and organisations of the Land Ministry, Shammo nurtured a positional advantage (Knoke 1990) for itself that legitimised and strengthened their attempt to exert influence in key policy areas at national and local levels. There is no doubt that securing this position was vital to Shammo’s overall success and helped the organisation develop its capacity to work better and explore opportunities within the political
system. Since its work with the Land Ministry, Shammo works intensively to nurture the right kind of political contacts because this is considered a legitimate basis for finding support and implementing policies or mobilising around issues that will benefit the poor.

At the local level, the contacts established by Shammo are highly valued by members because they open arenas where new livelihood options and entitlement claims can be pursued. Thus members have been involved in campaigns for better and just wages, improved working conditions for sharecroppers, provision of basic infrastructural services, more transparent distribution of government welfare goods and services (such as Vulnerable Group Development cards, Food for Work programmes, relief and rehabilitation projects, loans) and so forth. In some cases the level of success has been relatively high (ensuring reasonable wages for agricultural day labourers), in others instead it has been sporadic. The strategy adopted by Shammo and its members builds directly on their success with khas land. From this experience Shammo has developed a methodology that comprises two elements: a) target issues where the organisation enjoys some positional advantage or direct access to key actors, and b) target issues or services where there is a legitimate claim to be made by poor people. Working in this way means that any successful collective mobilisation will contribute to making members’ sources of livelihood more secure.

Another way in which members seek to achieve tangible improvements in their lives is through reciprocal help and support. Here the organisation is not an instrument to deal with external opportunities but node through which members deal differently with each other. Without over-romanticising the idea, it is clear that members care and look out for each other. This in one sense is an inflection of the point made earlier about the organisation having to take people’s everyday concerns seriously. Members therefore also take each other’s lives seriously. This is the reason why when faced with difficulty most members seek help in the first instance from fellow members,  

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15 In this paper I am focusing deliberately on the internal dynamics of MBOPs. Elsewhere I have explored in more detail the relationship between the organisation and the external political environment – a relationship that was so crucial to Shammo’s success. For more on this issue see Devine 2002.
and often this will be discussed in the *samity* meetings. In this sense members experience Shammo as a site of mutual help, a ‘problem solving network’ (Auyero 2000). The kind of problems that members resolve amongst themselves range from satisfying everyday basic needs (financial, medical and so forth) to mediating disputes within or between households, kinship groups, neighbourhoods or villages. In some cases, the benefits offered are public in the sense that they may be equally enjoyed by non-members. Mediating local disputes is a pertinent example. Another good illustration are the Women’s Action Committees established by Shammo in different villages. Comprising female members of Shammo, these committees were set up to monitor and then intervene in situations where women face particular threats (violence against women, women abandoned by their husbands, unstable marriage situations, and more recently – pressures connecting with the practice of dowry). When required, the committees act as dispute resolution bodies for members and non-members alike. In the kind of issues highlighted earlier, non-members acknowledge that the Committees are far more effective than other more traditional bodies.

**Utopian Spaces**

All this land was controlled by *mahajans* and after them, by local strongmen. Now it belongs to poor people. Poor people have to struggle and make sacrifices. You don’t get tired of struggling because there is no time to get tired. But having my own land makes me happy and makes me think that the fighting and years in prison were worth it. Tomorrow there will be a different struggle and if we stick together Shammo will also win that. And the day will come when there will be no more need for fighting (Mahfuz)

Mahfuz was a member of the very first landless *samity* formed under the name of Shammo. He became a leader amongst his peers because of his ability to rouse enthusiasm and passion, and establish *samities* in new communities. Like many other members of the organisation, Mahfuz held on dearly to the idea that one day there would be an ‘ultimate victory’ of the landless, vindication of the years of struggle, sacrifice and efforts. Mahruz’s words reflect the coexistence in his life of two spheres: the polemological and the utopian (de Certeau 1984). The former refers to the almost constant polemics and conflicts that have been such a daily part of his life – the ‘offensive
struggles’ if you like. The latter is the realm that nurtures aspirations and illusions, an almost impenetrable area where “the fatality of the established order can be subverted” (de Certeau 1984: 16-17). The utopian sphere alerts our analysis to the significance of meanings given to anticipated futures, much in the same way as the discussion of ‘belonging and identity’ offers insights into meanings given to present and past experiences. Importantly, as Mahfuz’s words indicate, the role of Shammo in the configuration of this anticipated future is regarded as central.

