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10

EXTREME POVERTY AND MARGINALISATION IN BANGLADESH: DRIVERS AND LESSONS FOR DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

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Table of Contents

Foreword by the EBA

Combating extreme poverty remains central to global development frameworks, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its commitment to "leave no one behind". Poverty reduction is a cornerstone of Sweden's international development cooperation policy, emphasizing the importance of inclusive development and human rights. In Bangladesh, recent estimates reveal that extreme poverty disproportionately affects religious and ethnic minority groups, underscoring the limitations of conventional poverty reduction strategies and the need for more targeted policy responses.

The authors of this report, Owasim Akram, Mathilde Maîtrot and Joe Devine, contribute to a better understanding of the multiple dimensions of poverty by exploring the intersection of ethnicity, religion, discrimination, and poverty in Bangladesh, a critical but under-researched dimension of marginalization. By focusing on the Chakma, Santal, and Dalit communities, the study sheds light on the dynamics that perpetuate poverty among minority groups, the lived experiences of marginalized communities, and the lessons these realities hold for policymaking. The findings emphasize the need to move beyond reliance on economic growth and generic poverty reduction measures, advocating for tailored approaches that address structural exclusion and advance the rights of the most disadvantaged.

From a development perspective, the study holds particular significance. Bangladesh's aspiration to eradicate poverty and achieve sustained economic growth hinges on addressing the needs of those furthest behind. Similarly, its democratic commitments are tested by the extent to which it upholds the basic rights and entitlements of marginalized populations. These goals align with Sweden's priorities in international development, including promoting equity, safeguarding human rights, and fostering inclusive governance.

Employing qualitative methods that capture the voices and lived experiences of members of marginalized groups, this report provides insights for international development partners, including Sida, as well as decisionmakers in Bangladesh. By deepening understanding of extreme poverty and advocating for calibrated and coordinated responses, it supports efforts to advance accountability, amplify marginalized voices, and ensure that development truly benefits all.

The study was conducted with the guidance of a reference group, chaired by Julia Schalk. The authors bear full responsibility for its content.

Stockholm, February 2025

Torbjörn Becker, EBA Chair   Julia Schalk

Sammanfattning

I Bangladesh är förekomsten av extrem fattigdom oproportionerligt hög bland religiösa och etniska minoritetsgrupper (Ali et al., 2021). Konventionella fattigdomsminskningsstrategier kombinerat med ekonomisk tillväxt har visat sig vara ineffektiva när det gäller att tackla grundorsakerna till och djupet av fattigdomen bland de mest marginaliserade. Istället krävs skräddarsydda politiska åtgärder för att minska minoritetsgruppers fattigdom och utsatthet. För att utforma sådana åtgärder krävs, i sin tur, detaljerade och systematiska analyser av hur fattigdom, marginalisering, och exkludering ter sig för olika grupper. Hittills har sambandet mellan religion, etnicitet och fattigdom i Bangladesh inte undersökts systematiskt. Denna studie syftar till att bidra med kunskap avseende detta.

Studiens övergripande syfte är att undersöka hur etniska och religiösa minoritetsgrupper i Bangladesh upplever och hanterar fattigdom och marginalisering. Studien besvarar följande forskningsfrågor:

1. Vilka dynamiker bidrar till den utbredda fattigdomen bland minoritetsgrupper?
2. Hur upplever och hanterar marginaliserade grupper sin fattigdom och exkludering?
3. Vilka lärdomar kan dras av svaren på de två ovanstående frågorna vad gäller framtida strategier och åtgärder för att minska minoriteters fattigdom och marginalisering?

Studien är viktig ur ett utvecklingsperspektiv av flera skäl. För det första har Bangladesh ambitioner att öka tillväxten och utrota fattigdomen. Detta är inte möjligt utan en ökad förståelse för och förmåga att tillgodose behoven hos dem som lever i extrem fattigdom. För det andra har landet även åtagit sig att sträva efter ökad demokratisering – ett åtagande som ställts på sin spets i och med de politiska förändringarna som landet genomgått efter den tidigare premiärministern Sheik Hasinas fall 2024. Ett mått på hur väl detta åtagande uppfylls är i vilken utsträckning de mest

marginaliserades grundläggande rättigheter respekteras. Denna studie är direkt kopplad till båda dessa frågor och anlägger därmed ett perspektiv som är av stort värde för såväl Bangladeshs beslutsfattare som för utvecklingspartners som strävar efter att utrota extrem fattigdom och stärka tillämpningen av mänskliga rättigheter i Bangladesh.

