

Bangladesh at 50: The Role of Civil Society in Bangladesh's "Miracle"

Transcript Begins:

Chelsea Ferrell: Moving into our next panel, which will explore 'The Role of Civil Society in Bangladesh's 'Miracle', I'd now like to introduce the moderator of this panel Borje Ljunggren who'll be moderating the panel. Ambassador Borje Ljunggren has devoted his professional life to Asia. In 1970, he joined the Swedish International Development Agency or SIDA as a regional economist for Asia. He aided in designing a development corporation program supporting newly independent Bangladesh, making his first visit to Dhaka in February of 1972. The following year he was assigned to open a SIDA office in Bangladesh, serving there until mid-1975. In the mid 1980s, he was put in charge of SIDA'S operations in Asia and became the agency's deputy director general making frequent visits to Bangladesh. Borje Ljunggren later became the Swedish ambassador to Vietnam, headed the Asia department of the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Swedish ambassador to China from 2002 to 2006. Currently, Ambassador Ljunggren is an associate at the Asia Center of Harvard University and the Swedish Institute of International Affairs. He holds his PhD in political science and has written extensively on China. At present, he is co-editing a book on contemporary Vietnam. Borje thank you so much for being with us today.

Borje Ljunggren: Thanks very much Chelsea. Thank you Marty also for being such a wonderful organizer and I must say I feel very honored, which you can imagine, to be invited and also impressed by the discussions so far, yesterday as well as today. I had not only a lot of insights but also gone far beyond celebrations, which I think is in true spirit.

In a minute I will introduce the distinguished speakers. I would ask them to do it themselves basically but allow me to first say a few more words about myself and how I got into Bangladesh 50 years ago and try to convey a bit on the flavor already touched upon by Chelsea. I did, as Chelsea mentioned joined SIDA in 1970 as regional economist for Asia and my first major task became Bangladesh, rather the whole war and the politics that emerged, Sweden took a very clear stand in support of independent Bangladesh. We already had a major program in Pakistan, actually in East Pakistan, family planning, vocational training, kept high and grain storage, but now when independence came we made a complete shift in support of Bangladesh. And my main task was to sort this out and design a new program and I was sent to Dhaka in February 1972, two months after the war. In order to get there I was sitting on the floor of a Red Cross carrier from Calcutta and you can imagine the situation that was prevailing there but we were so enormously well-received as a delegation by the new planning commission by Rehman Sobhan, Nooran Islam, Musharaff Hossain. They were all full of optimism and vision. So, it was for me a wonderful experience. The following year I was posted, as mentioned, to Dhaka to open a SIDA office with my wife who then started to work for Banglapat. So, lifelong friendship emerged with Rehman, Ronaq, Abed, Lincoln, Marty, Richard Cash, Josh. They were all great inspiration for me as a young person, and of course when I first arrived two months

after the war, the country was facing an enormously acute situation where millions of refugees returning from India, and as the country was recovering the devastating floods and famines of 1974. Needless to say, all this made lasting impressions on me.

The title of this session is 'The Role of Civil Society in Bangladesh's Miracle.' As we learned yesterday, Bangladesh development has in many ways been remarkable. At the time of independence of the nation, by the way one of the poorest countries in the world, 75 million people, life expectancy of 46, no basket case but highly dependent on food aid. Today, over 150 million habitants, able to feed itself as a country with life expectancy of 73 for women, 70 for men. Successfully, at least when it comes to population policy and thereby creating what we refer to as the demographic dividend, where we have seen microfinance emerge and so many very innovative programs and we have seen rapid economic development. This is all remarkable but even more so, I think, is the role played by Indians. That justified the word miracle, I think. Under circumstances that has been far from easy, state capacity, governance, corruption, human rights violations, fragile democracy, times of military coup and martial law, we have seen major developments and the major role played by Indians. Crucial thing has been the resilience and capacity of people to cope and turning from fatalistic to aspirational as Rahman said yesterday, from fatalistic to aspirational. But how did it happen? How was that space created and protected and developed? Which are the challenges waiting to be addressed today? The challenges are, as we know, very far from over. Yes, the consequences of climate change have just began to be seen, so innovations has got to remain crucial importance. To shed light on this, we have three eminent panelists representing three generations of Bangladesh's dynamic civil society and I will present them and very briefly ask them to present themselves and their work.

First we have Dr. Zafrullah Chowdhry. Nice to see you Zafrulla. Founder of, as you know Gonoshasthya Kendra, the pioneer well-known to almost all of us. Gonoshasthya Kendra was already established in 1972, hence one of the oldest NGOs in Bangladesh. Zafrullah has received numerous international recognitions but I am today particularly proud on the fact that you have received the Right Livelihood Award, sort of Swedish alternative for Nobel Prize, wonderful.

