Disputing development discourses

Understanding the motivation and performance of local NGO staff

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Introduction[1]

The aim of this paper is to find a way of understanding motivation and performance of local NGOs working as partners in international development projects. The discussion has been inspired by nine months of fieldwork in Bangladesh, during which two development projects were studied, both emphasising participation and empowerment of villagers. In projects using participation and empowerment as guiding principles, the implementation process at the grassroots level is crucial for fulfilling the expectations of the strategies. In the case studies referred to here, this process is in the hands of local NGOs in rural areas of Bangladesh. The NGOs are not acting independently, but are contracted partners in larger development programmes, financed by international donors.

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The discussion presented below aims at disputing conventional wisdoms about NGOs as partners in development. The discussion also touches on related disputes concerning the concepts of participation and empowerment. While debates are often detailed in terms of historical and social contexts, analyses seem to be motivated by a belief or conviction in the value of a particular development strategy. As a result, the tendency of these debates and analyses is to refine rhetoric and policy, considerably different from an approach that aims at understanding social phenomena.

The paper starts by pointing out why the discussion of NGOs as partners in development needs to be challenged. Arguments derive from empirical materials as well as from the literature on participation and empowerment in development projects. Following this, an attempt at introducing a different approach to understanding the dilemmas in focus here – i.e. motivation and performance of NGO staff – will be presented. This approach questions mainstream assumptions through reference to theories emanating from academic discourses rather than from development discourse. Organisation theories that problematise individual motivation are used to expand our understanding of the local NGOs in focus here.

Participation and empowerment in development projects

The material that has inspired this discussion comes from the study of two water supply and sanitation projects conducted in rural Bangladesh. As within development projects in general, these types of projects have had a strong focus on technology and top-down implementation. Although work within this sector in Bangladesh has led to a considerable increase in the coverage of safe water for rural households, success has not been undisputed. Technological sustainability and health impacts have not been as great as expected. There has hence been reason to re-evaluate implementing strategies. Both sustainability and health effects are strongly linked, it is now believed, to people's participation.

In the general context of development, the way participation has been promoted over time has differed considerably. We find participatory strategies aimed at increasing people's receptivity and ability to respond to development projects; cost-efficiency and sustainability are leading goals. We furthermore find aims at creating a dialogue between partners involved in processes of social change, with empowerment as the envisaged result (Midgley 1986, Mikkelsen 1995; Steifel and Wolfe 1994). Today's rhetoric argues that participation should involve a change in the way development has been practised, from being thing centred to people centred, from being based on blue-print project plans to being flexible and responsive to a heterogeneous reality (Chambers 1994, 1997). Contemporary advocates of participatory strategies are opponents of dominating approaches characterised by economism and modernisation theory. Stirrat and Henkel (2001) point out several themes that summarise this contemporary interpretation of participation. First of all, there is an emphasis on change from a top-down to a bottom-up approach, giving more room for empirical analysis to guide theories and policies. Second, empowerment is a crucial aim of participation. Third, the approach emphasises the marginal, the excluded, involving focus on e.g. the poorest of the poor, women, or ethnic minorities. Fourth, participatory approaches hold a deep distrust of the state, resulting in encouragement to co-operate with NGOs rather than state bureaucracies. Last, local knowledge should be made to count. Behind the emphases of these five themes, the authors argue, lie claims that this approach is not only more appropriate but also morally superior to previous approaches to development.

The distinction between seeing participation as a tool and seeing it as an end in itself has inspired a vast literature. Much of the debates are engaged in defining participation and adjacent concepts in order to clarify differences between 'genuine,' empowering participation, in which participation is seen as a goal in itself, and an instrumental view by which participation is a means to make development projects work better. The two water and sanitation projects studied use participation as a tool in order to increase cost-efficiency and sustainability. It is also used as an end in itself. Project plans emphasise that

the participatory activities should lead to social mobilisation and empowerment. From this perspective, issues of water availability, sanitation and health are used as vehicles to create empowerment in a broad sense. This involves creating interest, demand and capacity among villagers to take charge of problematic situations also outside of the water and sanitation area. There is a strong focus on communication with villagers throughout the projects via meetings and training sessions of various kinds held by partner NGOs.

Strategies and appropriate attitudes

Much could be said about the conceptual puzzles of participation and empowerment (see e.g. Cook and Kothari 2001 and Guijet, I. and M. K. Shah 1998). Here however, I wish to focus on what occurs during the actual implementing process where the local NGO staff contracted to execute development projects is the main actor. This focus is motivated in two ways: by referring to the empirical material as well as to discussions found in literature.

The normative implications ascribed to participatory and empowerment activities rely on the way activities are performed by the project staff. The two water and sanitation projects I studied in Bangladesh use participatory activities both as a tool and as an end in itself. The different interpretations do not necessarily conflict, but may nevertheless compete with one another, as when a bias towards instrumentality leads to a neglect of empowerment. Despite careful descriptions of both concepts and activities in project plans, the participatory and empowerment strategies presented dilemmas for the staff during implementation.

During interviews as well as through thier behaviour during project implementations, NGO staff expressed ambivalence about how to handle the participatory and empowerment approach. 'We have to inspire them,' one of the staff explained, emphasising the importance of taking on the role as facilitator. In the next sentence, however, the same person explained the importance of firm leadership, disclosing an authoritarian attitude towards the

villagers: 'Still it is compulsory for you, I tell them, to set up a hygienic latrine and you have to use it we tell them.' Furthermore, the concept of participation appeared at times to be interpreted as a means of making the job easier for the NGO staff: 'There are no problems, the villagers always cooperate with us... when we want a meeting they always come directly.'

The ambivalent attitude expressed by the staff was noticeable in the variety of reactions to the projects at village level. Some villagers were very positive about the new working methods that had been introduced by the NGOs:

> [The NGO staff] wanted to steer us towards a new wave ... Actually even if they can't solve the problems they have done a lot ... since long ago we have been following the older generations, that has been the problem. Now we are doing something new. They inspired us, they gave us some inspiration inside us that will make us strong mentally to go ahead.