Studien använder en kvalitativ fallstudiemetod för att undersöka fattigdom och marginalisering hos tre olika minoritetsgrupper: Chakma, Santal och Daliter. Grupperna valdes ut på grund av deras olika historiska, politiska och socioekonomiska förhållanden. Empiriskt materal har samlats in genom djupintervjuer, så kallade ”life history interviews” och fokusgruppsdiskussioner med medlemmar av minoritetsgrupperna, samt informantintervjuer med andra intressenter. Djupintervjuerna fokuserar på personliga berättelser och ger insikter i maktdynamiker och individuella erfarenheter av fattigdom och marginalisering. Fokusgrupps-diskussioner och informantintervjuer ger en bredare förståelse för strukturella faktorer och hinder för inkludering, och utforskar känsliga frågor såsom strukturellt våld. Totalt bygger studien på empiriskt material som samlats in genom 30 djupintervjuer, 10 fokusgruppdiskussioner och 10 informantintervjuer, vilket säkerställer demografisk mångfald och könsbalans bland deltagarna.

Studien analyserar erfarenheter av fattigdom och marginalisering utifrån Sidas ramverk för multidimensionell fattigdomsanalys (MDPA), som omfattar fyra sammankopplade dimensioner: resurser, möjligheter och valmöjligheter, makt och röst samt mänsklig säkerhet. MDPA hjälper till att besvara frågan ”vem är fattig och på vilket sätt?” och belyser att svaret på denna fråga beror på socioekonomiska förhållanden och sociala positioner, såsom kön, etnicitet, religion och sexuell identitet (Sida, 2017).

Studiens huvudsakliga slutsatser är följande:

- Minoritetsgruppernas identitet har fungerat som en drivkraft för marginalisering och diskriminering. Alla tre grupperna rapporterade erfarenheter av i) begränsade möjligheter när det gäller t.ex. sysselsättning/försörjning, tillgång till marknader samt utbildning; ii) maktlöshet och oförmåga att uttrycka behov och farhågor samt att kräva sina rättigheter; iii) brist på resurser genom begränsat markägande och dålig tillgång till välfärdsstöd; och iv) sårbarhet eller utsatthet för strukturellt eller episodiskt våld, vilket minskar känslan av säkerhet och välbefinnande.

- Minoritetsgrupperna upplever en hög grad av politisk och byråkratisk försummelse. Denna försummelse avspeglar en maktlöshet och hinder mot att föra sin egen talan i förhållande till staten och institutioner med uppgift att garantera individers rättigheter, vilka här representeras av lokala tjänstemän. Kollektiv försummelse av minoriteter utövas genom långa väntetider för minoritetsgruppsmedlemmar för få tillgång till understöd eller få ansökningar om försörjningsstöd behandlade. Enskilda personers anspråk avfärdas ofta eftersom minoritetsgruppsmedlemmar inte betraktas som fullvärdiga samhällsmedlemmar.

- Alla tre grupperna upplever en mycket begränsad tillgång till långsiktiga sociala skyddsprogram, såsom "food/cash-for-work" och andra statliga sysselsättningsprogram. Eftersom sådana program är generösare och mer långsiktiga används de ofta som incitament eller belöning för politiskt stöd. Etniska och religiösa minoriteter ses som politiskt obetydliga och nedprioriteras eller ignoreras därför systematiskt när det gäller allokering av stöd.

- Det saknas ett socialt värnande om och ansvarstagande för de marginaliserade grupperna, vilket leder till upplevelser och känslor av förödmjukelse och sårbarhet. Detta framgick av individernas erfarenheter av att bli förbisedda eller avhysta av tjänstemän med ansvar att hjälpa dem, och därmed ignorerade som medborgare.