The introduction of the notion of utopia should not be interpreted as reference to some fugumundi fantasy. Aspirations matter and are the basis of social action (Appadurai 2004). In other words they are constitutive of agency. Crucially for the discussion here, aspirations can also be shared. They may point to the future but are cultivated and developed through lived experience and repeated interaction. In Shammo’s case there is a wide repertoire of contributing experiences including the many different types of shared ‘offensive struggles’, the numerous formal and informal meetings amongst members as well as between members and external individuals or groups, the increased level of reciprocal ‘problem solving’, and so forth. These experiences foster the establishment of aspirations and hope, as well as the basis for practical action in the present.

In thinking about how Shammo and its members construct an anticipated future, I am helped by the distinction, offered by de Certeau (1984), between two types of action or practice: tactics and strategies. The main difference between a strategy and a tactic is that the former requires a figurative ‘fixed position’ or node that is identifiable, discrete and demarcated. This fixed position serves as an autonomous base for planning relations with other external agents and individuals. A tactic instead lacks a fixed position, a place of its own and as a consequence, can only operate on borrowed or imposed terrains. This allows for limited, constrained or opportunistic (as opposed to
planned) practices.\textsuperscript{16} It is therefore realm of the strategic that permits planned incursions into the future (the creation of aspiration), while the realm of the tactical reacts more to the moment.

Shammo has moved from being an organisation in a very vulnerable and exposed position to one that enjoys considerable authority, legitimacy and power. As the transformation occurred, the organisation was able to move more into a position where it could plan strategically as opposed to tactically. This in turn enabled the gradual realisation of ambitions and goals that previously belonged to some distant future. Examples of this include the Women’s Action Committees referred to earlier. What is the value of this kind of initiative? It encapsulates a particular vision of ‘the way members want things to be in the future’, while offering a position from which force and influence can be confidently exerted in the present.

A more recent initiative relates to the area of electoral politics. Being a MBO, Shammo has always attracted electoral candidates seeking block votes. In the late 1970s and early 1980s when the organisation was in a vulnerable position, members were forced to react (i.e. negotiate ‘tactically’) to demands made by competing candidates. Through negotiation and bargaining, a series of promises and commitments were made to ensure the support of members. Inevitably these were ignored almost as soon as the elections were over, thus confirming de Certeau’s (1984) observation that gains secured through tactical practices tend to be fleeting and cannot be kept or used to build actions in the future. However as the organisation grew and consolidated its position, the dynamics of electoral engagement also changed. For example, during the parliamentary elections of 1996 Shammo’s members set in a motion a huge electoral mobilisation strategy that had a very direct impact on the electoral outcome. The incumbent Member of Parliament (an old adversary of Shammo) was elected out of office and replaced by the candidate preferred by Shammo’s membership.\textsuperscript{17} In interviews I carried out with the local leaders of the three main political parties,

\textsuperscript{16} Put in a very succinct form, “Strategies scheme; tacticians trick” (Scott 1990:163)
\textsuperscript{17} For more details on the various mobilising strategies and the final electoral results see Devine 1999.
all of them identified Shammo and its members as being the single determining factor in the elections.

What enabled members to mobilise the way they did in 1996? Why could they not do this earlier? The answer to both these questions lies in the fact that by the early 1990s, the organisation had secured the kind of ‘fixed position’ or authoritative status that permitted strategic as opposed to tactical planning. The difference then is that members believed they could act collectively and with purpose during the 1996 elections. Before, this seemed an impossible or ill-advised task. This sense of purpose was evident in the local elections that followed the parliamentary ones. For the first time in the history of the organisation a significant number of members stood as electoral candidates. Of the 52 candidates from Shammo, 43 were successfully elected. The importance of this result has to be read in two ways. First, in Bangladesh it is not uncommon for candidates promoted by MBOPs or NGOs to present themselves at elections. However there is evidence that the end results are either negligible or insignificant as the number of successfully returned candidates tends to be quite low (Hassan 1999). By contrast, Shammo achieved a high rate of successfully returned candidates - a result of strategic mobilisation. The second significant feature of the elections is that it demonstrates how Shammo’s members were capable of building on previous gains and purposively creating new opportunities. This is a characteristic of strategic as opposed to tactical practice.¹⁸

Does it make any difference to act strategically or tactically? The answer is undoubtedly yes. Change carries with it new opportunities for change even if they may not be immediately visible or obvious. The difficulty is recognising these and being in a position to act upon them. Thus, the fact that some members are now locally elected officials provides new opportunities to access areas where new entitlement claims might be pursued and new practical livelihood options fashioned.