However, the fact that the staff at times used a rather non-participatory attitude was noticed and disapproved of by the villagers:

> They are only discussing these matter (water and sanitation) so where is the development?... Only the NGOs staff is deciding what to talk about.... One day a person came on a Honda. He only talked about water and latrines too. He checked the tube wells but they are doing nothing in this area. And the NGO is always calling the villagers to meet instantly.

It appeared to be of great importance that the staff had correctly interpreted project philosophies, and that the staff were acting accordingly. Judging from how villagers described the projects and the relationship with the NGO staff and from observing project implementation, it is evident that staff interpretation and attitudes affect the implications of participation.

In addition to findings in the field, a focus on NGO staff is justified by concerns raised in the literature on participation and methodology. There is a vast amount of literature exploring new participatory methods and reflecting on practice. The writings of Robert Chambers, which have had great impact, involve not only pragmatic, technical advice but also moral arguments about

attitudes and approaches of development practitioners and academics (Chambers 1983; also McGee 2002). The Participatory Rural Appraisal, PRA, as coined by Chambers, involves not just a technique to be practised outwards, but also inward, through self-critical awareness. Cornwall and Jenkins (1995: 1668) argue that 'the key element of participatory research lies not in methods but in the attitudes of researchers, which in turn determine how, by, and for whom research is conceptualised and conducted.' This applies not only to researchers involved in evaluations or fieldwork, but also to practitioners implementing participatory-based development projects. Hence PRA as used by Chambers and followers is linked to important principles of conduct, without which the technique falls short of its original meaning and empowering impact. Participatory methods need to be used in a context in which users' attitudes -- their conception of development and its practice -- are as important as the technique itself.

There are thus good arguments for a focus on the NGO staff in development projects. While staff attitudes are important it is not necessarily enough to investigate them on an individual level. Further basis for understanding the staff can be achieved by looking into the role of and expectations directed at development NGOs. Within the international donor sector, NGOs are increasingly being chosen as the most appropriate vehicles to use for implementation of strategies with normative goals, such as participation and empowerment. It is assumed that the values and ideological basis of NGOs and their staff, as well as their geographical closeness with the grassroots, constitute an important ingredient to development projects. The recent emphasis on both the use of participatory strategies and on the need for a strengthened civil society has served as an invitation for NGOs to play an important role in development practice.

Values, expectations, and possibilities related to the work of NGOs

Much of the literature of NGOs in the Bangladeshi context, and elsewhere, portrays them as empowerers of the poor and exploited, and run by people wanting to do well for society (e.g. Chowdury 1990; Kramsjo and Wood 1992; Lovell 1992; Sillitoe 2000). NGOs are non-profit, voluntary associations of well-intentioned, committed people who have visions and values but no interest in power and coercion (Fowler 2000a; Fowler 2000b; Hailey 1999; Haynes 1997; Holloway 1998; Korten 1992; McAdam et al 1996). The involvement of NGOs in development projects brings great expectations for the promotion of social justice, self-reliance, and grassroots democracy (Brett 1993). NGO staff is expected to be highly committed to a cause and be guided by integrity in their work (ibid.). A core concept which captures the essence of these assumptions and (wishful) expectations about the characteristics of NGOs is *altruism*: The work of NGOs should be based on altruistic motivation – i.e. the willingness to contribute to the common good in society, without expecting any calculated pecuniary or other reward in return (Brett 1996). Altruism is contrasted with *narrow self-interest*, which is a driving force found in both private and public sectors, and seen as a detrimental factor leading to corruption followed by disillusionment among participants in development projects.

The participatory approach embraced by the international donor society is clearly manifested in the work of the local NGOs included in this study. The language of participation and empowerment is frequently used, in discussions, as well as in pamphlets defining the intentions of the organisations which include statements such as The organisation 'pursues a bottom-up participatory development approach acting as catalyst with its concerned stakeholders,' and the organisation has the 'overall goal of emancipating the rural poor and destitute from the clutches of poverty.'[2] The characteristics ascribed to NGOs are also found in the way the organisations describe

[2] Quotes from brochures belonging to local NGOs included in the study.

themselves. This becomes particularly clear in discussions about problems with under-achievement of the government sector, expressed by one director in the following way:

> We can mix with the locals easily, but the government people cannot do this. They have a bossy attitude... a bossy tendency and NGOs don't have that, they are corrupted and NGO people are not, NGO people are working hard, government people are not, NGO people have a human side but the government people have not, they are not that type.

The NGOs identify themselves as being everything the government is not, as having all the features that the government institutions and staff lack -- precisely the properties which are needed in order to be able to get the country's poor population permanently out of poverty and to create a sustainable change. The NGOs do not let personal interests rule but prioritise the work and the people the projects are aimed at.

Reassessing NGOs

Although NGOs are perceived as important for improved horizontal communication and democracy in development projects, it is also well recognised that there are risks of clientelism and patronage related to their work. While the flourishing NGO sector signals increased freedom of practice for existing NGOs, studies also point to the emergence of new NGOs that are more interested in 'procuring funds from the international community' (Abrahams and Platteau 2001) than in real participation and local empowerment. Increasingly, discussions about motivations and values of NGOs raise concerns regarding the character of NGOs and their staff. The valuable characteristics we ascribe to these organisations seem to be at risk. Debates concern how 'over-reliance on public funds can and does alter NGDO nature and behaviour...', or that '... NGDO civic rootedness and values, such as solidarity, reciprocity, co-operation and collaboration are being overtly and covertly compromised. This is occurring because of external forces and

because of inadequate internal reflection...' (Fowler 2001b: 591 and 638).[3] The initial perception of development NGOs as indisputably benevolent must be reviewed (Cleaver 1998; Folke 2000; Fowler 2001a, 2001b; Hailey 1999; White 1999).

