Development Wheel Internship Scope of Work Report

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Introduction

Development Wheel (DEW) is a national non-governmental organization (NGO) now headquartered in Dhaka, though its roots date back to 1996 in the northerly Jamalpur District of Bangladesh where it still maintains a small regional office. Its mission states: “DEW is dedicated to improve security of livelihoods of the poor segments of society by increasing their participation (particularly women) in small-scale economic activities including arts and crafts by providing a range of business and life skills development services” (Development Wheel, 2010, p. 4). DEW’s founder and executive director, Shah Abdus Salam, remains committed to strengthening the capacities of the poorest and most marginalized in his country through participatory development and through international partnerships with such organizations as Oxfam, the European Union, the Department for International Development, Swallows, Traidcraft Exchange, and the World Fair Trade Organization.

With a staff of 26 located not only in Dhaka City and the Jamalpur District but also in the Mymensingh and Netrokona Districts of Bangladesh, DEW administers multiple programs geared towards building the capacities of the poor such as its Sustainable Livelihoods for Poor Producers (SLIPP), a five-year project funded by the European Commission that is in its concluding stages this year. This program’s commitment to grassroots participation, skills training, creating linkages between producer groups, and policy advocacy are exemplary of all of DEW’s endeavors. Mr. Salam explicitly fosters grassroots empowerment within these marginalized communities, facilitating strong connections within and between them which in turn enhance political power so that people can become advocates in their own lives and livelihoods.
The same capacity building holds true for DEW staff, many of whom have been offered professional development opportunities through their tenure with the organization. For example, one woman has been on a 10-month exchange in Nepal learning various handicraft techniques as well as fair trade retail outlet coordination strategies. Multiple staff from DEW have used their skills developed with the organization to advance their careers with international NGOs. Another young Program Manager said despite a Master’s in Development Studies his lack of experience in the field was a barrier to employment until provided an opportunity by DEW. While ideally these individuals would use their expertise in their work with DEW, Mr. Salam truly seems to view the successes of his staff as his own, even after they have left the organization.

This internship was focused primarily on agriculture practices and policy in Bangladesh and this emphasis will be reflected in the following discussion. The other facets of DEW’s program areas will also be touched upon in the context of development and economics. Research naturally included internal documents from Development Wheel, but readings, conversations, observations, and activities will be incorporated into this report through the lens of international social work practice in order to provide one intern’s overall analysis and experience of living and working in Bangladesh. Lastly, at the request of its executive director, recommendations for DEW’s long-term planning will conclude this report.

**Political and Cultural Landscape of Bangladesh**

Essential understanding for any non-Bangladeshi intern or international worker is the history of the struggle against colonialism in South Asia, particularly over the last century. Mahatma Gandhi’s resistance movement against Great Britain which contributed to India’s independence of 1947 is perhaps most renown, but the official end of colonial rule in the region
left in its wake the lingering hegemony of foreign dominance. The Partition which divided India and Pakistan in 1947, with its “uneasy wedge of one thousand miles of Indian territory” (Reza, 2004, p. 16) separating East and West Pakistan, seemed to be strategically designed as a post-colonial mechanism for control, setting the stage for future internal conflicts. One can refer to a wealth of information about the colonization of the Indian Subcontinent, so events will not be covered in depth here. However, there are some perspectives not commonly documented in history books which will be discussed below for a broader analysis of the birth of Bangladesh, its struggle to fulfill the dreams of its liberation, and some thoughts on how those dreams did not fully come to fruition.

The Language Movement

Post-Partition, language recognition quickly took shape as a struggle to preserve the cultural identity of the Bangalis of East Pakistan, who spoke Bangla. Most of the rulers of Pakistan were from the western part of the country, where several different languages including Punjabi as well as Urdu were spoken, leading to the establishment of Urdu as the official state language and eliminating Bangla from all written and oral government communication (Reza, 2004). Advocates of Bangla opposed the dominance of Urdu in their region and instead put forward a two-language solution. The conflict escalated.

February 21 is International Mother Language Day, formerly State Language Day. It was on this day in 1952 students from Dhaka University chose to take a stand against the imposition of Urdu and the eradication of Bangla and the ensuing clash with the police claimed the lives of several student protesters. Today in Bangladesh, February 21 is celebrated in honor of those student martyrs, an acknowledgment of the universally intrinsic connection between cultural identity and language. It is a day to highlight the importance of preserving the rapidly-
disappearing indigenous languages of the world. In Bangladesh, where the struggle to preserve Bangla from the dominance of English and Urdu was a contributing factor to the war for liberation over four decades ago, February 21 is a national holiday, one of remembrance, gratitude, and pride.

The national memorial begins at midnight on the 21st with a procession to Dhaka’s Central Shaheed Minar. Cultural events take place throughout the day, with people bringing multitudes of carnations, roses, lilies, and other flowers in shades of rich orange, red, white, and green, to be picked apart and used in a vibrant display at the Minar. Those proceeding in front of and up to the Minar carry their bouquets barefoot in respect and reverence for the martyrs. The mood is somber, defiant, and proud. And the language movement in Bangladesh continues today
with new demands for the formal adoption of Bangla as one of the official languages of the United Nations.

1971: The Liberation War

The Liberation War of 1971 through which East Pakistan became Bangladesh remains a powerful force in the cultural psyche of this young, vibrant, wounded nation. That defining moment in the history of South Asia was the culmination of events propelled by centuries of colonialism, Partition, and the fierce defense of identity and culture especially through the assertion of Bangla over Urdu as the official language of East Pakistan. The oppression of language and culture against the Bengali majority continued for decades after the 1952 protests. But so did the resistance, under the leadership of Shaikh Mujibur Rahman, Moulana Vasani, and others. As leader of the Awami League, Shaikh Mujibur declared his Six Point demands for autonomy in 1966 and after 1969 started non-cooperation movement against the rule of West Pakistan. In the 1970 parliamentary elections, Shaikh Mujib was elected with a unanimous majority but the Pakistani regime refused to hand over power. On 25th March at midnight the military began killing thousands of innocent Bangladeshis. On the morning of 26th March Shaikh Mujib declared independence, but he was arrested and sent to jail in West Pakistan. The war for Bangladesh’s liberation had begun. In the nine months it raged, 20 million people fled to India as refugees and West Pakistani military forces and their collaborators brutally killed 30 million people. Ultimately, Bangali freedom fighters with cooperation from India prevailed and Bangladesh was born.