- Ett viktigt inslag i marginaliseringen av minoritetsgrupper är legitimeringen av diskriminering genom hegemonisk makt-utövning och olika former av etikettering. Daliterna stämplas som "orena", Chakma-medlemmar som "efterblivna" och Santal-medlemmar som "fyllon". Denna etikettering legitimerar exkluderingen av grupperna. Dessutom leder en internalisering av etiketterna till acceptans av status quo bland gruppmedlemmar.

- Erfarenheterna av försummelse och utanförskap delas av individer som lever i extrem fattigdom men tillhör majoritets-gruppen. En avgörande skillnad i upplevelsen av fattigdom är dock minoritetsgruppernas avsaknad av mänsklig säkerhet. Extremt fattiga som tillhör etniska minoritetsgrupper utsätts för större och mer kontinuerliga hot mot sin säkerhet. Trygghetsdimensionen är viktig eftersom den har visat sig förstärka fattigdomen i de andra dimensionerna, det vill säga ytterligare begränsa minoritetsgruppsmedlemmarnas möjligheter, valmöjligheter, inflytande och resurser.

Studien diskuterar en rad policyimplikationer av relevans för beslutsfattare i Bangladesh samt för multilaterala och bilaterala utvecklingspartners, däribland Sida. Dessa fokuserar till stor del på åtgärder för att "synliggöra" marginaliserade minoritetsgrupper i Bangladesh, vilket är en förutsättning för att minska deras extrema fattigdom och marginalisering.

De viktigaste åtgärderna är följande:

1. Fortsatt fokus på extrem fattigdom

Trots framsteg vad gäller fattigdomsbekämpning så utgörs en betydande del av den extremt fattiga befolkningen i Bangladesh av etniska och religiösa minoriteter. Regeringen och utvecklingspartners bör därför fortsatt fokusera på att bekämpa den extrema fattigdomen med fokus på åtgärder som inkluderar minoritetsgrupperna. Detta kräver ett skifte från ett kortsiktigt projektbaserat fokus till en långsiktig, evidensbaserad socialpolitisk agenda som säkrar alla medborgares rättigheter.

2. Stärka ansvarsutkrävande för att säkra rättigheter och stöd

Studien visar på lokala myndigheters systematiska försummelse av minoritetsgrupper när de söker stöd och grundläggande tjänster som de har rätt till. För att komma till rätta med detta måste mekanismer inrättas för att öka de lokala myndigheternas ansvarsskyldighet, säkerställa en rättvis fördelning av socialt skydd och resurser samt säkra minoritetsgruppernas grundläggande rättigheter.

3. Övergång från integrering till kalibrering

Bangladeshs nuvarande förhållningssätt till minoritetsgrupper fokuserar på integrering och syftar till assimilering av grupperna i den dominerande kulturen. Det faktum att minoriters fattigdom och diskriminering inte minskat nämnvärt tyder på att denna strategi är ineffektiv. Regeringen bör anta ett politiskt ramverk som erkänner den intersektionalitet och horisontella ojämlikhet som minoritetsgrupper står inför, och gå från en integrationsmodell till en kalibrerad strategi som respekterar mångfald och tar itu med olika gruppers specifika behov och utmaningar. Utvecklingspartners har här en möjlighet att påverka regeringen i denna riktning. Ett sådant skifte kräver även att olika givares utvecklingsinsatser koordineras och samordnas lokalt.

4. Stödja samordnade påverkansinsatser

Civilsamhällesorganisationer spelar en avgörande roll när det gäller att försvara minoritetsgruppers rättigheter. Civilsamhället i Bangladesh är dock splittrat och okoordinerat, vilket begränsar dess inflytande. För att öka civilsamhällets genomslag krävs samordnade påverkansinsatser av de organisationer och nätverk som arbetar med minoriteters rättigheter i landet. Utvecklingspartners kan spela en viktig roll genom att bidra till ett stärkt och mer samordnat civilsamhälle. En viktig politisk utmaning är dessutom att engagera staten som en del av lösningen genom att förespråka politiska reformer som tacklar de strukturella hindren för minoriteters inkludering. Detta kräver ett aktivt arbete för att öka marginaliserade gruppers inflytande och röst samtidigt som man tar hänsyn till det komplexa politiska landskapet vad gäller förhållningssättet till minoriteters status och rättigheter.