Such critiques of development NGOs acknowledge that external elements have disturbed their valuable qualities: donors and the development industry have forced the NGO into a position where there is little room to practice these qualities. The organisations have been coerced to compromise their altruistic values, replacing solidarity with the poor with the pursuit of profit- and success. A competitive market has developed, which has caused visions of long-term social change to give way to short-term goals of securing funding and contracts. Contracts are characterised by tight time-schedules and bureaucratic organisational structures, which leave little room for time-consuming participatory procedures, and with evaluating procedures that go counter to any emphasis on slow and long-term social change.

Staff attitudes and the performance of NGOs are not only ruled by organisational goals and visions. The organisations must adapt to a larger context including a social, economic and political reality surrounding them. In the case of Bangladesh the relationship with the government sector and NGOs has since long been characterised by tension, suspicion and competition (see e.g. White 1999 and Hashemi 1995). This naturally affects the room for manoeuvre for the NGOs. Actions that appear too challenging or provocative for the government may result in restrictions in the way NGOs are allowed to operate, and hence affect organisational visions of both NGOs and projects. Furthermore, staff attitudes are not only a reflection of values claimed by the organisations, but are also likely to be affected by the general social structure in the country. Bloem et al, for example, noted that the staff of one NGO took on rather passive attitudes toward participatory approaches (Bloem et al 1991). This is explained by a general authoritarian and hierarchical culture which characterises many aspects of Bangladeshi life.

[3] NGDO is short for non-government development organisation.

In interviews with directors of local NGOs in Bangladesh, as well as in literature discussing NGOs in general, we find frequent reference to their relation to donors. The values of NGOs correspond well to the rhetoric of donors. Nevertheless, donor contracts appear to constitute serious restrictions on the possibilities of realising envisaged grassroots participation and empowerment, and on the possibilities for staff to express commitment and altruism in their work. Due to the fact that the NGOs are dependent on resources provided through donor contracts, requirements on organisational professionalisation come to play an important role. Time and effort that has previously been devoted by staff to work with villagers is increasingly diverted to administrative tasks.

Explanations of faltering staff attitudes

At this stage we may summarise our findings in relation to the ambivalent attitudes noticed among the staff in the projects studied. The rhetoric of participation and empowerment is not only something imposed on the NGOs through donor projects, but constitutes the core ideology behind the work of the NGOs themselves. The staff is, in other words, well acquainted with the rhetoric. Although part of the explanation behind faltering attitudes may be linked to individual ignorance or a weak capacity to understand and manage project strategies, this is an insufficient explanation. Instead, an important factor behind faltering attitudes seems to come from conceptual ambiguities of participation and empowerment, exposed when rhetoric meets reality during implementation. When looking into the practice of the strategies, it appears there is only a fine line between facilitating choice and imposing pre-defined solutions and knowledge, as stated in project descriptions. While the rhetoric of participation and empowerment gives priority to local knowledge, the concepts also entail a patronising tone[4].

[4] For further discussions of the conceptual ambiguities of participation and empowerment see Cook and Kothari (eds) 2001, Mosse 2001, and Mosse forthcoming 2003. See also forthcoming (2003) thesis by M. Arvidson, Dep. of Sociology, Lund University.

Further explanations of the slippage between the rhetoric of participation and empowerment strategies, and the practice and implementation of these strategies, come from the fact that organisational and project structures do not correspond to the values expressed by NGOs and project goals. In order for ideology and concomitant strategies of participation and empowerment to be valid in practice, there are certain requirements pertaining to a conducive environment and to organisational structures that need to be met. For local development NGOs in general, and clearly so for NGOs in Bangladesh, there are obvious restrictions in this respect. Hence, we may conclude that faltering attitudes and ambivalent staff behaviour appear to be caused by circumstances ruling organisational and project structures.

Making policy or understanding social phenomena?

Ferguson notes that general development strategies that they seem to be characterised by a focus on *'... what goes 'wrong', why and how it can be fixed'* (Ferguson 1996:10). In the case of participation and empowerment, the literature presents discussions that are strongly linked to the advocacy of the concepts in development projects. Discussions concerning the changing characteristics of NGOs exhibit very similar traits, with a focus on advocacy for how things should be, assuming that the ideal is attainable. Visions and ideological convictions about how things should be can hinder the scrutiny of the assumptions underlying these visions . Debates, which critically analyse social, economic and political arenas in which we find NGOs, are of course important. This puts organisational visions in context, and highlights how relations and pressure from outside affect room for manoeuvre and internal structure. However, the mainstream approach appears to be focused on finding ways of preserving or restoring organisational characteristics, which involves the analytical weaknesses pointed out above. Furthermore, an emphasis on external forces and inadequate internal reflection fails to problematise the relation between organisational values and members' motivation and performance. Analyses are based on the assumption that a well defined

ideology, proper training of staff, and management skills that encourage organisational learning and navigation under external pressure can ensure appropriate staff attitudes.

In the following, I introduce a discussion of these issues based on organisation theories that can help to further our understanding of staff motivation and performance. This approach constitutes both a complement and a challenge to the analyses commonly found on the performance and characteristics of development NGOs. As pointed out above, these analyses highlight important elements that should not be left out. However, the approach presented below constitutes a challenge to these analyses since it aims at questioning assumptions or biases that these analyses hold, i.e. a focus on practical solutions in order to realise visions, and an emphasis on structure over the individual actor. By emphasising what Jaffee calls the unique nature of the human factor in organisations, we may turn out interest from that of 'getting things right', to an interest in understanding a social phenomenon, i.e. the dilemmas faced by staff working in organisations that require altruism and social commitment.

The emphasis on altruism as a main characteristic of NGOs is based on a somewhat crude interpretation of what values are ascribed or claimed by these organisations. The focus on this concept has however been chosen for rhetorical reasons, to develop an argument that I believe is valuable. The discussion below presents a comparison between altruism and self-interest with the aim of illustrating ways of interpreting the concepts. Following this, an introduction to organisation theories shows that commitment to a claimed ideology does not vouch for any organisation staying clear of conflicts of interest among its members. Nor does it guarantee a particular kind of performance from employees, characterised by e.g. solidarity rather than self-interest and opportunism. It furthermore involves an introduction as to how one may control staff motivation in an organisational context, through systems of rewards and sanctions. Finally, the discussion will be related to some of the findings from fieldwork among local NGO staff in development projects in Bangladesh.

