

Democratization of Civil Society in Bangladesh: Prospect of Japanese Neighborhood Association as a Model

Background

- Bangladesh is a mostly Muslim society with a transitional democracy
- Political division among the political parties cuts through the entire social life of Bangladeshi citizens.
- In the last 20 years either of the two big political parties (Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party) and their alliances came to power alternating each other in every five years.

Core Observations on Civil Society in Bangladesh based on previous researches

- **CSOs highly participate in grass-roots social services.**
- **Advocacy and Democratic Contribution in everyday life is weak. Well organized advocacy is a new trend for the CSOs**
- **Lacks the necessary participatory attributes for proper interest articulation and monitoring the state**
- **Political entanglement threatens their autonomy. Co-optation and politicization by political forces have weakened civil society and impeded its ability to emerge as vigilant forces.**

What may be the way to strengthen civil society to generate a better democratic culture in Bangladesh

- More advocacy programs
- Participation in governance
- Training on civic engagement

(Training for most of these functions are all in way by different NGOs. NGOs themselves are also acting as advocacy groups.

Big NGOs themselves are powerful negotiators at the central level on different issues on development and economic growth.)

Developing a democratic culture at the grass-roots level prioritize first

All of these functions require a certain level of education and some technical know how that is often difficult to raise among the less educated citizens at the periphery level just through trainings.

Moreover these mechanism may work only when the citizens and government officials and the politicians posses the democratic values and are oriented in the democratic culture in their day to day life.

This research is particularly focuses on **developing democratic culture at the community** level through group based actions that generate both bridging and bonding social capital. Long practice to solve common problems collectively, feeling of unity may also develop understanding and tolerance and often it may overcome (though not overpower) the partisan division in the society and vertical socio-political relations.

Fundamental idea is to develop democratic culture (Tocquvillian Style)

- Democratic practices should begin in the everyday life around the living places
- Such democratic culture shall be institutionalized if it is organized and continued in a structured way
- For better participation and monitoring, important is to develop a sharing, compromising, negotiable interactions with each other and in collective actions
- Group based actions for small purposes, common goals, within the community or neighborhood or villages may be organized.
- Such common thinking, toleration, and cooperation in action and negotiation skills may be reflected in their political dealings

Research Question

Broad Purpose is democratic institutionalization in Bangladesh

- **Main objective** is to develop the best model to strengthen the politically weak civil society in Bangladesh
- **Emphasis** is given on reconstructing a democratic political culture at the grass-roots level through group actions
- **Research question** is, how can the grass-roots civil society in Japan help in the democratization of civil society in Bangladesh ?

Why Japanese Neighborhood Association?

- NHA is a type of organization that includes all inhabitants belonging to different social classes and professions in a small geographic area. Naturally it is expected to generate a type of bridging social capital.
- Its formation and operation are democratic.
- NHA is involved in all types of community issues;
- Again it is connected to the local government.
- NHA were formulated to overcome different common community problem ranging from security to garbage management throughout Japan.
- Historically, they have contributed to the development of Japan's society, politics and economy in different ways and in different levels.
- Moreover, in recent studies it has been found that NHA though offers it self as a stage for political campaign it remains politically neutral.
- We know NHA do not have direct impact on the mainstream politics in Japan but for enhancing social capital, civic political culture in Bangladesh and other developing countries, Neighborhood Association may be considered as a model.