Summary

According to recent estimates, the prevalence of extreme poverty in Bangladesh is disproportionately high among religious and ethnic minority groups (Ali et al., 2021). Conventional poverty reduction approaches along with reliance on economic growth have remained ineffective in addressing the causes and depth of poverty among the most marginalised. More tailored policy responses are needed but these require further detailed and systematic analyses that explore patterns of marginalisation, exclusion, and neglect. So far, the association between religion, ethnicity and poverty had not been systematically explored in the context of Bangladesh. This study makes an original contribution towards that end.

The aim of the study is to examine the dynamics of poverty and marginalisation experienced by minority ethnic and religious groups in Bangladesh. The study addresses the following research questions:

1. What dynamics contribute to the prevalence of poverty among minority groups?
2. How do marginalised communities experience and respond to these dynamics?
3. What policy lessons can be drawn from the responses to the above two questions?

The study is important from a development perspective for several reasons. First, Bangladesh has ambitions to increase its growth trajectory and become poverty free. This is not possible unless the needs of those living in extreme poverty are understood and addressed. Second, the country is also committed to a democratic future – a commitment that has taken on particular salience following the recent political transitions the country is going through. One of the crucial tests of this commitment is the examination of the extent to which the basic rights and entitlements of the most marginalised are respected and acted upon. This study feeds directly into both concerns. Such a perspective will be

invaluable to Bangladeshi policymakers as well as for development partners committed to the eradication of extreme poverty and the enforcement of rights in Bangladesh.

The study explores the marginalisation experienced by three different minority groups: the Chakma, the Santal, and the Dalit communities. These minority groups were chosen for their diverse historical, political, and socio-economic conditions. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, utilizing life history interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) with various stakeholders. Life history interviews focus on personal narratives and challenges, offering insights into power dynamics and lived experiences of poverty and marginalisation. FGDs and KIIs provide a broader understanding of structural constraints and inclusion barriers, exploring sensitive issues such as structural violence. In total, the study draws on empirical material collected through 30 life history interviews, 10 FGDs, and 10 KIIs, ensuring demographic diversity and gender balance among participants.

The study analyses experiences of poverty and marginalisation based on Sida's framework for multi-dimensional poverty analysis (MDPA), including four interrelated dimensions: resources, opportunities and choice, power and voice, and human security. The MDPA helps answering the question of 'who is poor and in what way?' and sheds light on that the answer to this depends on socio-economic conditions and if viewed from different social positions, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual identity (Sida, 2017).

The key findings include the following:

- The identity of the groups has acted as a force of marginalisation and discrimination. All three groups reported experiences of i) limited opportunities in relation to, for example, employment/ livelihoods, market access and participation, and education; ii) powerlessness and voicelessness in terms of being unable to articulate needs, rights and concerns; iii) a lack of resources,

evidenced in limited land ownership and poor access to welfare support; and iv) vulnerability or exposure to structural or episodic violence, which reduces the overall sense of security and wellbeing.

- The minority groups experience a high degree of political and bureaucratic neglect. This indicates a form of powerlessness and voicelessness in relation to duty-bearers and to the state, represented here by local government officials. Collective neglect was observed through prolonged delays for minority group members in gaining access to social security or in having requests for welfare benefits considered. Individuals' claims are often delegitimised as minority group members are viewed as less than full members of society.

- A very limited access to long-term social protection programs, such as food/cash-for-work or similar public works programmes, was observed across all three groups. Because such programmes are more generous and longer-term, they are used as incentives or rewards for political support. Given the electoral insignificance of ethnic and religious minorities, group members are systematically deprioritised or ignored.

- The findings indicate the absence of a social guardianship for the marginalised group, leading to feelings of humiliation and vulnerability. This was evidenced by individuals' experiences of being directed to seek assistance from various officials bypassing responsibility and being disregarded as citizens.

- An important feature of minority group marginalisation is the process of legitimisation of discrimination through hegemonic exercises of power and various forms of labelling. The Dalits are found to be labelled 'impure', the Chakma as 'backward', and the Santals as 'drunkards'. This labelling lends legitimacy to the exclusionary actions, but also results in the internalisation of the same labels and the internal acceptance of the status quo.