¹⁸ One of the characteristics of a strategy is that it retains any gains made and uses them to advance new plans (de Certeau 1984)
Strategy facilitates the consolidation of benefits and the creation of purposive action. For members, strategy is therefore an important mechanism through which that process of gradually ‘allocating more segments of their life chances to themselves’ (Bayat 1993) is nurtured and executed.

**FORMS OF AGENCY**

Members have to listen to leaders. If they do not, they will be ignored or even thrown out of the organisation as I was. Other members like Mahfuz could have defended me but they were frightened. In fact some worked hard to get rid of me in the hope that they would be benefit in some way. Members are always trying to please the leaders. (Anjan)

That Shammo represents a major shift in the local institutional landscape is an undeniable fact. The organisation brings people together and offers them the space to reciprocally support each other and collectively work together (identity and belonging); plays a central role in the local distribution and use of key resources (tangible improvements); and enables members to strategically plan around future possibilities (the utopian space). This paper has argued that the combination and ongoing interaction of these three key dimensions is constitutive of new form of agency for Shammo’s members. The organisation therefore is an important means through which members act upon and make better sense of their past, present and future realities. In particular, the organisation shapes numerous possibilities for members to deal more ‘strategically’ with their situation of poverty.

Agency however can take many forms and it is therefore important to take the analysis forward by asking about the type and quality of agency that MBOPs like Shammo facilitate. A useful way of doing this is to examine more closely the structure of relationships developed within the organisation itself. In the case of Shammo, the fundamental relationship within the organisation is between the leadership and the other members. This relationship is important in its own terms but also because, as Anjan suggests, it conditions relationships among members.
One of the key observations that can be made about Shammo is that as the organisation has developed, the social and economic distance between leaders and members has increased. This is not a phenomenon that should surprise us. Robert Michels famous dictum ‘who says organisation says oligarchy’ is as valid a warning to MBOPs as it might be to political parties, bureaucratic organisations or business enterprises.\(^{19}\) For Shammo and its members, the process of separation has brought with it a division of roles, responsibilities and expectations. Thus in very general terms, it is the leaders who receive salaries, maintain external contacts with key bodies or institutions, have management responsibilities, travel and attend conferences in the name of the organisation, and so on. Most of the members meanwhile carry on with their everyday lives (looking after their families, land, business and so forth), while remaining enthusiastic and committed to the organisation. In terms of exploring what the relationships within the organisation can tell us of the emerging form of agency, I would like to highlight two key dimensions.

First, although Shammo presents itself as an organisation committed to establishing and protecting the rights of the poor, in practice this is underpinned or qualified by a logic of preferential behaviour in which certain entitlement rights are privileged, others ignored; certain are included, others excluded. This leads to a rather nebulous area where favours and rights intertwine. A good case in point is that of Roton. Given his economical status and the fact that he resided so close to the Beel, Roton had very strong entitlement claims (indeed stronger than some who were allocated land) to an allocation of *khas* land. So why did he not receive land? The answer to this question is simply that he was not a member of Shammo. Rights and indeed poverty may have been a necessary basis for pursuing entitlement claims on *khas* land, but they were not a sufficient basis. Membership and allegiance to Shammo were important and defining criteria in the final distribution of *khas* land (Devine 2002).

\(^{19}\) Useful to be reminded that Michels identified three reasons why the iron law of oligarchy comes into play: the size of the organisation, the value of the specialist information and the distance between leaders and led (Michel 1962).
There may be some justification behind the decision to allocate *khas* land according to membership status. First, one may argue that distribution through membership ensured that the land went at least to genuine landless households. This marked a significant improvement on the *status quo ante*. Second, one may also argue that by distributing among members there were inbuilt mechanisms in place to monitor the use of the land (for example it was easier to defend the land from possible attacks of elites). Notwithstanding these arguments, the point remains that some rights were advantaged over others and this has had a direct and immediate impact on people’s well-being. Paradoxically, as Shammo consolidates itself as the dominant force in the area around the Beel, the livelihood prospects of non-member households (now undoubtedly the poorest in the area) seem to be spiralling into further insecurity and uncertainty.