There was hope engendered in the battle for liberation, a sense of possibility of all the new nation could be, the freedom from oppression that would make the enormous devastation of war worthwhile in the context of possibility. The struggle’s heroes are celebrated today as
inspiration for a new generation of Bangladeshis seeking a just world even as the country tries to come to terms with the atrocities of the war and its aftermath of famine and neocolonialism.

The lingering question even today seems to be how to make all of the devastation of war worthwhile in the context of creating a new and hopeful nation. In his powerful novel set in 1971, Islam (2011) vocalizes the hope of the Liberation War at the time of its inception, before there was a Bangla-desh:

You see, in Bangladesh you can be anything you want. If you want to worship a cow or eat it, it wouldn’t matter at all…if you want to marry a Brahmin’s daughter, and if she is agreeable, you can do that too. Same rights for everyone, understand? That is what this war is all about (pp. 177-78)

Neither nationality, nor class, nor gender, nor religion can divide such an egalitarian ideal. These things were the hopes of liberation.

Yet the raging debate currently about the trial of war criminals is evidence the hopes of the liberation remain elusive. It is common knowledge many political leaders in power today were once collaborators with the Pakistani army that wreaked so much devastation upon the people of East Pakistan before, during, and after the war. Public discourse is very much alive on this topic, inspiring massive human chain protests as well as student-led dramas enacting war crimes tribunals where perpetrators are brought to justice. Resolution in this realm would make great strides towards the healing of the nation. From the egalitarian dreams of the Liberation’s heroes to today’s ongoing struggle to hold violators of human rights during the war accountable, there is a knotted scar that marks Bangladesh. The scar begs the answer to the question of what happened to those ideals and how to go about achieving them now.
1975: Hegemony in the Aftermath

There is a special vulnerability to a newly-formed country, particularly one whose land and people have been ravaged by war and decades of oppression. In 1971 Bangladesh was no exception. In his article on the politics of food in developing countries, Sobhan (1979), a Bangladeshi economist, describes the state of his country’s food sovereignty in the years following the war and the politics of food aid exercised by the United States during that time. Sobhan puts forward insights into how food and power propelled the formation of modern-day Bangladesh that looks very different from the vision held by the Liberation leaders. He notes Bangladesh even prior to the war had experienced several consecutive crop failures in rice, a food staple in the country, and this was exacerbated by the destruction of the war not only in terms of crops but also the people who cultivate them who died or were displaced. Years of natural and manmade crop failure combined with ineffective government management of rationing existing food supplies led to increased dependence upon foreign food aid in the fragile years following liberation. Commitments of food aid came predominantly from the United States under the Public Law 480 Title I program which allocates resources for food aid in the form of loans or grants to developing countries (US Department of Agriculture, 2010).

In its desire to influence the political leanings of the still forming government of Bangladesh, the US leveraged its food aid to the country on the brink of famine. Sobhan points out that the early 1970s was defined by the oil producing countries of OPEC flexing their muscle with skyrocketing oil prices and the US was seeking influence in breaking down that barrier. The US government looked to developing countries like Bangladesh to exert pressure on OPEC to reduce their prices, but Bangladesh was not interested in involving itself in western politics. Instead, its prime minister and liberation hero Sheikh Mujib was focused primarily on food
sovereignty and a regime of cooperatives and decentralized government (Sobhan, 1979). At the height of the food crisis the US committed and yet continually delayed food shipments to Bangladesh, citing a violation of PL 480 prohibiting countries receiving aid from the US from trading in strategic commodities with embargo countries like Cuba. But Bangladesh had a prior trade agreement to ship four million jute bags to Cuba and the US cited these bags as ‘strategic commodities’ thereby justifying the blocking of food aid to Bangladesh (Sobhan, 1979).

Continued delays and bureaucracy prompted Sheikh Mujib to visit Washington to advocate on behalf of his starving people, but he was received casually by the administration, sending a clear message of US power (Sobhan, 1979). In the meantime, famine victims in Dhaka and across Bangladesh were dying. “This grim drama was being transacted in the capital city in full view and knowledge of the US embassy as to the nature and gravity of the crisis” (Sobhan, 1979, p. 1979). The United States government watched people die while they played politics and power. “The lesson was being driven home that in destitute countries such as Bangladesh pretensions about independence and non-alignment were only viable through the courtesy of the United States” (Sobhan, 1979, p. 1979). Mujib was assassinated in 1975 and his successor was more willing to align with the trade policies of the Global North.

**The Role of NGOs**

As of February 2012 Bangladesh is host to over 2,100 national and international non-governmental organizations which are formally registered with the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) NGO Affairs Bureau, a prerequisite for receiving foreign donations (Government of Bangladesh, 2012). Since the Bureau was established in 1990, over 18,000 projects funded at nearly US $5.5 trillion have been implemented in the country (GoB, 2012). The vast majority of these organizations are Bangladesh-based, but foreign NGOs from throughout the Middle East,
the European Union, North America, Asia, and Australia are prevalent. According to a report from an online news source in 2010, there are a substantial number of NGOs that are not registered under the NGO Affairs Bureau, but instead fall under the auspices of other GoB departments: Social Welfare; Cooperatives; Office of the Registrar, Joint Stock Companies and Firms; Women and Children Affairs; Micro-Credit Regulatory Authority; Youth Development (BangladeshNews.com, 2010). At a cursory glance, it appears the cumulative number of NGOs under all governmental departments is in the hundreds of thousands.