- While the experiences of neglect and exclusion are shared by non-minority group members living in extreme poverty, a crucial difference is observed with regard to human security. Extremely poor belonging to ethnic minority groups face greater and continuous threats to their security. The insecurity dimension is important because it has been found to enhance poverty across the other dimensions, i.e. further limiting minority group members' opportunities, choices, voices and resources.

The study outlines a set of policy implications of relevance for decision- and policymakers in Bangladesh as well as for multilateral and bilateral development partners, including the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The policy reflections largely focus on how to make marginalised minority groups in Bangladesh more 'visible', which is a prerequisite for addressing their extreme poverty and marginalisation. The key policy messages are the following:

1. Sustained focus on extreme poverty
Despite progress in poverty reduction, a significant portion of the extremely poor population in Bangladesh belongs to marginalized ethnic and religious minority groups. The government and development partners should maintain a strong focus on addressing extreme poverty, recognizing the disproportionate impact on minority communities. This should involve shifting from a short-term project-based approach to a long-term, evidence-based social policy agenda that upholds the rights and entitlements of all citizens.

2. Strengthen accountability to protect rights and entitlements
The study reveals significant instances of bureaucratic and political neglect experienced by minority groups when seeking government support and services. To address this, mechanisms must be established to enhance the accountability of local government officials, ensuring equitable distribution of social protection schemes and resources, and upholding the rights and entitlements of minority communities.

3. Transition from integration to calibration

Bangladesh's current approach to minority groups focuses on integration, expecting them to assimilate into the dominant culture. However, the persistent poverty and discrimination faced by these communities suggest this approach has not been effective. The government should adopt a policy framework that recognizes the intersectionality and horizontal inequalities faced by minority groups, moving away from a one-size-fits-all integration model to a calibrated approach that respects diversity and addresses the specific needs and challenges of different groups. Development partners could play a role in pushing the government to move in this direction. This shift necessitates a re-imagining of development interventions to be more integrated and locally coordinated, considering the multidimensional, intersectional, and inter-generational nature of poverty.

4. Support coordinated advocacy efforts

Civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for the rights of minority groups but the fragmentation of civil society in Bangladesh limits their influence. To enhance their impact, coordinated advocacy efforts are essential, bringing together diverse civil society groups working on minority rights. Development partners could play an important role in contributing to greater coordination among civil society organisations. Moreover, a key policy challenge is engaging the state as part of the solution, advocating for policy changes that address the structural factors contributing to minority group marginalisation. This requires navigating the politically sensitive nature of minority rights in Bangladesh and calls for development partners to support agency and voice while recognizing the complex political landscape.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, most ethnic and religious minority groups belong to the poorest wealth quintile of the population. According to a recent estimate, the levels of extreme poverty among ethnic minority groups are above 70 percent when the lowest two quintiles are added together (Ali et al., 2021, see also Table 2 below). Religious minorities, such as Buddhists and Christians, are twice as likely as Muslims to be extremely poor, and those belonging to 'other' religious communities are three times as likely to be extremely poor (Ali et al., 2021, see also Table 3 below). These findings are significance for several reasons. They highlight important but under-researched horizontal inequalities in Bangladesh, a country often perceived and presented as ethnically and religiously homogenous. Until recently, the association between religion, ethnicity and poverty had not been systematically explored.

Despite the fact that Bangladesh has made significant progress in alleviating extreme poverty, poverty reduction policies in the country have been criticised for focusing on 'graduating' the number of people living below a particular poverty threshold rather than reducing the severity or depth of poverty. The latter is a significantly greater policy challenge because poverty severity varies across groups (Ali & Mujeri, 2016, Ali et al., 2021). Wealth concentration among a few contrasts starkly with persistent extreme poverty, disproportionately affecting ethnic and religious minority groups.

Urgent policy action is needed to address these disparities and the disenfranchisement of citizens, which threatens rights and exacerbates divisions across various lines. 'Business-as-usual' poverty reduction or growth strategies are ineffective for those living on the margins, as argued by von Braun (2014). Instead, more tailored policy responses are needed but these require further detailed and systematic analyses that explore patterns of marginalisation, exclusion, and neglect. This underlines the need for a better understanding of the nature and dynamics of extreme

poverty and marginalisation in Bangladesh as well as for political commitment and concerted efforts on the part of policymakers and development partners. This report aims to make an original contribution to addressing these challenges by offering an exploration of the lived experiences of marginalised ethnic and religious groups in Bangladesh.