Second, relationships constructed within the organisation are based not on equality\(^\text{20}\) but on inequality and hierarchy. This point is illustrated well through the case of Anjan, another original member of Shammo. Over the years Anjan had built up a strong reputation as an honest and capable leader. This was confirmed when he was elected chairman of the organisation by the other members.\(^\text{21}\) The decision to expel Anjan from the organisation was taken after he had publicly challenged the leadership on its strategy around the electoral issues, and then subsequently sided with a candidate that Shammo’s leaders considered a threat to the ambitions of the organisation. The decision to expel was initiated by the organisation’s leaders and then later publicly defended by other landless members like Mahfuz. What was the real nature of Anjan’s misdemeanour? His expulsion is a direct consequence of his perceived disloyalty to the organisation. This is quite clear even in the way Anjan explains the circumstances surrounding his expulsion. He argues that other members like Mahfuz would not openly confront the organisation’s leaders because they know the price to be paid for being disloyal. Instead they used the occasion to deliberately make a public

\(^{20}\) Remember the name of the organisation is Shammo, which means equality.

\(^{21}\) Making him the leader of the executive committee.
show of their allegiance and loyalty to the leaders. A public show that hopefully would help gain or protect benefits.

There is then an ongoing dynamic tension between members and leaders. Each continually stares at the other, caring but also mistrusting, aware of the inherent unequal nature of the relationship that binds them together. Members are deeply aware of the inequality (blatantly observable anyway), accept it and even strategise through it. The leaders of the organisation then are the focal point and members try to position themselves as strategically as possible to them. Elsewhere, and following Bailey (1970), I used the idea of ‘moral proximity to leaders’ to help distinguish between ‘core members’, ‘followers and new recruits’ and ‘excluded’ in the organisation (Devine 1999). These categories imply different types of relationships to the leaders and reflect different degrees of loyalty or attachment. In this way, a social hierarchy of relationships is constructed within the organisation. Importantly, there is a general correspondence between one’s position in the hierarchy and access to resources or benefits. The implication of this is that it pays to be a loyal member. Members therefore endeavour to be part of the inner or core group, or at least to have good links with core members. However if loyalty brings privilege it also brings expectation. Thus outright confrontation and dissention by core members like Anjan is rare. It is also tolerated less.

Shammo has evolved as an organisation without ever removing itself from its small, personalised origins. Its success today is rooted in a history saturated with stories of personal ties, informal deals and favours, different forms of mediations being called into play, random opportunism, and so forth. These can be traced at a very local level but equally at the higher echelons of state authority. In almost all cases, it is the leaders who forge the significant ties, deals and links. These remain in the strict sense of the word quite personal, certainly almost always unwritten. The organisation

22. Auyero (2000) in a very similar fashion speaks of clients organised in inner and outer circles around key political patrons. The terminology may change but the underlying logic is similar: there is an intensity or density of relationship between leaders and those closest to them, and a lighter or intermittent relationship between leaders and those not so close.
therefore retains a strong personalised *modus operandi* and membership, allegiance and loyalty become the key reference points for any meaningful negotiation and dialogue.

The creation and perpetuation of a social hierarchy through which unequal exchanges take place and competing claims, entitlements and obligations are resolved, is of course a key characteristic of the same culture of patronage Shammo originally set out to break down. Notwithstanding its status as a MBOP, relationships within the organisation therefore are essentially of a clientelistic nature. Furthermore, given the organisation’s success in terms of expansion and consolidation, the size of the clientelistic network generated around Shammo is of a much larger scale than those supported by traditional patrons.

The juxtaposition of the creation of new form of agency via a MBOP (section one of this paper) and the reproduction of aspects of the culture of patronage via the same MBOP (section two of this paper) presents us with a challenging conundrum. The conundrum can also be presented in the form of a straightforward question: can you exercise greater agency from a position that encourages the persistence of clientelistic behaviour? Can they co-exist in the same practice? This is presented here as a conundrum because commentators and analysts have tended to see agency and clientelism as mutually exclusive, the latter an aberration of and an obstacle to the former. Indeed it can be argued that a core tenet of dominant civil society perspectives and much of the literature on membership based and community based organisations, rests on the radical separation and mutual exclusion of these two forms of social action. In what remains of the paper I will explore further aspects of the conundrum.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Shammo is a problematic site of agency. The persistence of characteristics associated with clientelistic practices runs counter to many of the core tenets of the dominant civil society
perspective that informs our thinking about a range of pro-poor organisations. Clientelism is perceived as a negative form of social action because it is based on mechanistic and coercive exchanges that are normally instigated by patrons and to which clients respond in an almost Pavlovian manner. It comes as no surprise then that especially in developing contexts, the study of clientelism has reached a stubborn impasse (Auyero 2000). On the other hand, the study of civil society organisations emphasises values of voluntarism, freedom and choice. The task of these organisations, normative and salvationist in character (Hearn 2001), is precisely to free poor people from ties that are coerced and primordial, and which permit only narrow and short term calculations on the part of the poor. Civil society organisations are supposed to de-clientelise and not re-clientelise individuals.