Propositions

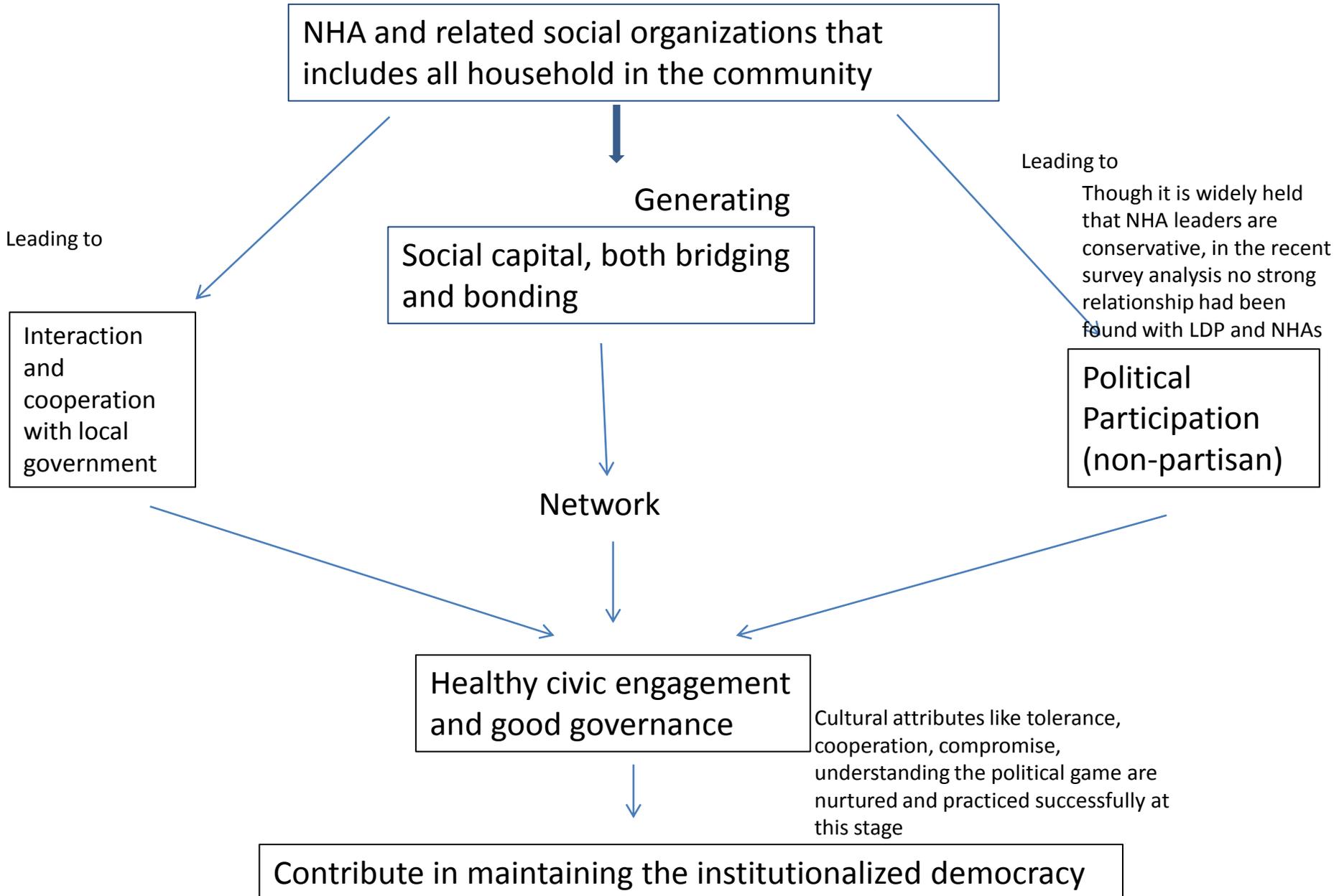
Theory

- NHA as an institution has contributed to the development of the democratic political culture of Japan.
- Involvement and participation at the community level through NHA has contributed in building the necessary norms and practices (social capital) for building the democratic culture