In general, they seem to have the overarching goal of development as defined by poverty reduction, sustainable agriculture, empowerment of women, or rights of children. From Bangladesh emerged such well-known international NGOs as Grameen Bank, pioneer of the microcredit platform, and BRAC, focused on development, microcredit, and disaster response. Certainly, such missions are worthy in this country. The World Bank (1998) reported over 61% of Bangladesh’s urban population lived below the absolute poverty line of Bangladesh takas (BDT) 3500 per month, and that was over a decade ago. Given that the minimum wage for the garment sector alone has been set since last year at BDT 3500, the working impoverished are likely to be struggling even more today especially in light of dramatic inflation and the global economic crisis.

But even so the proliferation of NGOs seems unprecedented in any other country on the planet. As one Bangladeshi student and activist put it recently, academics and experts go to the best universities in North America and Europe to learn about technology, medicine, or business; to learn about NGOs, experts come to Bangladesh. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the history and current status of development work in Bangladesh and its impacts on the poor and marginalized. However, there is criticism about corruption, opportunism, and foreign
hegemony inherent in the system of non-governmental organizations and their oversight that is worth noting. The subsector of microcredit can perhaps best illustrate and substantiate some of this criticism.

**Microcredit.** The World Bank (2011) reported that in November 2010, the Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA) put a cap on interest rates at 27 percent and made it mandatory for the 1,200 microfinance institutions in the country to allow minimum of 15 days between the dates of loan issuance and the first repayment. This regulation was imposed after an independent 2009 analysis from a US-based firm found that the rates of interest charged were between 18 and 52 percent, with a vast majority of microcreditors – 75 percent – charging 31-40 percent interest. Since microcredit has the expressly stated goal of providing funding streams for poor people who otherwise would have no access, the ethics of charging such exorbitant fees are questionable, though the rationale for this practice is that servicing the loans in rural areas incurs higher costs.

Anecdotally, a discussion with a representative from one microcredit organization could provide insight into the practice. This gentleman was interviewed at the Upazilla headquarters of RDS Microcredit in Jamalpur District as part of a series of focus group discussions held jointly by Development Wheel and Traidcraft Exchange. The RDS representative was pleased about the organization’s 98 percent repayment rate and very few bad debts, facts that to him reflected the success of the RDS program. He reported a majority of the debtors are women and the interest rate, 37 percent last year, was 27 percent currently. At a later meeting with women in Shitalpur nearby, RDS was there to collect loan payments explaining microcredit in this particular non-farming community was used to purchase livestock or to start up small business enterprises like tea stalls. There was no discussion of the ways in which RDS had facilitated lifting women out
of poverty. The women who participated in this meeting identified only RDS and ASA, microcredit institutions, as the only NGOs operating in their community.

An RDS representative takes installments from women in Shitalpur on 14 February 2012

**Development Wheel Spring Internship 2012**

As an international social work student researching the global economy for the duration of my two year master’s program, I came to DEW interested in learning about the impacts of neoliberal agriculture policy on the global food supply, small farmers, and the environment. Through DEW’s sustainable agriculture programs I hoped to gain understanding about the particular struggles and strengths of Bangladeshi farmers, compare those experiences with those of small farmers in the US, and identify practices which perpetuate, mitigate, or contradict the current industrial agriculture model. Simultaneously, I hoped to learn about ecological
alternatives to industrial agriculture integrated with sustainable economic solutions from a human rights framework. In keeping with social work practice and liberation theology, those solutions I have been biased towards include a preferential option for the poor, women, and people of color. The information I have assimilated has been compiled through workshops, conversations with diverse people, articles from Dhaka’s English-language newspaper, World Bank reports, and works of local authors, both fiction and nonfiction, to name a few.

But the scope of this internship, while most definitely meeting the expectations stated above, expanded well beyond agriculture and economics or even the other activities in which DEW is engaged. It quite unexpectedly emerged as a magical cultural experience encompassing evenings of music and art, heated discussions on foreign imperialism, a tasty palate of delicious foods, and personal instruction on how to wear a sari. Mostly, though, it was the grace and hospitality and warmth in which I was ensconced by the Bangladeshis who cared for me during my stay that created the space for still unfathomable learning and growth. For the remainder of this report, I will interweave the entire scope of my 11 weeks in Bangladesh, from the professional realm of the formal internship to the rich cultural exchange that occurs through daily living in a country other than one’s own.

**Sustainable Livelihoods in Agriculture**

At the risk of perpetuating the hegemony of development language, sustainable agriculture is in the forefront of the work of many development professionals and NGOs in Bangladesh and DEW in this regard is no exception. The challenge, of course, is to clarify what exactly we mean by sustainability and recognize the word can be lip service to what in actuality is counterproductive practice. To address this from a structural perspective, it can be helpful to
answer the question, “Who benefits?” If we are rooted in the practice of preferential options for people who are poor the answer to this question must unequivocally include them.

Not lost in translation, after all…

I arrived in Bangladesh on 9 February 2012 and by the 11th I was in the field in the char areas in the northern part of the country, traveling with DEW and Traidcraft to hear from farmers about their struggles and strengths as they adapt (or not) to the changing climate. We spent long days hearing from dozens of farmers and on the 13th we arrived in Tatihati in Sherpur District to speak with a group of indigenous women trying to farm to feed their families. We sat in a central area with the packed dirt freshly swept of debris and listened to them explain how the foggy weather has destroyed many crops over the past several seasons.

At the end of the meeting they gathered around to talk to me, so I kept someone close by to translate. One woman approached and said she has no hope for herself, but rather hopes for a better life for her children. Another woman simply asked me to pray for her. Nothing else. Finally, a few women came close to me, clearly asking something and making forward clawing motions in the air with their hands. Confused, I turned to the person translating for me. He hesitated, and then explained the government has a program where the Ultra Poor can get a job digging in the dirt to fill in holes in the road in exchange for food. I had no response. I thought perhaps I misunderstood or that language barriers limited explanation.