Shameran Abed from BRAC, lawyer by training, he's a senior director of BRAC'S microfinance, graduation program. BRAC was also founded in 1972 by Shameran's late father, a beloved friend of all of us, and also you know BRAC is often regarded as the most successful NGO in the world. Then we have the third generation, Umama Zillur, a feminist activist, founder and director of Kotha, focused on tackling the culture of gender-based violence, which is such an important subject already today. So now, I would like to turn to the three participants and ask them to introduce themselves and their programs speaking for three to four minutes and I'll start with Zafrullah of course. Please Zafrullah, the screen is yours.

Zafrullah Chowdhry: Thank you. Probably, you have forgotten that my first international award was given by Swedish Youth Peace Prize. You were here in Bangladesh at that time, it was

very inspirational. I think about Gonoshasthya, we were involved in the freedom struggle of Bangladesh, the war, most things are bad but war has got one thing, it forced people for imagination, innovative programs for survival they have to do that. The war had the most important impact on women, women suffered most but women opens the door for opportunity for women. Some of the desperation, rigourosity, that imposes by the society, it breaks up, especially in a Muslim society. The Bangladesh has become, over 90 percent are Muslim conservatives though we are not as conservative as Pakistan or Iran but it is conservative society. Maybe one reason we are all converting Muslims so we inherit some of the cultural heritage, at least in our mind we inherit that. But the opportunity when all the muslim we are all —, women in the families, it has been broken, this oppression by Pakistanis and our will for survival that ten million people had to leave the country so they had to really open up .

So, first encounter will be made when we wanted that in the refugee camps, there were large numbers of deaths and other. And also this war was a bit unequal because the US and China did not support this and India was not very efficient in managing these ten million refugees. As a result there were more deaths in the camps, healthcare was lacking, food was not enough, education and housing were not there. In those days, few international agencies like Oxfam were there. Under the circumstances, we had to look for how do we survive. When I came out of England, the only type of freedom struggle they are asking for bullets and bullets, guns and bullets but soon they realized they also need healthcare. Pregnant women after being raped or normally pregnant and the food situation, such a high infant mortality. At that time, it forced us, as we are not allowed to bring the British in ourselves though our leader the commander in chief Muhammad Ataul Goni Osmani, who himself was wounded during the second world war was treated by British nurses. He was very fond of and he was very appreciative. So he said if some bullets are fired, bring it, but our Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad said war is not always a fair game so if something goes wrong there will be bad ramifications, bad reporting, you cannot bring any foreigners in this disaster.

So that has forced us to look around and there I saw thousands of young women are sitting in their village, everyone wants to join the guerilla fight but our problem are not. So there we picked up a few hundreds, they are so clever, this is the first time I realized women are much clever than men. Of course now I realize the reason for survival is such then also I look back in England, my colleague, a lady doctor, has had much difficult life than I have even though I am not white, I am not local person, I had more opportunities than a British girl but they are hard workers. So these younger women with 2-4 weeks of training, we created a big hospital, four hundred and eighty beds hospital so that there, I think really was the beginning of Bangladesh miracle.

That really forced all our leaders and others to see the opportunity exist within the women. I think really that is one thing we must remember but always it happens even in Europe, when the second world war, British women were allowed to participate and as soon as the war was ended, they said go back. So from that lesson, I think really our story, our Bangladesh Miracle story begins at the same time our participants of our freedom struggle were mostly young

people, they are always willing to open, willing to discuss and willing to debate, that is why in, previously we insisted that the first women's commission was happening in Ziaur Rahman's time when I am a man but I was a member but my conviction of their supportive work so this was something that really began. We realised that aligning the women to participate, to come out in public it helps us economically, it helps development of our children, it helps development of our countries, movement and other. In 1972 you may also recover, to get the vaccine people used to run away, we tried to find what is the reason then we realized our, they come from different town and other. We said recruit the women, recruit the girl who can enter anybody's house, sit down and work or talk and other that is one wisdom. You see, Bangladesh really for vaccination even in Europe and especially in England and America you have to really convince people but in Bangladesh you don't, you just announce the date, just tell the mother are coming with the child in her arm ready for the injection. So these are the, our we NGO that what happens that freedom has made the abed life and other. They said we have to build the country, they became the worlds largest, we have to create the healthcare, ...said we have to build our hospital in Dhaka. I said 'No, that is the wrong thing, you have to start from the village' a village so these are our contributors and now NGOs have made a big contribution to spreading the gospel, spreading the gospel of development and really that continues but I also want to say we have brought failures. We are failures in what, our economy is very much dependent on the governments. The women and our worker, the migrant workers we have not done and put up well. Still we have got the developing status but I am worried that unless other facilities seriously develop then we have got.