Altruism – a gift for free?

> Altruism implies a willingness to make a contribution to others without expecting a calculable return, thus allowing interactions in which there need not be a direct relationship between contribution and reward (Brett 1993:283)

Although the concept of altruism is referred to in discussions concerning organisations and NGOs in particular, it is rare to find clear definitions of the concept. Nor has it been scrutinised to the same extent as the concepts of self-interest and rational, maximising economic behaviour. Brett is one of few who discusses it in detail, and he does not only associate it with voluntary organisations such as NGOs, but argues that organisations and society in general rely to some extent on people's altruistic behaviour. Brett claims that 'altruism can be treated as a form of far-sighted self-interest: we recognise that we too will lose if everyone maximises short-term self-interest' (ibid.: 283). However, a clear difference between the two concepts remains in that altruism is based on a willingness to do good for others, while self-interest is aimed at securing personal well being.

Brett states that altruism does not imply expectations of 'calculable return', but he also recognises that such a pure kind of altruism cannot be sustained over time. A chain of altruistic actions soon establishes an understanding that 'I give in order that you may give' (Brett 1993, quoting Mauss). The fact that NGOs have developed into formal organisations, with formalised goals and contracts with external partners, make them dependent on organisational continuity. Altruism becomes institutionalised which means that some sort of system of reciprocity is established. This has implications for the theoretical approaches that we may use to better understand problems within NGOs.

The fact that a reward system is introduced makes NGOs similar to private and public organisations, in that there is an established relationship between organisational control and expected staff performance. Relationships are not only characterised by a shared vision of social change, but also by negotiations over rewards and recognition for members of the organisation. Conflicts

between individuals, or between employees and the organisation, can be found in both profit-seeking and voluntary organisations. While in the former conflicts are often related to the pursuing of individuals' self-interest, in the latter it may be caused by a strong commitment to an individual interpretation of an ideology. Problems due to conflicts of interest and a lack of coherence between the goals of the organisation and those of its employees may hence be related to both commercial and voluntary organisations. Furthermore, behaviour interpreted as individual opportunism is not only related to material rewards, but also to non-material compensations of various kinds, such as social recognition, status and increased influence (Brett 1993). Although these organisational types have considerably different agendas and goals, they share the dilemma of controlling individual opportunism.

Political scientist Lipsky presents a study of employees in public organisations in which he discusses how altruism as initial work-motivation is negotiated (Lipsky 1980). The particular group on which his study focuses is street-level bureaucrats, i.e. public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs. Lipsky uses the concept of altruism to describe the motivation of the street-level bureaucrats: the employees want to do well for society and probably enter their positions with a belief that this model – the public welfare system – benefits the clients. Lipsky does not dismiss claims of altruism and solidarity as insincere, and he does not question the initial ambitions of the street-level bureaucrats. 'Yet,' he argues, 'it may be called a myth of altruism because the assertion that agencies provide benefits and fair treatment is usually unexamined, not subject to falsification among people who believe it, and a means for structuring a range of further assumptions about public policy' (ibid.: 71). This myth does not take ideal policy implementation for granted, but it uncritically believes the outcome will be beneficial due to staff commitment to fulfil the myth. 'Street level bureaucrats are often expected to be benign and passive gatekeepers. They are also expected to be advocates, that is, to use their knowledge, skill, and position to secure for clients the best treatment' (ibid.: 73). The organisation assumes, and relies on, the altruism of the workers.

While accepting initial altruism Lipsky also explains what a fragile basis of motivation this is. The structure of work compromises altruism and causes workers to lose their devotion to being advocates for their clients. Lipsky calls the process that changes the initial devotion and altruism a process of alienation, not unlike that described by Marx. Alienation, Lipsky explains (1980: 80), refers to how street-level bureaucrats 'are not able to express or need to suppress their creative and human impulses through work activity.' The process of alienation is caused by pressure for efficiency that results in specialisation, distancing the workers from involvement in various processes in their work (from policy decisions to evaluation). Workers do not control the outcome of their work, neither do they control resources available to them. Increased alienation implies less concern with protecting clients and this relationship loses in importance. The working conditions give rise to alienation and contribute to a continuous separation of the street-level bureaucrat from the client.

Lipsky offers a valuable and sympathetic way of understanding the dimensions of change in workers' motivation and performance, and how the working conditions alter the necessary characteristic of the worker, i.e. commitment to work and a degree of altruism. His analysis of the street-level bureaucrat illustrates how inherent tensions within organisations and pressure from outside influence the employees. These tensions are, I believe, not only applicable to public service organisations but also to private business organisations, and to NGOs. Lipsky's account provides an opening to discuss suggestions for altering organisational structures that appear to threaten workers' altruism. To some extent this may present solutions, but according to Lipsky such an approach neglects the actual nature of the problem, i.e. the dilemma of altruism. Altruism is of an evasive nature, as pointed out by Brett, and not only does it risk being alienated through organisational structures, but it is also very hard to find appropriate reward systems for preserving this characteristic. The dilemma accounted for by Lipsky is further exacerbated by the fact that an important characteristic of the position of the street-level worker is *autonomy* from authority and *discretion* during work. Trying to control the worker in order to discipline altruism and protect it from other

corruption by other types of motivation would imply that autonomy and discretion are being violated. Controlling altruism through systems of rewards and sanctions appear to be very difficult, rife with trade-offs and unintended consequences.

Self-interest and economic rationality

Within the realm of economics several recent theoretical perspectives (New Institutional Economics, Collective Action theories, Common Property Resource Management) present analysis of individual behaviour and institutions in order to better understand how organisations work. Neo-classical economics can be used as point of reference to clarify some of the important traits of these new approaches. Typically, neo-classical economics posits a hypothetical individual: one assumes rational, self-interested behaviour which is affected minimally by social relations, as well as access to perfect information which makes it possible to strive for maximisation. For the purpose of finding new perspectives on NGOs, the weakness of the neo-classical approach is that it ignores altruism and voluntary work, providing little scope to analyse actions where profit for the individual is negligible.