As we were walking back to our vehicles, I suddenly became overwhelmed not only by the sheer desperation of these suffering women, but by the audacity of the official solution to that desperation. In crisis, I questioned my presence in this country. What could I possibly meaningfully contribute here? I began to cry. While jet lag and the stress of navigating a new culture without understanding the language could be attributed to my emotional response, I believe in fact it was the overwhelming, quiet, and yet intense request that stuck such a deep chord within me.

Several weeks later I reviewed a World Bank report from 2011 talking about the current economic status of Bangladesh. It turns out I did not misunderstand the translation: the formal government policy was spelled out in this report.

“Food for Work – this program operates in rural areas only. The beneficiaries are generally women selected by the Union Parishad who must be fit and willing to work in infrastructure projects in the area for food. The work includes planting trees, digging canals, building embankments, road building and maintenance, etc. The total budget allocation for this program in the current fiscal year is Tk9.9 billion” (World Bank, 2011, p. 12).

In Bangladesh, farmers help to the maintain food sovereignty of the nation, that is, it is through the essential production of fish, vegetables, and poultry and livestock farmers that
Bangladesh is not dependent upon foreign food aid. With the famine of 1974 in not-too-distant memory, the importance of this sovereignty is highly recognized in policy and rhetoric. In practice, there are complications which negatively impact small and landless farmers. Their socio-economic status within the caste-based society of Bangladesh creates barriers to education and access to those government decision-makers who have the ability to help or hinder farmers’ livelihoods. Farmers in Bangladesh tend to function as disintegrated, individual actors in the market which limits their negotiating power, makes them dependent upon middle men to obtain inputs and to sell their produce, and often they have little to no access to or control over current prices in the market. Unscrupulous inputs sellers have been known to contaminate fertilizer with substances like cement in order to increase profits. The chemical pesticides and fertilizers are not only expensive but the retailers mostly provide no training as to their correct use which leads to heavy, unnecessary, and harmful application.

Interventions must then address the power differential between small farmers and the other actors in the agriculture system in order to reduce the farmers’ vulnerability and strengthen their influence upon key components of the market. The power differential, created and perpetuated by the dynamics of class stratification, stems from which actors have or lack access to information, training, and networks of support. A sharp recognition of this dynamic is essential to enhancing the capacity of small farmers, long term. So what, then, is sustainable agriculture as practiced by DEW?
SLIPP. Sustainable Livelihoods for Poor Producers (SLIPP) was implemented in 2007 and came to its planned completion at the end of March this year and the project seems to best illustrate the value set of DEW’s work in the agriculture sector, with its focus on economic independence and self-advocacy in the realms of policy and the market. SLIPP provided training programs in such areas as organic alternatives to chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Throughout the course of this internship, I have spoken with dozens of farmers from Mymensingh and Netrokona about the impacts of SLIPP on their lives and each of them cited three consistent positive changes: 1) Respect: because they have come together as unified groups government officials and market actors now pay attention to their needs; 2) Knowledge: trainings on sustainable agriculture practices and on the rights of farmers within the policy of Bangladesh have leveraged power in their favor; 3) Economics: all of the farmers describe enhanced financial security due to better prices, higher quality products, and more effective use of inputs.

### SLIPP Income Impacts over 5 Years

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<td>Vegetable</td>
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<td>Netrokona</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fish</td>
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<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duck</td>
<td>Netrokona</td>
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*Data: Traidcraft, SLIPP  Summary of Findings*
In each district, farmers have formed registered associations comprised of 3,000 total members. The success of the SLIPP model is being expanded upon through a similar project in the Mymensingh and Sherpur Districts which starts in April this year. As these groups are organized and linked with each other, the voices of small farmers throughout Bangladesh will no longer be marginalized. In this way, DEW is focused on genuinely sustainable agriculture.

**Case Study: Boira Village, Mymensingh District**

On 3 March 2012, Boira vegetable farmers were asked to talk about the impacts of DEW’s SLIPP on their lives.

**Before** – Boira farmers largely worked individually within the market, paying high prices for low-quality seeds and inputs, misusing the fertilizers and pesticides, and going into debt with high interest rates in order to survive from season to season. They described being ignored by sub-district agriculture officers and other government officials. These farmers, who mostly own small plots of land, felt ignored and powerless in the market.

**After** – 5 years of support and training from DEW has had dramatic impacts on Boira farmers. Because they are now united they negotiate better rates, buyers come to them with advance orders, and they pay lower interest rates. Government agriculture officers and inputs sellers when they pass through Boira will now stop to talk with the farmers, asking about their crops and their families, inviting them to trainings. Such consideration was previously unheard of. Training on organic composting and pest management has enhanced the economic and nutritional health of this community. They are more self-sustaining and independent from agribusiness companies.

Democracy in action: Netrokona farmers debate about the formulation of the association

**Bangladesh Agriculture Policy.** In a statement from 1999, the Bangladesh Ministry of Agriculture declared the overarching objective of its myriad agriculture policies is to create a self-sufficient food system within Bangladesh (GMark Consulting Ltd., 2003) through rapid poverty reduction, increased productivity,
and creating income opportunities within the agriculture sector, especially for rural poor and rural women (Sattar Mandal, 2006). Both analyses of policy reviewed for this report concur the official policy is generally compatible with the above stated goals, while acknowledging weaknesses in their formulation and execution (GMark, 2003; Sattar Mandal, 2006). As well, it could be argued dissemination of national policy to those impacted most by it, the farmers themselves, is also a weak point. Sattar Mandal (2006) conducts his analysis by segmenting three major areas of policy: crops, non-crops, and cross-cutting. It is the cross-cutting policy subsector, which has to do with land use, water, food, and rural development, that has the most relevance to this report regarding DEW’s work in sustainable agriculture.