Last point I want to make and stop here, in one side we have got no hunger. As you remember in '74 we had the famine so many people died though we got enough food. Amartya Sen says we produced most but we did not distribute properly. I am a little bit worried, recently US foodie they had mentioned two things 'this year we have got one million tons shortage of rice, six and a half million tons of wheat .' So these are the things we have to look after if we cannot manage these, who knows who can still hear the sounds of famine and other disparities has increased. We are getting food but it is not adequate food, we are the one nation who have not grown much where these things are shorter and other. Equal opportunities is not there. Our previous — as he said I see the stagnation in the women's development, I see serious stagnation in their area. It is our contribution, commerce also has to dispel and our union council meetings, it is our proposal our push that they have got board members but they are not given enough responsibility so women cannot show their resource. These are the things, I stop here

Borje Ljunggren: Authentic, and of course we will return to these questions later on but now we will ask Shameran, please to make a brief presentation of yourself and BRAC. The challenges that you would like to highlight.

Shameran Abed: Yeah. Thank you very much Borje, I hope you can all hear me.

I'm Shameran, I'm in BRAC, I manage BRAC's work in financial services and also our work on ultra poverty. I won't say very much on BRAC, I think you know, at least in development circles,

it's fairly well known. It is a large development organization founded in Bangladesh and now working in I think eleven countries.

My work in BRAC mostly focuses on financial services specifically in that on microfinance. We are one of the largest microfinance providers globally and the largest in Bangladesh but I also focus a lot on issues of extreme poverty and in that we focus a lot on graduation approach which is a program we developed about twenty years ago which over the last twenty years has become one of the most effective ways to help pull the poorest people out of extreme poverty so that's the work that I do before I joined BRAC in 2009, I was a journalist for a couple of years for three years and before that I was trained as an economist in the US and a lawyer in the UK but I didn't spend a day practicing law. It's a real honor to be a part of this panel. I think this has been two days of amazing conversations that I think to follow the last panel which I think is incredible is a hard act to follow but it's great to be able to talk about Bangladesh's development miracle. I should say I would echo Dr. Chowdhry that there is a long way to go so I don't think that we should assume that the word miracle that we have solved all our problems. I think there are several instances where we have a lot of work to do. Dr. Chowdhry has already spoken about women's development, the issue of gender rights and gender equality is a big one among others as well but what we have achieved as one of the poorest if not the poorest countries in 1971-72 when we gained independence, what we achieved in the last five decades being one of the densely populated countries in the world with really no real natural resources to speak of in the traditional sense has been miraculous and obviously as the title of this panel suggest there has been a big role played by the civil society organizations and civil society at large, not only CSOs but the civil society at large and I will be happy to get into that in this conversation.

So thank you very much for having me here, I am still waiting for my first award, I am pretty sure that Umama is going to beat me to that if she hasn't already but very happy and very honored to be a part of this panel .

Borje Ljunggren: Thank you very much. I think maybe you are suffering from the fact that BRAC has been recognized again and again globally.

Shameran Abed: I guess.

Borje Ljunggren: So now I will turn to Umama and you are at the beginning of a wonderful career and maybe something exciting and challenging to please.

Umama Zillur: Thank you, thank you to Borje and to The Mittal Institute for having me on this panel. Yeah, so like many if not most of the panelist on this conference, I wasn't around for the liberation war in fact I wouldn't have been born for two more decades so I will share what I can from my experience.

My name is Umama Zillur, I am the founder of a young feminist organization called Kotha based in Bangladesh and Kotha directly translates to 'conversation' if anyone was able to tune in to the

last panel. Kotha was a kind of product of rage at a lot of the issues that were discussed in the last panel at a society that really treated the culture of gender based violence as a normal part of the Bangladeshi culture and so we are focused on primarily interventions to tackle this culture of gender violence so we are looking at the root causes and trying to attack those and one of our main focus areas is education based interventions. We have been trying to popularize comprehensive sexuality education that is trying to help people rethink ideas of masculinity and femininity as we understand in Bangladesh and really work with the youngest of the you know, young in Bangladesh and the way we also work is trying to engage the young people at every level of our works, from program design to delivery to decision making power that's kind of the model we have been working with. Along with I have also been working as a research associate and Participation Research Centre PPRC and there also I have been focusing on issues of urban poverty, the urban dynamics with a gender lens. Yeah and lastly ofcourse I had the privilege of working alongside some of the leading women's rights activists, feminists of the country since the founding of Feminist Across Generations alliance which I mentioned in the last panel so that's also something new that we have been trying to build together as a more collective action against gender based violence in the country. Thank you.

Borje Ljunggren: Thank you, Umama. I really also understood from the previous session you are really addressing very key questions.

Now we have discussed in preparing ourselves, we have discussed a number of questions to address and I will now mention them briefly, give each one of you some seven to eight minutes to discuss rather freely and choose what you find most interesting.