The neo-classical approach has been highly criticised, by other social science disciplines as well as within economics. The rational economic man and assumptions of perfect information are both contested. Sociologist Granovetter calls this approach 'under-socialised' since it does not take norms, culture or individual social relations into account (Granovetter 1985). It neglects the fact that most behaviour is closely embedded in networks of interpersonal relations. Motivation and rationality must be linked to other than purely economic goals, such as sociability, approval, status and power. Similar to Granovetter, Brett claims that neo-classical economics fails to acknowledge the importance of organisational incentives and sanctions, which require a more sophisticated understanding of individual motivation (Brett 1993, 1996, see also Clague 1997; Granovetter 1985; Moe 1984; Wade 1992).

More recently, economic theories have come to emphasise the concept of uncertainty and imperfect information, thus creating a new basis for the analysis of economic behaviour. These theories focus on trust in relationships and the evolution of norms as a way of coping with ever-present uncertainties in daily life. It is not possible to maximise economic outcome as an idealised economic man since uncertainty is constant. Rather, one should understand individuals' behaviour as aimed at *satisficing* (Moe 1984).

The fact that economists recognise the weakness of under-socialised theories has not led to the merger of the various social science disciplines. Analyses of the phenomenon of collective action can illustrate the differences between economics and sociology in approaches to interpreting the individual. An analysis of revolutionary movements through social movement theories sees collective action as an outcome of commitment to a cause, of altruism and social solidarity. From an economics perspective though, collective action can *also* be explained by action based on self-interest. Mancur Olson (1997) explains how the core of collective action theories takes 'the purposive individual' as starting point, and then 'assumes social outcomes based on their behaviour' (ibid.: 36). Collectiveness can stem from normative beliefs, but it can also be a result of collective understanding that this is the best way of promoting self-interest. Olson differs between self-interest that is narrow and one which is encompassing, emphasising that we should allow self-interest more than one interpretation and accept that it can have different outcomes. From this perspective, the social consequences (collective action leading to collective good) are seen as side-effects of a calculated optimisation (collective action to increase individual efficiency). The basis for understanding social phenomena should thus be individual behaviour based on an encompassing self-interest instead of using an ideology as point of reference for understanding performance.

Finding a balance between conflicting disciplines

> The concept of self-interest is often linked to the economic idea of the profit maximising individual, whose only interest is to get 'the best deal possible, by any means possible' (Jaffee 2001: 251).

Such associations make it hard to see how the notion of self-interest can fit into the analysis of a voluntary organisation, such as an NGO. Acting in self-interest means to be selfish, and in relations ruled by selfishness there is little trust. Maintaining relations, building networks, following social norms are of secondary, if any, importance. This is, as has been mentioned already, according to Granovetter an under-socialised conception of an atomised actor, i.e. a socially isolated individual (Granovetter 1985; Jaffee 2001). In his discussions of motives for human conduct Granovetter also warns against tendencies in sociology to over-socialise the individual (referring to Dennis Wrong), i.e. seeing the individual as overwhelmingly ruled by an omnipresent system of norms. In the context of organisation theory the result of such an over-socialised conception of the individual would be that one assumes that organisational structures can control individuals. Granovetter calls for an alternative approach to the under-socialised and the over-socialised ones, which acknowledges 'that most behaviour is closely embedded in networks of interpersonal relations' (ibid: 504).

The balance between an over-socialised and an under-socialised conception of the individual is a source of debate between different disciplines. While fierce critique is aimed at economics for it's idealised, simplistic way of treating the individual, economists also criticise sociology and political science. Clague argues that the ideas presented by the New Institutional Economics are quite different from the 'moral exhortations of incentive-free social engineering' (Clague 1997: 369), referring to sociological and political science theories of development. A social engineering approach that represents an over-socialised view of the individual does not realise the complexity behind individual motives, and hence, Clague argues, misinterprets organisational problems as

being simply due to inappropriate ideology and a lack of commitment. Problems are addressed through convincing rhetoric and not through formulating incentives to encourage a certain kind of behaviour.

Brett suggests that redefining the concept of self-interest may allow us to apply economic theories to organisations which have traits of altruism, social solidarity, and voluntarism (Brett 1993). Such a redefinition is exemplified by Olson's theory of collective action and encompassing self-interest, and by Granovetter's concept of embeddedness (Granovetter 1985; Olson 1997). Similarly, a deeper understanding of altruism may help us see how the two bases for motivation can have very similar effects in terms of integration and commitment as well as tensions and conflicts in organisations. Through getting more acquainted with the concepts of altruism and self-interest, we begin to understand that these are complex bases for motivation and can co-exist within the same individual. Contesting both an over- and under-socialised view of the individual, the concept of dual personality will lead us further towards understanding staff motivation and performance in an organisational context.

Dual personality and the multitude of motives

> While the worker may be physically and mentally able, there is no guarantee that he or she will be willing (Jaffee 2001: 22).

In any organisation, the employee is more than just a neutral instrument. The 'unique nature of the human resource' makes her much more than a disengaged commodity (Jaffee 2001). An organisation employs the whole person with changing reflections and reactions making it difficult to control and access the skills the employee has been hired for, be these commitment to a cause, technical skills or a striving for profit. The fact that people are conscious, creative and reactive renders the individual a source of tension,

since there is no guarantee that the characteristics the individual has been hired for will persist over time. Jaffee explains this further:

> The normative elements of social existence must be included in any theory and strategy of human social control. [...O]rganisations are constructed for particular purposes, but they employ individuals who may have divergent objectives and desires. Any inquiry into organisations requires, according to [Chester] Barnard, a set of theoretical postulates about individuals or persons (Jaffee 2001: 74).