The criticisms offered by GMark Consultants (2007) in terms of formulation and execution of policy are well-founded. The authors, clearly drawing heavily from Sattar Mandal’s 2006 report, note an absence of farm and non-farm linkages which include the processing and marketing of crops. “Even the most recent policy document…avoids any analysis of linking the growth of farm productivity with development of non-farm activities” (GMark, 2007, Section 5.6). This omission is a missed opportunity to maximize job creation and to incorporate and enhance the role of women in agriculture. In their conclusion, the authors of the 2007 policy analysis state rather boldly, “Poor farmers do not care about the policies…Their only concern is high price and high profitability” (GMark, 2007, Section 7.1). It can fairly be questioned whether poor farmers do not care or whether their lack of involvement in policy formulation and lack of awareness of their rights under national policy has led to a considerable level of disenfranchisement.

Yet national policy makers have identified farmers among those key partnerships necessary for a robust agriculture sector in Bangladesh. Sattar Mandal (2006) highlights the
supposed role of farmers in this partnership: (a) achieving and sustaining household level food security, (b) deciding what to grow and how much to grow, (c) deciding the type of technologies to adopt and adapt, (d) forming cooperatives and other farmer organizations, (e) creating demand for new inputs and technologies, and (f) placing demands on the government system of public goods provision and representation. (p. 14).

The author’s recommendation to strengthen linkages is an essential component of DEW’s work.

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Pragmatic Partnerships – DEW and Syngenta Memo of Understanding

On 28 February 2012, Syngenta’s Head of Marketing in Bangladesh spoke with me about Syngenta’s role in agriculture in this country and its partnership with DEW.

In this country where as much as 80-85% of the population lives in rural areas, agriculture plays an enormous role in the lives of millions of people. There is a dearth of government support at the local level, however, with agriculture extension offices remarkably understaffed. As a result, private businesses and NGOs make up the gap for farmers, but not all of them behave ethically or are well-trained in best practices in their own right.

Inputs such as hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides are frequently misused by farmers due to lack of training. Worse, some unscrupulous retailers will actually mix cement in with the fertilizer. As the largest inputs retailer in the country Syngenta has unparalleled access to farmers. Recognizing this, DEW has entered into a partnership with the agrichemical firm to train Syngenta staff and create linkages between retailers and farmers in order to reduce misinformation and exploitation.

The executive from Syngenta said his company is committed to providing technical and safety training to farmers. In fact, Syngenta staffs a small army of 1,200 community workers throughout Bangladesh for just that purpose. He reported each of those outreach workers has daily contact with up to 30 farm families. In addition, Syngenta has franchised about 7,000 exclusive outlets selling hybrid seeds and chemical inputs, with a commitment to maintaining quality. The training of franchise owners is done through the Bogra Learning & Development Center and Development Wheel has been involved in this process to ensure accurate information is reaching vulnerable farmers.
One final report on agro-ecological zones in Bangladesh (see below) fleshes out this policy review. Fazlul Haque Bhuiyan & Uddin Bhuiya (2003) chart the characteristics of each of the 30 agro-ecological zones including zone nine, the Old Brahmaputra Floodplain, within which Jamalpur, Sherpur, Mymensingh, and Netrokona are contained. The chart’s delineation of development constraints – flash floods in river basins and droughty soil on ridge tops – and potential infrastructure developments – all-weather roads and improvements to irrigation channels – in zone nine are in synch with information obtained from field research conducted by DEW in 2004 and also this year.

**Campaign for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods (CSRL).** At a workshop on groundwater, or lack thereof, in the char areas of western Bangladesh, CSRL delineated its four primary goals to achieve comprehensive agriculture reform in this country: 1) to ensure profitable prices for agriculture products; 2) to
establish storage for agriculture products at the union level; 3) to protect the seed industry from multinational corporations; and 4) to protect ponds, canals, and rivers. Oxfam funds this campaign and DEW, as a partner NGO with Oxfam, actively participates along with other vested interests in the agriculture sector. The campaign establishes connections between the diverse regions of Bangladesh and lobbies policy makers on behalf of sustainable agriculture with the support of expert testimony and through research.

The groundwater issue is a telling one in terms of the challenges facing farmers in Bangladesh, particularly when important factors are simply beyond their control. For example, the expert testimony provided at CSRL’s groundwater workshop indicated 90 percent of Bangladesh’s water comes from upstream, that is, through India. This leaves Bangladesh’s farmers particularly exposed to the temperamental political climate between the two countries. Farmland in Bangladesh is heavily dependent on irrigation – as much as 63 percent – as opposed to rainwater (CSRL Workshop, 2012). Dams and climate change have dramatically reduced water availability, leading to the unsustainable solution of deep tube-well drilling for groundwater access. In the Boranthjo region alone, the Boranthjo Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) has drilled 12,693 deep T-wells, with severe consequences. Groundwater levels have been reduced by as much as 100 feet in some areas, long after the BMDA halted drilling in the early 1990s. Even with these dramatic impacts, there is discussion of massively expanding deep T-wells in the Dinajpur District.

Given all of this evidence, it was somewhat surprising to hear the policy recommendations from CSRL regarding the groundwater issue, which seems to struggle with long-term solutions to the severe water shortage in the region. CSRL is proposing dredging of various water sources in the Borando area, with a “favorable alternative” for poor people living
nearby the dredging-affected areas who will be displaced by the projects. Further, CSRL wants to halt the “unplanned” drilling of deep T-wells, or at least require scientific testing before any further drilling is begun. One could question what kind of science would reflect positive environmental impacts on such practice given its track record in the region. The campaign further proposed rather traditional policy solutions such as loan management – i.e. microcredit – ensuring low-interest funding for farmers, though exactly how this will mitigate the groundwater shortage is unclear.