Key question 'What role do you think that civil society has played in Bangladesh and expect an economic growth and human development and women's empowerment'. Can you discuss further the role, the amazing role of civil society and what aspects of Bangladeshi miracle did civil society incorporate with the public sector and the private sector. How have they impacted on the performance of the government? How have you affected the government, your work. What impact has civil society had on the development of the Bangladeshi Democracy? In what domains of Bangladeshi development could or should society play a more significant role, even more significant role and what role should society play or need to play going forward. We know, I just mentioned in passing in climate change which is something you certainly have to address.

So would you please again, shall we start with Zafrullah, and ask you to take some seven to eight minutes to address whatever you find the most pertinent to you among those questions.

Zafrullah Chowdhry: I think that Bangladesh miracles main reason is the women's development. In these developments, one person's name, I think it needs to be mentioned, you may remember Dr.Sattar, Ellen Sattar was his wife, do you remember? Ellen Sattar is the lady who introduced in Bangladesh to give the girls scholarship. It is to buy their time for the domestic war state, they should come to school,I think it was the beginning of a big impact in that day. Following the same tradition, the subsequent governments, they make girls education

free, books free and other so I think that is the really most important work they did. Other side, it also helps in our industries as the girls in the local industries and other this plays a very important role. Our, unfortunately, in democratic process, another thing in Ziaur Rahman's time we made a Women's Commission, I was a member of that commission when we all wanted all the primary school teachers should be women, who opposed? It is a senior women's leader, this is another I know doesn't look good. I said even if you make it 100% it will take you fifty years to become 50% of the school teachers and other. These are the and secondly family planning, women played a great role in the family planning. In Bangladesh, young women were shown how with a short training they could even operate. Gonoshasthaya Kendra showed thousands of mini-laparotomy, the village women in method

One of the English newspaper made front page news cannot read or write but could operate all surgery published a very important article on that. So this is the women's power, the people that started to realize if you open the door for women it benefits both, the family and the country. So that is I think it is the most important but on the other side as they were making progress, government did not take the full opportunity. They did not give the full opportunity, now as the mechanization coming, the women's were not being trained they cannot become supervisors, they are becoming the workers not the managers but our target have to be like the — were one thing, all the technical schools were created with the Swedish help, even when you were here, there were all male. I said make it for the female, that still has not yet happened. I think then as people would see, men would see by their side a girl, women who were equally effective and can laugh and smile as easily as he can that will bring that will bring the changes so I think here in democratic world, NGOs here have failed, I am sorry we all avoid the politics, without politics the country cannot change. Today, really there is not democracy in the country, it is the bureaucracy that is controlling everything so this women's development have become stagnant, I think for this you have to be really imaginative like take the example of medical doctors they are all upper class they are becoming. Here, I was pushing a small percentage, maybe a four-five personals like nurses and health workers should be allowed to admit into medical school, that brings a new changes. These are the things we cannot think, we are happy now, we are bliss at this certain state but our disparities still enhance. These are the things we have to look at very seriously the social disparity and another part the tremendous corruption in the country. There is bureaucracy controlling the democracy and expansion of corruption that might destroy us.

Borje Ljunggren: Thank you. Yes, certainly agree that it was important to highlight the corruption even though it is sad story. I was actually checking the Transparency International Index yesterday and I think that Bangladesh was rated 140 or so among 180 countries but so again it makes it rather remarkable what you have been able to achieve what you have achieved over the years and manage to steer through these complex periods, politically the way you have done.

May I now talk to, turn to Umama please and then Shameran

Umama Zillur: I was expecting Shameran but I can go ahead, ok.

As mentioned already I don't think I am expected to give a historical overview of the evolution of civil society so I won't go there. I guess I will talk mostly about civil society and their role in women's empowerment but before that just a general comment, I think just from seeing adults around me in the field of economics or you know social activists, women's activist I did see much more hunger for collective action and joint action before within the civil society landscape than I do in today's world, right now people who are working at NGOs or similar spaces. So that is just a general comment that I think I make from my personal experience. In terms of areas where we saw real change and progress for women's empowerment I think those areas, they were only possible for areas where there was a state commitment alongside NGO resources and NGO mobilization and relying on their governance structures and service channels so the state commitment I think was really necessary and to some areas that Zafrullah Chowdhry already mentioned fertility rates and family planning, right?

So in terms of health, reducing the fertility rate, decreasing mortality rate where civil society has played an outstanding role in achieving those and also in terms of health where it was mentioned in yesterday's panel as well, primary education enrollment and even now secondary education enrollment of girls has been doing really well and you know we met our goals even before the end of the MDG era so for both of these it required state commitment alongside NGO resources but I think one critique that I will make and of course can be debated that these did not come from a place of commitment to women's choice and agency and didn't come from centering women but came from using women as instruments to meet larger national development goals and state goals that we had so for fertility rate.