Barnard's definition of the individual emphasises her developmental nature that she is different from other elements of the organisation, and that the power of choice and purpose are important properties of the individual. Barnard sees the individual as embracing a dual personality that is, on the one hand, driven by 'internal, personal and subjective' factors, while also being driven by non-personal, i.e., 'external, impersonal and objective' factors (in Jaffee 2001). The concept of a 'dual personality' as delineated by Barnard, suggests that there are potentially conflicting interests and goals *within* the individual. Apart from this we find sources of tensions also *between* individuals, based on differences in interpretations of goals or on different interests and power to pursue those interests. Goals mean different things to managers and owners of organisations than to employees, and there is always room for the interpretation of stated goals within these groups as well.

Ideology as a safeguard against damaging conflicts?

Within any organisation, one can never take it for granted that everyone's goals are the same. Claiming ideological grounding, such as prioritising a sense of sharing and solidarity before profit in a co-operative, cannot be taken as a guarantee that conflicts will not arise, since there are likely to be numerous interpretations of both goals and the means to reach the goal. Hence, the problem of conflicting goals should not only be assigned to organisations of certain structure or character, such as hierarchical organisations with strong emphasis on cost-efficiency, high productivity and profit, where differences in

both power and individual gains can be assumed to be considerable. Conflicts of power may also be found in co-operatives, where self-interest and opportunism can take the form of individual strivings to ensure that one'spersonal interpretation of goals and strategies should be prioritised over that of other's (Brett 1996).

Often, in public service organisations and very clearly so in development projects with normative goals, we can find conflicts not only between actors but also internalised in the stated organisational goal (Jaffee 2001; Lipsky 1980; Scott 1992). We have already become acquainted with Lipsky's description of how the social worker's altruism is compromised by the structure of the organisation, causing a process of alienation. This process is exacerbated by goals that are 'more like receding horizons than fixed targets,' i.e., they have normative implications that are very hard to verify (Lipsky 1980: 40, referring to Landau). Furthermore, Lipsky continues, goal ambiguity is caused by inherent conflicts in organisational aims -- in this particular case, client-centred goals conflicting with social engineering goals -- which may lead to conflicts between a flexible approach to clients and an approach based on organisational manuals and other pre-determined solutions. Furthermore, client-centred goals can conflict with organisation-centred goals. In practice this arises when staff need to choose between treating clients as individuals the need for the organisation to also proceed quickly.

There are thus various sources of conflicts that may cause organisational goals to capsize. These conflicts, reflected in organisational contradictions, can change the initial characteristics of the staff, from a motivation that complies with the main goal of the organisation to motivation that leads to goal-displacement. It is, naturally, in the interest of the organisation to prevent such conflicts. This may be done through different strategies, and often with trade-offs that need to be carefully taken into account.

Control-systems to prevent conflicts and to encourage performance

Control systems in organisations are motivated by a need to make the organisation more efficient, and by a need to control antagonism caused by divergent interests. By using the principal-agent model as starting point we can elaborate on the dilemmas of control systems within the organisation. The model concerns an agency relationship in which one party, the principal (the employer) enters a contractual agreement with another party, the agent (the employee) in the expectation that the agent will choose to act in a way that will produce outcomes desirable by the principal (Moe 1984; Scott 1992). The agent has interests of his/her own, but can be persuaded to follow the principal's objectives when the incentive structure that comes with the contract gives such behaviour an advantage. The principal's problem is to design an adequate incentive structure. Not only is it difficult to decode what rewards will encourage behaviour leading to a desirable effect, but one also needs to bear in mind the not entirely predictable response from the individual. We may again use Lipsky's public bureaucracy to illustrate this dilemma.

Public bureaucracies, as described by Lipsky, rely on their staff to have some altruistic qualities. The organisation tries to provide an avenue for people with altruistic orientations to enter the work force by offering secure jobs, promotional possibilities, and by attaching professional status also to street-level positions. Through professionalisation the organisation shows recognition of the street-level bureaucrat and demonstrates its appreciation, despite their low position in the organisation hierarchy, that this particular group is indeed important. A professional status may help to remedy the damage caused by alienation, and could give this group recognised authority as a form of encouragement in their work. There are however problems with such a 'professional fix'. Professionalisation may function as an incentive to change from a focus on the clients to a focus on personal career moves (Lipsky 1980). In practice, this could imply the neglect of difficult clients in favour of more rewarding tasks. It may also lead to the isolation of the staff as a professional group, making it hard to detect deficiencies in performance and

behaviour, such as a lack of accountability towards clients. Lipsky notes that 'the careers of idealistic professional recruits are usually abandoned to processes that insure their socialisation to the dominant professional values' (ibid.: 204). The initial aim of strengthening the group as professional altruists can have the adverse effect of changing the object of accountability and solidarity from clients to their own peer group.

Evaluation of work performance is another way of motivating workers to contribute in expected ways towards organisational goals. Evaluation is seldom a straightforward business, since many organisational goals have normative or qualitative characteristics that cannot easily be measured. In a study of interviewers handling job-seeking clients, Blau puts special focus on the form and effect of evaluation (Jaffee 2001; Lipsky 1980). When evaluation emphasised number of job-placements, i.e. quantifying normative goals, the effect turned out to be that interviewers consciously selected clients who were easy to place, or placed clients in inappropriate work places and falsified figures in order to be able to show satisfactory performance on the evaluation form. The intended effect of motivating the staff to perform well resulted in unintended consequences, such as competition between staff and goal-displacement, since statistical records came to supersede the goal of actually assisting job-applicants according to their needs (Jaffee 2001). It is also risky to discipline staff for lack of compliance with normative goals. The cost of close supervision may be the loss of trust between principal and agent, leading to increased alienation between the two parties. Furthermore, in cases where discretion is an important part of the employees' tasks, control and supervision go against this essential characteristic of the job.