The issue highlighted above is one of many facing small farmers of Bangladesh over which they currently have little control and even less of a voice. While CSRL reported as much as 50 percent of the water used by farmers to irrigate crops is wasted due to mismanagement and over watering, particularly of rice, there was no mention of other major uses for water like mining and industrial production. It would be beneficial to research the extent to which water used for agriculture is recycled back into the groundwater table versus how much industrial water is fit for re-use, but this was not part of the drought discussion.

**Fair Trade**

Global manufacturing and financial markets are realities in today’s economy, creating an intricate international network of relations which reflect the power dynamic of forces within and between the Global North and Global South. Facilitated over the last 40 years by neoliberal market policies known as the Washington Consensus – deregulation, privatization, and trade liberalization – that gained traction in the Reagan/Thatcher era (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008), the vehicles for the growth of the global market have been the World Trade Organization (WTO) and international financial institutions, free trade agreements (FTA) and other trade instruments,
and widespread deregulation that led to a streamlining of global financial markets, development, and the supply chain (Bello, 2010; Black, 2007).

After four decades of neoliberal trade policy it is possible to reflect holistically, with the support of research and data, on the impacts of the Consensus, data that reveal patterns running counter to the mantra that laissez-faire economic policy results in wealth that trickles down to prosperity for the masses. Indeed, one can simply visit the garment sector in Bangladesh’s export processing zone outside of Dhaka to catch a glimpse of how millions of workers suffer today under neoliberal policy which suppresses wages, promotes long working hours with no compensation, and relies on the desperation of poor people who have no other options. The term sweatshop is now common in the lexicon of the Global North, though its tangible meaning in terms of how sweatshops are directly connected high standard of living enjoyed by wealthy countries remains obfuscated.

Yet, efforts to shift the balance of power into the hands of the producers have long been in the works and are gaining momentum. There are international responses to neoliberal trade and development practices that have included the work of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) and regional fair trade agreements stemming from that network. The WFTO and its partners (2009) have collectively defined fair trade as follows:

Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair Trade organizations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising, and in campaigning for
changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade (What is fair trade? section).

Development Wheel is a fair trade organization and its executive director Mr. Salam is the current Secretary of the WFTO Asia. DEW is also a member of the national Ecota Fair Trade Forum, a collective of fair trade groups from throughout Bangladesh. Mr. Salam is the chair of the Ecota board. During this internship, I was afforded the opportunity to meet with producer groups in Tangail and Jamalpur, Bangladesh as well as in Kathmandu and Pokhara, Nepal. I spoke with directors of fair trade groups, producers, and staff, who provided a wealth of insight into the impacts of fair trade as well as criticism of some forms of its implementation.

Bangladesh. DEW works with bamboo producer groups in Tangail District making lovely baskets and household items like lamps and serving trays. As well DEW groups in Jamalpur, Jessore, Bogora, Gazipur, and Manikgonj create jute handicrafts, hand-stitched clothing, bedding, pillowcases, and scarves. DEW’s role is to provide training on technique and design, cultivate markets for export, and negotiate for quality raw materials. The embroidery is completed by women, mostly as supplemental income through work they can do from their home. They are paid by the piece. The bamboo producers are both men and women from a region known as a bamboo cluster in Bangladesh. There is intergenerational knowledge of weaving techniques that people from this region are known for.

In villages like Baoikhola in Dalwer Upazilla of Tangail bamboo
producers who work from their homes make baskets for both the local market and for fair trade export to Japan through People Tree and DEW. The baskets, used locally for carrying mustard and rice as well as for cleaning vegetables and fish, have a simple aesthetic appeal that is both functional as well as elegant. Prices in the local market fluctuate with the harvest so that now, in the off season, the baskets fetch 40 Bangladesh taka (BDT) each as opposed to BDT 50 a piece wholesale and about BDT 60-70 retail during peak harvest. DEW places orders for export from September to December annually. Last season DEW’s order from this producer group was for 3,700 pieces for which they were paid over BDT 130,000 (roughly 35 taka each). Despite the lower cost per item, this family indicated they wish they had more orders from DEW because the volume alone provides substantial income.
Export of their products to the United States is a consistent goal of these producers, who view that market as lucrative. Indeed, migration to the US is also the dream of many who have the perception that opportunities are greater there. However, the DEW staff person from Tangail who works with these producers expressed that it is better to promote skills training and opportunities in Bangladesh. He spoke from personal experience and became teary when talking about how he came to work for DEW. Nine years ago in 2003 when this young man crossed paths with Mr. Salam, he could not even afford the bus fare to Dhaka. Mr. Salam helped to cultivate this young man’s skills not only in handicrafts but also in the fair trade market. Now, he has purchased his own motorcycle, is able to comfortably support his family, and serves as an advocate for the livelihoods of others in Tangail. Rather than migrating to the US or anywhere else, his story asserts the power of capacity building within a local context, where one person’s success can have a ripple effect on his community’s well-being.

In Bangladesh, there are other fair trade organizations doing good work such as Artisan Hut, a member of the national Ecota Fair Trade Forum. Artisan Hut is a textiles fair trade group whose founder is committed to maintaining the integrity of the standards fair trade represents, challenging the growing trend in the lucrative fair trade industry to compromise the very values – worker rights – from which it stems. Through his criticism Artisan Hut’s founder reflected his alignment with and respect for the producers who weave and sew the lovely fabrics coming from his organization.

Nepal. The tourist hotbeds in Kathmandu and in Pokhara are home to many cooperatives and also fair trade groups, many of which are members of the WFTO Asia network. For organizations like Mahaguthi in the capital city and Women’s Skills Development Organization (WSDO) in the resort town of Pokhara, transparency in their values and working conditions is
explicitly integrated into every aspect of their work, from production to retail. Visitors are welcome and signs posting fair trade policy and worker compensation packages are prevalently placed. The atmosphere in both places reflects a sense of calm, productive, cooperation and pride. From the stunning pashmina and cashmere scarves of Mahaguthi to the vibrant dyes of hand-loomed textiles at WSDO, the (mostly) women who produce these finely-crafted pieces have been selected for employment because of their marginalized status in society as single, widowed, divorced, or disabled. For WSDO particularly, the spirit of fair trade is embodied in its mission and lived in its daily practice.