I know right now, we can talk about it in the framework of reproductive rights but I think that would be a mis-categorization I think that was more about population control, that was more about serving the need that the state had to control the population in Bangladesh after the liberation and very little to do with giving women agency and rights in how to control their lives and the effects of that we see even now today and in my research as well I have seen. And this lack of commitment to center women in the fight for women's empowerment can maybe help to some extent explain some of the more persistent problems that we haven't been able to address. A lot of which have been mentioned like gender based violence and fear of gender based violence that just persists and continues to persists; so, even if you are not a victim of rape, even if you are not a victim of sexual harassment, there is always that fear whether you are and I won't even say when you step out into the streets, I will say whether you are at home, whether you are in your school, in your classroom, whether you are out in the streets, whether its day or night it does not matter, that fear of violence is something that women and girls and gender minorities in this country have to carry with them that they haven't been able to address I think enough and as much as they would have liked to and alongside that so I can also, you know, the intimate partner violence.

Yesterday, Sajeda very briefly mentioned that, we have, regardless of urban-rural areas, we have one of the highest intimate partner violence rates in this country, two out of three women will have faced some form of violence by their own husbands. In fact one of the main reports by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows that women consider their husbands' homes to be the most dangerous place for them in the country, that really says something about the state of this issue for Bangladesh and Bangladeshi women. Of course, child marriage is another issue. So, I think all of this that I am mentioning because at the root of it is the same problem, at the root of it is this lack of commitment by the government to challenge patriarchal structures.

So when we are talking about health and education, the examples that I have mentioned at the beginning those are very much about service and access to service and it was possible to get women engaged in those without challenging or without causing much disruption in the societal structure that we have in place, without shifting a lot of the social norms that we have in place but in order to actually really change gender based violence and issues that we have, we need to cause those disruptions and we haven't seen that and that requires more energy from the civil society of course, requires collective action but also at the end of the day, needs state commitment that we have not seen and I think this was mentioned in the last panel as well that we really need to prioritize and center women and girls and their safety in this fight if we are going to see any big changes. I guess I can stop here.

Borje Ljunggren: And again, the way you have highlighted the question of violence against women as given in the earlier session is also linked to gang rapes

Umama Zillur: Absolutely, that's where the state commitment also comes into play, I think.

Borje Ljunggren: Linked to the political culture.

Umama Zillur: Exactly.

Borje Ljunggren: And their protection from different interests seems to be at the core in a way of political culture something that you need to address even more head on. We will return to it later the question of mobilization rather than not-yet provided services of education but mobilization, but that is for later.

Thank you, I turn to Shameran, please.

Shameran Abed: Thank you very much.

So of course I was also not born during liberation but exactly a decade after but having grown up with someone who was part of the development movement and the NGO movement since independence. My stance is that you know obviously there was a big civil society and student movement that led to the liberation of Bangladesh and in the post liberation era obviously a lot

of that channeled itself into a lot of these people moving into creating civil society organization, to devote themselves into development work. Now Bangladesh's civil society organizations, I think is separate from other countries as they didn't limit themselves from just holding the government accountable and working on issues of rights. Obviously there are many civil society organizations that did that but I think one of the many things about Bangladesh's civil society movement was that these large NGOs, at that time not large but over the times got into direct service deliveries themselves.

So to your first question, Borje about how the civil society organizations contributed to economic growth and human development, I think what we do find is that you know typically in most countries even most countries in our region look at this civil societies movement and it is mostly holding our government accountable but in our country civil society organizations became huge service delivery organizations providing education, providing health, providing agriculture extension and agriculture development, providing microfinance. That has been a big part of the story so on that front the civil society organizations have played a huge role in the development of the country, in human development.

Even though I thought I will leave something for the next panel discussion but we have a long way to go on many of those things. On the accountability front and on the issue of your next question of how we have done in terms of promoting democracy. I think there is this issue of you know, of how outspoken can you be, how much can you take a direct role in holding, you know, politicians to account because that does impede the work that you do on service delivery, on health and education. That's been a, that has sort of created a two class of NGOs in Bangladesh, I think, some which have been more focused on service delivery and some which have been more focused on holding governments and politicians to account. I think both those have been, there has been a lot of progress by both sets of civil society organizations over the last few fifty years and I think there has been a lot of progress made even as we heard in the last panel.

Even in this panel, despite all of the challenges. I mean if you look at the role of women in societies in the 1970s to where we are now there has been a lot of progress. Couple of addition of things I would like to say, I think Umama is right, in the sense that I think maybe civil society organizations could have done more to put women in the center of development. I mean we all did that but she's right, maybe the you know, main motivation was to fix a problem that was other than women's agency but having said that a lot of the work happened did lead to an increased agency for women. I think that is a debate we can always get into. One of the things that my late father used to say is that a lot of the conscientization and mobilization that the NGO sector did and in the 70s and 80s led to the fact that once Bangladesh had this large garment industry. Most of the workers of Bangladesh's garment factory were women, right? And that is very different from the garment factories of India or Pakistan or Sri Lanka where by far the most you know, where by far the most of the worker are men and most of the civil society organizations brought women out of their homes and linked them to the economy and to the market activity also led to that kind of to that happening. Of course we have a lot of issues

around rights and fair pay and work environment and all of that but that foundational work was done by the NGOs in the 70s and the 80s and that has played a big part in the, sort of, in the economic development of this country.