This paper has argued that the relational milieu constitutes the primary cultural terrain upon which people construct their well-being. This is an attempt to forge a more grounded and critical perspective of organisations of the poor. By linking the relational and the cultural, the intent is to emphasise the embedded and situated character of associational life. This approach lays the foundation for a serious challenge to the tendency to essentialise pro-poor institutions or associations, treating them as if they could or should be isolated from their relevant cultural terrains. Substantially, by insisting on the link our analysis also becomes far more sensitive to the possibility that apparent contradictions (agency and clientelism) may co-exist and be co-constitutive of social action. This builds on an established tradition in social sciences in which agency and the particularities of context are seen to co-produce each other (Giddens 1984).

A key part of the argument presented here is that the organisation has facilitated the creation of a new and stronger form of agency for its members. Agency is prioritised because it allows people to have greater control over increasing parts of their lives. In other words, it enhances well-being. Ryan and Deci (2001) offer interesting insights into this dynamic of well-being from a social
psychology perspective. In their framework, they argue that individuals need to fulfill three basic needs in order to enhance their overall well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Conversely, when the satisfaction of these three is frustrated, well-being is diminished. Of the three basic needs, the notion of autonomy is acknowledged as the most problematic because of its association with ideas of independence and individualism. This clearly connects with our concerns over the reproduction of clientelistic practices and behavior.

In a further exploration of the notion of autonomy, Chirkov et al. (2003) reinforce the centrality of autonomy for well-being. However, the authors begin to introduce important definitional distinctions that are pertinent to our discussion. Autonomy, they argue, is understood as the ability of people to act in accordance with their interests, values, and desires. The opposite of autonomy is not dependence but heteronomy, i.e., coerced action regardless of values and interests. One of the implications of this distinction is that it is conceivable for individuals to strengthen the ability to act autonomously even in contexts when they are enmeshed in relationships of dependency. Or put in a way that allows us to return to our analysis of Shammo and its members: clientelism as an expression of dependency does not necessarily frustrate the possibility of greater agency. The key question to ask therefore is not whether there is dependency, but whether or not the relationship enables members to move from heteronomous contexts to more autonomous ones.

For poor people, the art of moving between various forms of institutional dependencies is the stuff of everyday habits and practices (Auyero 2000, Scheper-Hughes 1992). They are aware of the constraint of relationships but do not always and only judge the same relationships in this light. The fact that members continue to join Shammo is a sign that the organisation is satisfying core needs and is doing so in a way that makes sense for members. While one must be cautious in reading too much into these kinds of numbers, it is equally imprudent to ignore them. In the paper, I have

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23 Doyal and Gough (1991) also argue that autonomy is one of two basic and universal human needs without which human beings cannot meaningfully participate in society.
argued that Shammo’s continued success rests on the fact that it reaches deep into the everyday struggles of its members and is seen to be interested in their concerns and ambitions. Other institutions and networks exist in the area and many offer key material benefits on a regular basis. Yet they do not enjoy the quality of relationship that exists between Shammo and its members. Becoming a member of Shammo therefore entails an exercise of calculation, choice or preference. Members continue to apply the “idiom of belonging” (White 2002) to the organisation partly in recognition of the fact that in the past it has taken their lives seriously, but also in expectation that it will continue to do so in the future. Being locked into dependency or de-cleintelisation therefore is not the main issue. Indeed at particular moments, the need to lock into further dependency may be important to satisfy the need for autonomy. As Chirkov et al. argue: “[o]ne can be autonomously dependent on another, willingly rely on his or her care, particularly if the other is perceived as supportive and responsive” (Chirkov et al. 2003:98, emphasis added).

Finally, agency is created through ongoing interaction. Its morphology changes over time but the direction it takes is not always discernible. For Shammo’s members important changes have occurred and these have become the new matrix for future change (Gramsci 1971). For the organisation, future success depends entirely on its ability to be always relevant to its members’ endeavour to forge new opportunities for creative agency.


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