**Criticism.** While the enormous popularity of fair trade in the Global North is encouraging, its growing market has also led to the erosion of the core values of worker rights and justice in many organizations, calling the integrity of the entire model into question. The largest so-called fair trade organization in Bangladesh, Aarong, for example, has been questioned about compensation of its producers in relation to the market price for their goods. As one fair-trader pointed out mass, just-in-time production is impossible in the fair trade model, since the standard emphasizes not only fair compensation but also quality work environments that do not mandate long work hours. In addition, while fair trade mitigates some of the production abuses workers endure in the industrial

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**Women’s Skills Development Organization: Fair trade, as it should be…**

In 1975 Ms Ram Kali Khadka founded WSDO with the intention of providing skills training for the most marginalized women in her community in rural Nepal. In 1990 producing handicrafts was added to the scope of group. To date, more than 8,000 women have passed through her doors, 400 of them currently actively engaged with the organization.

They produce fine hand-woven and dyed purses and textiles. The women who work there are paid by the piece and work 9-5 daily with Saturdays off, which is the standard for most of South Asia. Workers receive a remarkable benefits package including paid maternity leave, basic health care, a clothing allowance, scholarships for women and their daughters, professional development, and a cooperative savings and credit program.

WSDO is completely self-sustaining, receiving no external donations. Their products can be found at places like Ten Thousand Villages all over the world.
economy it does nothing to impact the rest of the supply chain that includes seafarers – many of whom come from Bangladesh – and the truck drivers, warehouse workers, and retail workers who get the (hopefully) fairly-produced goods into the hands of the global consumer.

Weaknesses within the fair trade arena itself, that is, with the treatment of staff working on behalf of fair trade producers, is another concern. DEW currently has a staff person on a 10-month fellowship exchange in Nepal. She describes substandard living conditions, such as poor heat in the winter, and an irregular and insufficient stipend for her living expenses. If the very people who are being cultivated as future leaders of the fair trade movement are not being treated with the standards they are supposed to uphold, how can the network endure with integrity?

Yet the criticism does not suggest the fair trade model should be abandoned altogether, particularly since there are groups out there, like DEW, WSDO, Mahaghuti, and Artisan Hut, which are doing such good for so many people. But the global supply chain and the consumer-based economies it feeds require us to be ever-vigilant of the corruption of the values fair trade represents that make it so popular to begin with. There should be regular oversight of any organization using the WFTO label with interviews of producers by speakers of their native language conducted.
independently of the managers. Perhaps a not-for-profit or cooperative model is warranted in the fair trade arena, which would help to ensure it is the producers who benefit the most from the fruits of their labor.

**Gender Equity**

Fair trade is inextricably tied to gender issues, since women in the global economy have tended to be exceptionally vulnerable to exploitation and exclusion. DEW’s work in gender issues extends beyond the economics of fair trade and into challenging the social constructs in Bangladesh culture that perpetuates marginalization of and violence against women here. In Mymensingh, the We Can Campaign to end violence against women is now in its eighth year with a roster of activists 20,000 strong who are mobilized to a community response when an incident of violence occurs against a woman. This is an awareness-raising campaign through which the wall of silence preserved in the name of privacy is broken down to expose domestic violence as unacceptable under any circumstances.

Recognizing the power of cultural norms, the We Can Campaign incorporates a youth-focused program called Change Makers which endeavors to reach youth in their formative years. The idea is that we first much make change within ourselves and then radiate that change to our families, our communities, our districts, our nation. With young men honoring their sisters and mothers, they can then lead by example for their friends and family members to create a new generation of men who do not abuse women and a society in which such abuse is absolutely not tolerated. The We Can and Change Makers campaigns are being expanded into Dhaka currently, building on the success of the Mymensingh groups. In fact, the goal is to have We Can District Alliances representing all 50+ districts of Bangladesh.
Community leaders with the District Alliance in Mymensingh recognize the complex social power dynamic that perpetuates and tolerates violence against women, explicitly citing patriarchy and class as tools of oppression. One leader noted a woman who sought help from her male religious leader was told the marks from her torture by her husband would get her into heaven. The message is clear: this is a private matter that should not be spoken of in public.

We Can and Change Makers strive to break that silence.

During this internship International Women’s Day was celebrated – on March 8 – and DEW coordinated programs in Dhaka as well as Mymensingh. Preparation for the events, which included cultural programs, speeches by community leaders, and music, was extensively orchestrated by DEW’s We Can staff and volunteers in both cities. The event incorporates a midnight candle lighting symbolizing the light being shined on the darkness of violence, followed by a collective oath-taking through which everyone commits to do their part to end violence against women. It was a powerful and solemn moment.

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**Violence against Bangladeshi women: How real is it?**

DEW’s director of the Dhaka We Can Campaign described several incidents which happened in March this year:

- A woman studying for exams to enter university was set on fire by her husband, suffering burns over 90 percent of her body, because he did not approve.
- A female professor had her eyes gouged out by her husband in order to end her teaching career.
- A woman studying at university against her husband’s wishes had the fingers of her hand completely severed by him.

Justice for these women is elusive. Evidence is contaminated or lost, perpetrators flee and change their names and this seems to be sufficient to throw law enforcement off, and the judicial process if a case does come to court is cumbersome and slow. The family is pressured by society to move on and support other daughters.

The newspapers weekly contain stories of women who are “tortured” by their husbands in order to extort the wife’s family for increasing amounts of her dowry. In this context, torture can mean anything from emotional abuse to beatings to setting on fire. We Can formally opposes the practice of dowry.
Development Wheel’s roots began in rural Jamalpur, where its founder, Shah Abdus Salam, was born. There, and later in Mymensingh, he experienced the marginalization of the poor and of women around him and this has shaped his entire life. Professionally based in Dhaka, Mr. Salam never forgets his deep connection to the rural people of his country. In this sense, the future of DEW is largely a reflection of its founder. Plans are in the works to deepen those roots in Mymensingh and also in Sherpur, while expanding programming inside Dhaka.