So, where have we fallen short? I think you have asked a really good question and I think Dr. Chowdhry has already said this I think on the democracy front I think we have a lot of challenges, how the NGO sector works through these problems, how we continue to serve people, the poorest people through graduation programs and microfinance and provide healthcare and education, how we can continue to do that and at the same time make sure that our voice is raised when we see issues of injustice, when we see issues of rights violations- is something where we got to have a real soul search on because right now, I think that is where we, as a sector are falling short. I saw a question there that is putting me a little bit on the spot with that and I think that is something we have to own up and say maybe we have got to think about how we play a bigger role in that but definitely in terms of the human development of the people of Bangladesh whether its health or education or financial services.

The role that the microfinance organizations, non-microfinance NGOs and even the rights based NGOs have played have made a huge contribution to the country and I will end by saying that I think it is worth mentioning that for most of our history, the government actually did allow NGOs to play a big part in our development. Again, our experience and this is very different from many other countries and now that we work in several other countries in Asia and Africa. We see how difficult it is for civil society organizations to play a role in the development of the country even on basic things like providing healthcare and education and financial services. So you know the successive governments in Bangladesh in both military and civil, democratic and undemocratic, they did allow the NGOs to grow and become large and play a big role and I think that needs to be highlighted. Now whether that will continue, whether now we are being, whether now civil society space is shrinking and whether we can continue to play a part in the future remains to be seen and obviously we have some serious concerns about that. But historically that has been, the government has enabled the civil society organizations to play a part in that has of course led to these civil society organizations at large in Bangladesh that have become globally known and I think we should also just highlight that.

Thank you.

Borje Ljunggren: You are all describing a story which is exceedingly fascinating. How you have managed to cope and maintain your role in different circumstances and we listened to Hamida before, she talked about the authoritarian character of government in actual one party system and so forth and many going issues to be addressed- governors and corruptions and so forth and still you have succeeded but when it comes up to what you touched upon now, all of you actually, how can you contribute to a deepening of democracy of course you can easily cause a tough reaction if you go too far obviously but so far you all have managed well but can you widen the scope, mobilize more and can you deepen the involvement of the local government the way Shareen discussed about it and women's involvement to be evolved and

education and what Umama mentioned can you see a way to widen the scope and create a government structure which is more transparent and which has more trust among people?

Well I see who can go first, Zafrullah, please?

Zafrullah Chowdhry: I think really we have to be careful with our civil society that the political parties they should not think we are a competitor for them but we are the NGOs, we are helping the government, we are for the people, for the public and other. Here is one main impediment in Bangladesh is the centralizations. Political parties they have now recently learned the pleasures of living in Dhaka and controlling the whole nation which is very dangerous. That is heading the country to becoming almost like a mafia state, that is there, too much of centralization this is the most dangerous. I often tell people should realize Soviet did not succeed like I said it is too centralized, USSR has been. So we also really need people in more power so people should decide how they can lead their way, this is really, it is the high time that all civil societies very actively promote why Bangladesh is too big a country to be ruled from Dhaka or it is a rural like Islamabad to here, this is here NGOs have to work but they cannot do it. The one reason is they're so dependent on the government for approval of their funds and on the other side our donors now unlike your time, 70s, you people use some discretion, independence if you really think and I think in those days our foreign donors were more interested to know the country better, to know the people better so they stood by anything even if the government was delaying they persuaded the government to give us as we see as many countries as Shameeran was telling we have earned it and earned it together. Local NGOs and others and international donors, did you hear? I think you have to invest money so that the people realize the will of these the decentralization and democratization, you know, more democracy will reduce corruption because it will create accountability still really this is not yet on so here the idea to be considered where this is change is really important and the country need to be divided into twenty states or really in what shape into sixty four, whatever it is. It must be divided into that and given to local government locally that will allow the many flowers to bloom and with new ideas. So definitely if Bangladesh is twenty states, I'm sure in some states, women will be taking it up, these are the areas where, you see, anything when the movement sees a little bit growth, government will declare "we agree, we'll hang the perpetrator." Hanging is not the answer.