Etzioni's inverted symbiosis

As we can see, there is a paradox in that control systems for enhancing organisational efficiency may at the same time create processes that undermine their intended effects. Etzioni terms the paradoxical relationship between control and integration *inverted symbiosis*. The organisation strives towards enhancing efficiency - control - while at the same time integrating

staff via organisational activities - commitment. While the organisation needs to find efficient ways of utilising its employees, it also needs to be able to reconcile individual commitment with the organisation's goals since bias towards control will diminish commitment and vice versa (Jaffee 2001). According to Clegg (1990: 42), Etzioni's interest in this complex relationship brought him to enquire 'into both the nature of motivation in organisations, that is the type of involvement that people might bring to bear in their organizational life, as well as the different types of power that organisations might exercise over their members.' Etzioni concluded that people may 'comply with organisational discipline' based on normative motivation, on fear and coercive power, or on the pursuit of profit (ibid.).

There are, in other words, three different bases for involvement: moral, alienative and calculative. Similarly there are three different types of power, which organisations use to motivate and integrate their members; Etzioni terms these normative, coercive and remunerative. Clegg continues: 'Etzioni believes that, typically, there tends to be a balance between involvement and power, so that coercive-alienative, remunerative-calculative and normative-moral couplings will be those which are most frequently encountered empirically' (ibid.: 42). Organisations will remain stable as long as other reward systems are not introduced. If material reward or the threat of punishment is introduced in an organisation based on moral commitment, the equilibrium can be disturbed since a calculative or alienative commitment will be introduced among members or employees. A calculative commitment suggests that employees' work performance will be related to an expected reward. The goal of this performance is the reward and not the actual effect of the performance according to organisational or normative goals. In other words, with a strong focus on either calculative or alienative commitment, the employees are likely to become estranged from goals of a normative character.

Reality reflected in theory – some examples of organisational dilemmas

Let us now turn to what this discussion may tell us about the motivation and performance of NGO staff. Within the particular development projects used as background material for this study we find managers (formal policy makers, donors) at the top, administrators in the middle, and NGO staff at community level, equivalent to Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats. While the NGO is close to the grassroots level geographically, it is at a distance from the official policy makers, the managers or donors. Presumably, the distance is not only geographical but also evident in interpretations of ideologies and strategies, since perspectives and background differ considerably between the policy makers/donors and the implementers/NGO staff. Hence, *autonomy* from authority is a characteristic common to both NGO staff and street-level bureaucrats. Furthermore, when NGO staff is interacting with village participants in development projects, elements of *discretion* are evident. The actual interaction with villagers brings a new dimension to the policies, in that the villagers accept or object to the purpose of project activities in individual ways; the strategies come alive. There is a strong element of personal judgement, required in order to negotiate with villagers during participatory processes, formally included in the task of the staff. While autonomy and discretion are a necessity, intertwined with the tasks and goals of the staff, they also provide a challenge to managers and policy makers. The challenge consists of controlling the unpredictable, i.e., staff behaviour, without invoking high costs in terms of money, trust, or unintended consequences such as goal displacement. Judging by the hesitation expressed by donors regarding the changing characteristics of NGOs, as well as by the ambivalence expressed by the staff themselves, there appears to be a need to control motivation in order to ensure that performance encourages participation and empowerment.

Organisational frames causing frustration

The NGO staff in the study undertaken often expressed frustration over the lack of correspondence between demand and supply. The staff that directly interact with people in villages are faced with the complex realities of people and communities that are likely to include needs and priorities beyond those that they, as policy executors, have a mandate to respond to. Hence, demand in terms of needs that go beyond the limits of the project goals will always make the supply side lag behind. Demands also emanate from another direction. Donors who find NGOs to be performing well according to donor goals – keeping time-limits, being cost-efficient, conducting the planned project activities with participating villagers – will increase their demand and pressure on the NGOs to continue to perform well despite resource constraints and demanding working conditions. The 'reward' of good performance (delivering services, being flexible and participatory-friendly, yet keeping time limits) will mainly come in the form of greater demands.

While autonomy and discretion may leave the staff with considerable freedom and power over their own work on a daily basis, the unbalanced relationship between supply and demand restricts their sense of freedom considerably. The fact that reward comes by way of increased demand may be interpreted as a sign of good performance, but there are limits to how far this will suffice as a reward. In the long run, there is a risk of alienation from the initial altruistic motivation, since frustration may leave the staff feeling distanced from the initial purpose of their work. As is further discussed below, the staff express that they are happy to do voluntary work in good projects, but they also clearly express that they would enjoy their work more were they paid for their efforts. One may only speculate whether this should be interpreted as altruism being replaced by profit-seeking motivation, or as a fair demand for due recognition for good performance.

A further source of tension arises from goal ambiguities, or what Lipsky calls the 'idealised dimension' of goals, i.e., the aims of normative impact. Client-centred goals (making indigenous knowledge and priorities count) conflict

with social engineering goals (based on a belief that there is a preferred and appropriate solution to the problems addressed) and with organisation-centred goals (keeping budget and time-frames). Local NGO staff feel that they have to choose between allotting time to projects, people and activities. Projects inevitably introduce priorities that compete with their own stated goals when budget and time constraints are imposed on activities. Despite an initial client-centred predisposition, the struggle for survival and competition may determine the priorities made by the NGO. Professionalisation seems to be a very high priority, displayed in an increased sophistication in producing charts and pictures verifying the achievements of local NGOs. However, the view that this change towards organisational professionalism is a sign of diminishing altruism was contested by the local NGOs. Their interpretation was that competition increases the pressure on all NGOs. The sum effect of this is positive since only organisations that are committed and sincere, as reflected in their professionalism, will pass the test of monitoring and evaluation carried out by funding organisations.

The NGO as an open system: Influence from the outside

Staff employed by NGOs sometimes comes from rather poor environments. For the employee, the possibility of working as a volunteer is limited by personal economic needs. Among the staff interviewed the problems of making choices based on ideological conviction concerning development work and on personal needs clearly appeared to be relevant. NGOs who had signed contracts for projects which meant they would be working as volunteers, without salary, explained that they were happy to work as volunteers since it was a good project and they got valuable training. But they explained how they adjusted the effort they put into activities when working as volunteers. In practice, contracts involving remuneration or salary would be prioritised over projects that involved a contract based on voluntary work.