Hypothesis

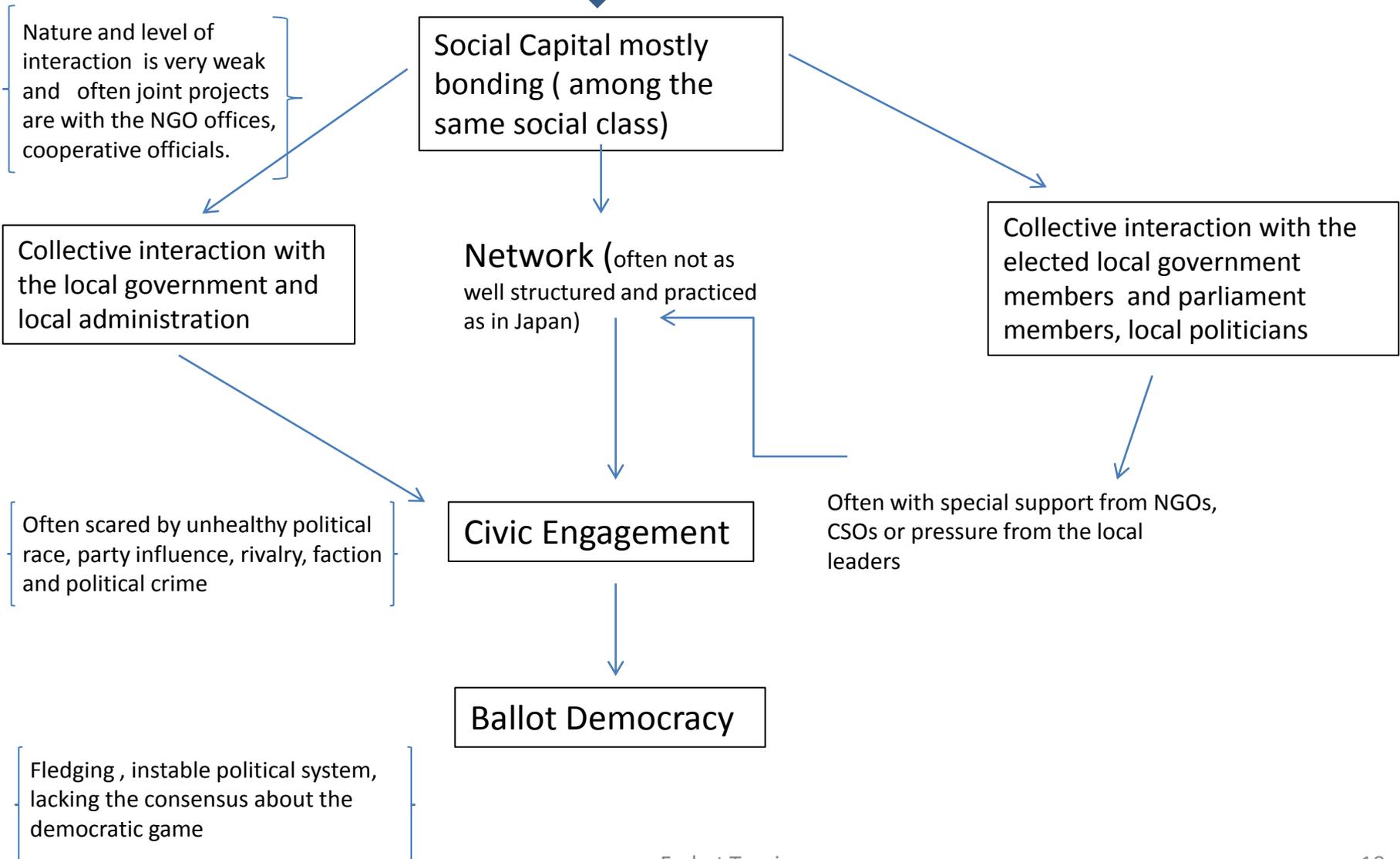
1. Group based functions on issues that concern all sections of the community develops the necessary democratic attributes like community feeling, tolerance, understanding , consensus on common issues etc.
2. When a community group is successfully able to conduct or manage matters that involves all and contributes to the whole community and if the leaders and members are satisfied with its out come, then to preserve or institutionalize the new function, they may try to keep the group non-partisan /neutral.
3. Civic engagement with the support and backing from a neutral organization may turnout to be more democratic. (third hypothesis follows from the first two hypothesis)

Japanese NHA Contributing to Democracy



Community Groups leading to Grass-Roots Democracy in Bangladesh

NGO credit groups, Community groups, Voluntary organizations, Cooperatives, Religion based groups active at a certain local unit with overlapping members



Modifications that may be introduced at three points in the process

NGO credit groups, Community groups, Voluntary organizations, Cooperatives, Religion based groups active at a certain local unit with overlapping members

Select one or two CSOs that covers most of the community households and introduce few more functions, that may require the participation of all members of community, e.g. cleaning, repairing road, culvert, arranging festivals etc.

Social Capital mostly bonding

Nature and level of interaction is very weak and often joint projects are with the NGO offices, cooperative officials.

Network (often not as well structured and practiced as in Japan)

Collective interaction with the elected local government members and parliament member, local politicians

Collective interaction with the local government and local administration

Just like NHA, the selected community groups may turn into media for circulating govt. information, again a few simple but important local govt subcontracts may be given to those groups.