Like as anything those who have held dearly women's operations and other. How many hangings have you done? It needs education, it needs discussion. It totally needs this country to be in openness, why it is happening? Why we cannot stop the women being tortured in a bus? How difficult is it instead of putting all the police to control of the mass, they should put few plain cloth policemen in the buses, public places and other. These are the theories the simple things, I do not think these are very difficult. Ok, Development case really, ok, another thing, government is selling their certificates, their achievements, you are patting our government's backs and they think we have achieved everything. You see even this morning, I was in the hospital which charges so little even that they cannot pay it, we do not have national health insurance. Our government is not investing but keeping the present structure alive, disinvestment will not help. I repeatedly request our Prime Minister, I said start with the village,

atleast where the fifty thousand people needs, they have the right to see the face of a doctor or receive basic healthcare and also train the local resources. The traditional male attendants, I think now they have got some knowledge but now enhance their knowledge, give them support.

You have tackled because in the western world, you have elderly homes, you have invested money and other but in our country it is not there but this problem we are going to face it very soon so these are the and also many other healthcare like smoking and other. I mean there is a big road still waiting for the dear NGOs. Last point I want to make, NGOs have done a great thing but they have not invested their energy and money for agriculture unless we involve them, the civil society NGOs and other for the agriculture who knows the world might have someday the food problems and famine and others might come back.

Borje Ljunggren: Thank you. Shameran would you answer the question of how civil societies and BRAC can deepen democracy? We will also have some questions from the participants.

Shameran Abed: Yeah, sure.

I don't know if I have the answer to that question and I would just say that there is a way that we've tried to do that in the past. I would channel my late father a little bit where he always felt that there was better to work behind the scenes because he had access and to use this access to try to say the things he wanted to say than try to take a more adversarial route that kind of worked for him and it worked for BRAC. Now how we do it going forward, I think what I do agree with is that civil society organization and civil society at large, civil society beyond CSOs. The writers, the journalists, all of that makes up the civil society, we do have to speak for democracy and rights.

We do have to talk about it, I mean even the people we work for and we work with they expect us to make sure that we speak for these things. Now I think you know we've got to convince politicians and governments that because we challenge certain policies and debate and disagree sometimes, doesn't mean we are part of a conspiracy to bring the government down. It doesn't mean that we are against this government or for that government, or we are for this party or that party. It is our work to make sure that the government works for the people and I think if we can be honest brokers and if we can build trust, we can have our voices heard but of course it is a difficult situation to be in right now because it is very easy as soon as you go or say anything it is easy to go and be given a label that you are anti-government or anti-liberation or anti-state even and I think we ought to get beyond that and have more constructive conversations in a non-adversarial way. That's what BRAC has tried to do, I think that is what we will probably continue to try to do but you know there is also a lot of need and a lot of space to be adversarial sometimes and I think there are lots of organizations that do that very well. Sometimes we partner with them as well but I think we shouldn't, what I'm trying to say is that we shouldn't feel that our civil societies, that our work is just to provide services and not to raise our voice. I think that is very important.

Borje Ljunggren: Thank you. Umama, the question that how democracy can be deepened ?

Umama Zillur: Sure. Something that you said initially when you were posing that question is how you can navigate this and how you can't even go too far. I'll just pick up on that phrase 'of going too far' I think in recent times that going too far has changed its meaning drastically and that going too far is now kind of the things that you wouldn't consider going too far are being considered going too far and like Shameran Abed was saying civil societies are made up of service-delivery organizations, community based organizations, artists, activists and journalists and so because of this changed definition of "going too far", I think service delivery organizations kind of have had to take this role of not speaking up so that they could continue to provide these services and all this burden has come on the people who are usually out on the streets, the activists, journalists, the writers.

I don't think that is fair and again I will bring it back to collective action even within movements. I was speaking about the women's movements, the feminists movements, even within this movement we haven't had much scope for discussion, dialogue and debate just to strengthen our voice and I think that goes for other collectives, other alliances and networks as well within the country and I think we really need to do that internal work as well and strategize in order to figure out how we can raise our voice and be effective. I think I will end there and lastly I think civil society in Bangladesh used to have a very strong voice in shaping discourse whether it was development discourse, whether it is women's empowerment, women's rights and agendas that kind of has been fading as well and that's an area I think we need to work on as well.

Borje Ljunggren: That sounds very serious. We have sometime left. I am trying to weave some questions in between the dialogue. I would also very much like to address maybe the most crucial question that you are facing as a nation that is climate change. What kind of role do you see for civil society and can you see that you can cooperate with the government here because you have managed, remember the floods of '74 after that you developed the capacity to cope with floods which I think has not been understood fully even though the population has grown double but now the climate change is not caused by you but you are the victim so how can it be brought up in the agenda or at a level required by the realists.

Who would like to start? Zafrullah, are you ready?