The staff of local NGOs work in a lively environment, with consultants and workers from far away traversing extensive geographical areas. They get to meet people working in organisations with different structures and rewards systems. To the staff working at grassroots level it is quite obvious that a substantial amount of money is spent on the monitoring and evaluation of projects by outsiders, often coming from overseas. Local NGO staff feel used; they contribute with an important share towards the success of projects, but they do not get due reward in salary or by way of secure employment. They demand a professional status, including a salary in accordance with their responsibilities and skills. Demands on staff for having the capacity to understand participatory and empowerment strategies, to follow strict time and budget-frames, and to write reports and communicate with villagers, is increasing. NGO staff gradually gain skills and experience that are valuable within the development business market, and although competition is severe, such personal properties are useful for the advancement of a personal career leading to higher salary and secure employment. The high turnover of staff in some NGOs is the result of staff finding increased security, professional status and higher salary in other NGOs or in other sectors. Formal recognition through the professionalisation of people working in local NGOs, with the subsequent leverage to demand a salary and secure contracts, may be one way of resolving the frustration that can lead to a lack of commitment to work. However, the case presented by Lipsky shows that such a solution might lead to complicated consequences, with loyalty shifting from clients to the professional group as an entity.

Concluding remarks

Experience from the field shows that the staff of local NGOs may sometimes have authoritarian and patronising attitudes that go counter to the participatory and empowerment strategies they are implementing and advocating. The staff reflect on problems that the strategies present during implementation, and express frustration and ambivalence towards the strategies. The problem of non-participatory staff behaviour is often attributed to inadequate skills at individual and organisational level. First of all, the staff have failed to

understand the implications of normative projects goals for their role as implementers, and hence need to be educated about this. Secondly, organisational learning is needed in order to increase the capacity of the organisation to manage external and internal pressures that may jeopardise the important characteristics of the organisation, i.e. being based on altruism and social commitment to do good. In a sense, recommendations appear to be marked by an over-socialised view of the individual, since clearer information along with the careful training and management of staff is believed to be the right means of coming to terms with these problems. The analyses have a focus on structure and neglect the individual as an actor. In this case, such a bias implies a disregard of the problematic relationship between the individual basis of motivation, and the basis for motivation proposed by the organisation. Furthermore, debates concerning the characteristics of NGOs and the motivation and performance of NGO staff appear to be focused on policy making, i.e., privileging recommendations about how to avoid problems and ensure more appropriate implementation. Such an approach is quite different from one that focuses on understanding the relationship between individual and organisational values.

Although the concepts of participation and empowerment have not been the focus of discussion here, I have suggested that the ambivalence expressed by the staff should be seen as a manifestation of conceptual shortcomings and inherent contradictions which appear when the rhetoric of participation and empowerment meet reality during implementation. Another source for ambivalent behaviour can be detected in the analysis of altruism as basis for work motivation. Brett has argued that altruism in its pure kind cannot persist over time. Hence, the ambivalence of the staff can be interpreted as an expression of the nature of altruism rather than as a misinterpretation or a lack of ideological conviction. By ignoring the inherent dilemmas of altruism in a context where organisational goals rely on this kind of work motivation, we also ignore the importance of supporting staff through reward and incentives. Without such support it is likely that conflicts appear, which may leave the staff with feelings of disillusion resulting in under-performance. A simplified romantic notion of commitment and altruism can lead to the neglect of the

problems of self-interest and opportunism since they are wrongly attributed to profit-seeking, hierarchical organisations. Self-interest and altruism are complex bases for motivation and may at times appear to be very similar, even intimately related.

Altruistic motivation needs some sort of reward to sustain itself over time. According to Etzioni's analytical framework, we can see that, ideally, NGOs belong to an organisational type with staff commitment based on moral motivations, with the organisation offering normative rewards. While the staff interviewed for this study claim that commitment to a cause guides their actions, they also call for the recognition of their deeds by way of better salaries and secure employment. The staff, working in an environment that is far from isolated, have been influenced by other organisational types and want a share of the rewards achieved by others. From Etzioni's model we can appreciate the importance of a balanced relationship between organisational type, reward system and individual motivation, and how this balance may be jeopardised by the introduction of new reward systems. Rejecting the introduction of a reward system, however, by refusing to give in to demands for higher salary in order to preserve and strengthen commitment would probably not prevent the emergence of an imbalance between organisational control and staff commitment. Taking Etzioni's model too literally would lead to the simplification of control-commitment relations. In other words, organisational characteristics cannot be controlled by a formal reward-system alone. First of all, presuming that individual motivation is always multifaceted, no control system can fully and permanently control staff commitment. Secondly, a reward system responding to the staff's calculative motivations does not necessarily need to be a formal one, but may be developed on an informal level, by the staff itself, through ascribing status, prestige and power to certain positions and tasks.

Concerns about the changing characteristics of NGOs are relevant. However, we must try to see to what extent these changes can be related to real developments or to a more sophisticated understanding of the actual forces driving NGOs. The change in circumstances that accompanies increased

attention and resources from external donors is quite considerable. Evidence from general studies on organisations suggest that strong dependence on outside resources combined with pressure to professionalise can supplant initial visions with goals linked to organisational survival and efficiency. NGOs and other actors on the development arena confirm that this evidence is highly relevant to the case of Bangladeshi NGOs. However, changes in the characteristics of NGOs linked to changes in external circumstances should not be viewed as a radical move away from voluntary, normatively based organisations toward those of a more commercial orientation. I believe, rather, that these changes reveal an inherent and pre-existing complexity in these organisations that has become apparent through processes of professionalisation, competition and marketing. The conclusion is neither to blame NGOs for false marketing, nor to abandon them as partners in development. We should, however, recognise that this realisation has profound consequences for the developmental potential of participatory strategies that rely on implementing organisations characterised by altruistic motives.

Through invoking theories from discourses other than those directly related to development, we can expand our understanding of staff motivation and performance in local NGOs. This should be seen as an incentive to rethink established analytical approaches.

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