Civic Engagement

Often with special support from NGOs, CSOs or pressure from the local leaders

When the community will begin to receive benefits from the common programs in their everyday life like cleaning and other matters, they may be more careful to keep the group division free and partisan free

Stronger Civil Society

Better Democracy

Often scared by unhealthy political race, party influence, rivalry, faction and political crime

Fledging, instable political system, lacking the consensus about the democratic game

Realty that has to be kept under consideration

- Even in case of Japan, dependence and reciprocity on both sides that is the NHA and Local govt. is the key point to success.
- In Bangladesh most of the functions are performed by the administration (which often is mismanaged) and social development projects are contracted to NGOs. The cooperation here is between the government administrators and NGOs staff, not the members of the community.
- Practically, level of literacy is an important factor here. The community leaders who may have the ability to cooperate with the local govt are the educated elites. They don't belong to the NGO target groups rather they might be political elites-elected member of the local council or local leader of the national political party. Therefore, the structure for introducing such cooperation among the two types of organizations and their outcome may not be as easy or fruitful as that of Japan.

Continued

- Social class, political ideology, clientelism these may emerge as a negative forces in the initiative to such neighborhood activity. So just ignoring them may not be rational. Again, naive plans to eradicate such forces would not be feasible. Rather, new programs must be taken in such a way where much thought is given how to minimize the influence of such vertical forces while initiating for better political culture.
- However, even under such circumstances, if functions like information dissemination, road maintenance, garbage management, disaster preparedness were subcontracted at the community level, and if it were worked out successfully, then there was some additional benefits such as save wastage of money through tenders, it would be easy to avoid corruption, to some extent loosen the strong political clientelistic link.

Selected CSOs and Functions that cross cut Different Social Classes

Selected CSOs

- BRAC Village Committees (that connects the ultra poor with the local elites and credit receivers)
- Mosque based Committees

Functions indigenously managed or in cooperation with local administration and NGOs

1. Irrigation (Rural)
2. Eid Prayer Management (Rural)
3. Maintenance of local roadside (Rural)
4. Tree Plantation and maintenance (Rural and sub-urban areas)
5. Mitigation of disputes (Rural and Urban)
6. Garbage and management (Urban)
7. Crime Prevention (Urban & Rural)

Theoretical Expectation (in a simple and naive equation)

- If the most members of the community benefit from and are satisfied with the common actions performed together they may be interested to keep their community group free from political division and rivalry.
- This may ease administration, make it more efficient and ensure governance.
- It may develop horizontal organizational social relations
- May lessen corruption
- May loose (to some extent) the vertical clietelism.

Established Theories to be Consulted for the Study

- Civil Society
- Social Capital- Putnam
- Democracy
- Common Property Theory- Elinor Ostrom
- Social Power, Status and Class- Max Weber

Plan for Data Collection

- For Japan, mostly secondary data shall be used.
- The nationwide survey on NHA (J-JIGS2-NHA) shall be analyzed, along with other information available from published articles and books.
- If it becomes necessary to know some additional information, selected NHA in Japan shall be visited for observation and interview with the help of a Japanese translator.

Plan for Field Trip in Bangladesh

Unit and offices to visit

- Visit BRAC Project offices working with Ultra poor and community together in Dhaka (Central Office) and Rajshahi (field Office).
- Visit Rural local governments (Unions) and community organizations of selected villages under the union under Rajshahi District (5 Unions among 70 Unions shall be purposively selected considering their socio-economic status, political support bias, Political performance, existence of the BRAC Program for Ultra Poor)
- Selected urban wards, municipalities (at Dhaka and Rajshahi)
- Urban new house/apartment owner's community offices in Dhaka
- Mosques at the urban (Dhaka) and rural (Rajshahi) areas

What to Observe and Inquire:

- Inquire about how the life line and group functions are managed within the community for example, irrigation, garbage management, road repair, mitigation of dispute
- Focus on one or two most prominent actions that are or may be managed by the community in cooperation with the local community.
- If the functions are successfully managed by the community, identify the vital point to its success.
- If they are not well managed, then point out the main reasons to its failure.
- Identify the points where the Japanese style of community functions may be introduced among the community groups at the rural and urban areas.
- **Way of inquiry: Open ended questionnaires through interviews, group discussion and observations.**
- **Expected date for field visits in Bangladesh: 23 December, 2011 to 9 January 2012.**

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