Zafrullah Chowdhry: Ok, I think we are the victims of climate change, that's true but we have got other responsibilities. Ideally, you see when the Rohingyas come in 1978 first, I said look we must be realistic. Whether you like it, like NGOs we are not only to provide them the service. We are also guarding their rights and other, we should also take the risk to safeguard people's rights, one has to have certain problems, certain government's anger and other, even then we must really strengthen, we must speak up for the restoration of their rights, illegal works, our legal system's failure. About the climate change in '78 I said look we must realize this issue will not be solved in two-three months time, allow them a couple of years that they are going to stay and while they are here they will cut our forests but for survival reasons they have to cut the

forests, they need firewood so allow them to cut the forest at the same time allow them to plant trees. Every families to give them opportunities to plant five trees and look after that and other. Similarly about the climate change and other give them the education give them the other facilities, unfortunately, every government thinks they are going to solve the problem in a couple of months. Same thing this time also I repeatedly requested the government please there will be deforestation, give them a part of it for restoration. Similarly our rivers and others, here we are failing in India's attitude, India is not really helping they are giving nice talks but they don't stop, they are killing our people in the border, they do not solve the problem of water resources for the world to survive we have to share; we have to share with each other. So that is also something I really think, I think for climate change, another thing is really important is education, we must educate our people and understand the global problem. Ordinary people must understand why, like in the Sudan and other, they do not have agriculture, how we can cooperate with each other

So that is what really I think, you our international donors now you should not wash up your hands and become a new status and these are the sectors, like in education, must be given. Education in healthcare and humanity, I think it is the question of humanity. I think it is the survival of the heart.

Borje Ljunggren: Shameran would you say that when it comes to public discourse that Umama referred to can you contribute to climate change and the huge issues a part of the role that you play or it is something that you think is beyond how you define your role now or in the future?

Shameran Abed: No, I think we do play a role in that and I think that discourse is more global rather than national, right?

I mean you know we are not, we don't, our issue is not mitigation as much as adaptation but we do bring up the issues that Bangladesh is facing and will continue to face over the next several decades because of climate change. I think we as an organization, we do play that role, I know we sit on quite a few of the Commissions and turn up at the CoP meetings and we try to do that. In our country, obviously we have a slow onset disaster coming with the rising sea levels, with the increase in salinity of water in the southern belt, with the loss of arable lands that is going to lead to internal migration of people from the south into the cities and it is going to lead to internal displacement and more rapid urbanization and I think those are all the issues that we are going to face and as civil society organisations we need to, I mean we have already been working on it for a long time and continue to work on that and there are many aspects on that. From agriculture that is saline resistant to finding people new jobs, new homes and new livelihood so we are very much on that, we are very much working across many elements of that.

Borje Ljunggren: It's very unfair how you have managed to address so many challenges but now climate change has been brought on all of us and you are not the cause at all but you are an early victim because of nature and geography. I was actually involved in a discussion just yesterday about Carbon Dioxide emissions, of course, now China is causing 28% of the

emissions today but I also define new target to Carbon neutral by 2060 and the American administration and Biden defined new goals, EU in a major meeting in Glasgow in November but to me I cannot resist but mention it because every other issue is going to be secondary. Hence, my question to Umama: you are a young person and we very much envy you for that as well and you will experience this, your children will very much experience this. What are your thoughts on this subject? Beyond also all organization work but also as a Bangladeshi female intellectual?

Umama Zillur: Maybe I won't be around for how it plays out actually so I think I am going to bring this back to the earlier conversations that I was having whether its climate change or urbanization for the case of Bangladesh for all emerging problems that we have, I think we need to rethink how we have been working till now especially with women and how we have been thinking about women's empowerment. I think it is very important to broaden the definition beyond just service opportunities for women, broaden the definition beyond thinking of empowerment as women as users of services and to really, really look at them as the center of how we design interventions and programs and move away from bandaid solutions. I think Climate change is something we can't afford to have bandaid solutions for and we really need to attack the root of and I think those would be the areas I would focus on, not just on climate change but on other emerging problems as well.

Borje Ljunggren: Thank you. I think we have a few minutes left but I think I have failed a bit. I feel when it comes to picking up the questions from all the participants. I think I have brought some into our discourse but forgive me for that but I hope that you think we have addressed all the major issues.

Zafrullah Chowdhry: I want to make this just one point in one sentence.

Borje Ljunggren: Go ahead, please.

Zafrullah Chowdhry: Can I please add one sentence? I think the climate change is one reason which our local contribution is centralization so people are leaving villages for jobs and other so where more emissions, more hazards are increasing for this reason to we stop the repeat of urbanization, it will be useful if our local governments, local startups they are being helped . they are being promoted and they are being helped to some extent that climate change changes, the effects of it changes.

Borje Ljunggren: Thank you and I hope I have in our discourse confirmed the very idea and the role, the very positive roles that the NGOs in our societies is playing in Bangladesh. I think all through my experience of over fifty years this will be my most positive experience, to witness the work that you have done and what you have created also now a new generation emerging like Umama is emerging and its all that makes it all, I think that is wonderful I try not to extend but only say that you matter a lot and even more in the future so thank you.

Zafrullah Chowdhry: Thank you.

Umama Zillur: Thank you so much, Borje.