There are multiple new programs currently in progress. Launched in April this year is an agriculture program inspired by the success of SLIPP through the Global Poverty Reduction Program. This is a three-year program endeavoring to reach 6,000 farmers in Mymensingh and Sherpur; a second collaboration between DEW and Traidcraft Exchange. The Swallows
Agriculture Rights Program is also imminent in its implementation. Oxfam UK is funding an initiative in Mymensingh implemented by DEW called Transformative Women’s Leadership, which endeavors to further develop the capacities of women leaders in that area. The We Can Campaign is dramatically enhancing its presence in Dhaka as well as throughout Bangladesh, especially in the Greater Mymensingh area which encompasses five districts. Also currently in the works is a Right to Education campaign which incorporates the children and teachers of DEW’s primary school for the children of garment workers in Savar. All of this work is very exciting and the dedicated and capable staff throughout DEW is working hard to coordinate these impactful programs.

Still in its infancy is another major project, which has been a dream of Mr. Salam’s for some time. In the countryside between Mymensingh and Netrokona, Mr. Salam is searching for a piece of land in order to build a training and resource center primarily for agriculture work but also to serve other DEW programs. The vision for the center includes not only centrally-located training and office space, but a full-service guest house and kitchen, green space for trees and a garden, composting, rainwater catchments, and solar energy technology. It would be an environment hospitable to learning and research for DEW staff and partners based in Bangladesh and also abroad. It would be a place of collaboration and exploration of possibility. It would be a place of empowerment and equity, a functional manifestation of DEW’s mission.

Recommendations

Mr. Salam has requested me to include this section, which I would not have otherwise presumed to do. Yet part of his success in sustainable development work is precisely due to his openness to the perspectives of others and so I agreed to express my opinion about ways in
which DEW itself could develop as an organization and perhaps strengthen its impact on those it endeavors to serve.

1) **Strengthen the Farmers Associations by encouraging a cooperative model.** These associations are still in their infancy, not yet even formally registered with the government of Bangladesh, and clearly their collective power has been demonstrated in the market and in official circles. But as Bangladesh continues to develop its industrial sector and as land, already a rare and expensive commodity, becomes even more in demand small farmers owning individual pieces of land will remain vulnerable to wealthy and powerful forces which seek to drive them from it. A cooperative model – examples in Cuba are informative – could leverage the economic power of small farmers collectively against those forces. Considering a cooperative model for DEW’s fair trade groups is also recommended to mitigate against the fluctuating market and as a means of leadership development.

2) **Maintain a tight focus on programming scope.** The myriad challenges facing poor people in Bangladesh combined with Mr. Salam’s genuine desire create enduring solutions to those challenges can make it tempting to spread the organization too thin. Preserving a hyper-focused scope on one to three program areas will ensure those programs, while few in number, are powerful in impacts. The Women’s Skills Development Organization, for example, does one thing – fair trade for women producers – very well. As a result, the WSDO is completely independent of external funding and fully autonomous.

3) **Incorporate an overt opposition to dowry in the message of the We Can Campaign.** While I recognize the depth at which this practice is entrenched in Bangladeshi culture and in religion, dowry perpetuates the deep psychological message that women are the property of men. As property, violence against women will be tolerated, justified, and minimized as
within the rights of the men who ‘own’ them. This is reflected in the structural indifference permeating the legal and criminal justice systems’ ineffectual responses to perpetrators of violence against women. The We Can social movement needs to amplify the intrinsic connection between the practice of dowry and violence against women, explicitly calling for the practice to end.

**Conclusion**

As I think about my fourth day in Bangladesh when a group of poor rural women asked me to procure them a job digging in the dirt for food I return to my question: What do I have to meaningfully contribute in this country? After processing through this crisis with Mr. Salam I came to the conclusion the most meaningful contribution I could make as an international social worker is to bear witness, to learn, and most importantly to tell the story to people in my own country who are either unable or unwilling to witness and experience this for themselves. Now that my 11 weeks in Bangladesh have concluded, I find this commitment to bear witness still resonates as the most impactful contribution I can make.

Images of the last three months percolate: A little boy, obviously a child of the street, hurt and crying in the midst of masses of humanity celebrating the Bengali New Year, his tears met with indifference not out of callous disregard but out of numb acceptance that *this* is reality; two pairs of feet on the rainy sidewalk, one polished leather and the other bare and muddy, both reflecting class and status; river water anemically flowing black and soupy outside Old Dhaka; lush green rice paddies and banana trees spanning acre after acre, dotted with islands of mud huts and mounds of rice straw; traffic jams of cars, busses, rickshaws, CNGs, and horse-drawn carriages all under a cacophony of honking horns, shouting men, brick grinders, pounding hammers; the early morning and evening azan creating a sense of stillness and peace amidst the
chaos; having tea at the fish market; the gracious tilt of the head, a gesture unique to Bangladeshi culture that can best be interpreted as an assent, or a nonverbal “as you wish.”

To bear witness is to spend a substantial amount of time uncomfortably aware of one’s otherness – it is a privilege to be in this role, able to observe, to engage even, but also able to leave, ultimately. The slums of the export processing zone in the garment sector of Bangladesh and the unspeakably hard life where toil and cholera and missed meals are a daily reality are stories that *must* be told in my country. Because one lifestyle supports the other, one lifestyle creates the other. I return to the United States as an ambassador of Development Wheel. It is an honor that comes with a tremendous responsibility, one I intend to fulfill wholeheartedly until, that is, I come back to Bangladesh.

Women farmers in Barumari Village, Mymensingh, 5 March 2012
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