Study aim and questions

This study builds on an original finding in recent research that the prevalence of extreme poverty Bangladesh is disproportionately high among religious and ethnic minority groups (Ali et al., 2021). The aim of the study is to examine the dynamics of marginalisation experienced by minority ethnic and religious groups in Bangladesh.

The report addresses the following research questions:

1. What dynamics contribute to the prevalence of poverty among minority groups?
2. How do marginalised communities experience and respond to these dynamics?
3. What policy lessons can be drawn from the responses to the above two questions?

The study explores the marginalisation experienced by minority groups in Bangladesh through case studies focusing on three different minority groups: the Chakma, the Santal, and the Dalit communities. These minority groups are chosen for their diverse historical, political, and socio-economic conditions. The study employs a qualitative case study approach, utilizing life history interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and key informant interviews (KIIs) with various stakeholders. Life history interviews focus on personal narratives and challenges, offering insights into power dynamics and lived experiences of poverty and marginalisation. FGDs and KIIs provide a broader understanding of

structural constraints and inclusion barriers, exploring sensitive issues such as structural violence. In total, the study draws on empirical material collected through 30 life history interviews, 10 FGDs, and 10 KIIs, ensuring demographic diversity and gender balance among participants.

Analytically, the study uses a framework for assessing and analysing poverty across multiple dimensions developed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), the Multi-Dimensional Poverty Analysis (MDPA) framework. This enables us to observe and analyse how different aspects of poverty interact and reinforce one another.

From a development perspective, exploring the above questions is important for several reasons. First, Bangladesh has ambitions to increase its growth trajectory and become poverty free. This is not possible unless the needs of those living in extreme poverty are understood and addressed. Second, the country is also committed to a democratic future – a commitment that has taken on particular salience following the ousting of the ruling party on 5 August 2024.[1] One of the crucial tests of this commitment is the examination of the extent to which the basic rights and entitlements of the most marginalised are ensured.

This study feeds directly into both concerns. Examining the experiences of poverty of marginalised groups will offer a more precise and nuanced understanding of the determinants and reproduction of poverty and exclusion. This will be invaluable to Bangladeshi policymakers as well as for development partners committed to the eradication of extreme poverty and the enforcement of rights in Bangladesh. Although the ambitions to generalise findings to a larger population of minorities in Bangladesh

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[1] Following an unprecedented and massive Gen Z uprising, Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country on 5 August 2024. An interim government, led by Professor Muhammad Yunus, has been in place since 8 August 2024.

or to minority groups in other countries are limited given that the situation of minority groups as well as contextual factors and conditions vary, the findings are likely to be of value for understanding drivers and patterns of marginalisation and exclusion beyond Bangladesh.

Growth and governance in Bangladesh

In this section, we offer an overview of some of the key current political and economic concerns in Bangladesh that are relevant to the study.

For more than two decades now, Bangladesh has enjoyed significant, if not exceptional, achievements in socio-economic development. Its success is the result of a combination of factors, including strong private sector-led growth, macroeconomic stability, high levels of remittances, and increasing levels of foreign investment. Bangladesh is expected to soon graduate from the United Nations' (UN) Least Developed Countries (LDCs) list and has realistic prospects of joining the league of middle-income countries.

Nevertheless, Bangladesh faces serious challenges when it comes to the quality of democratic governance, high levels of corruption at all levels of society, weak enforcement of human rights and the parallel weakening of civil society and tightening of space for civil society to function. These concerns have persisted over time and were highlighted in the mobilisation of 5 August 2024 that led to the ousting of the then government.

The juxtaposition of a successful and thriving economy with a poor governance profile has led many to characterise the country as a 'development paradox' (Blair, 2020). At the heart of the paradox lies a substractivist assumption (Devine and Wood, forthcoming) that highlights how Bangladesh 'lags behind' Western ideals of democracy. The substractivist paradox framework is therefore one that focuses on 'what ought to be' while failing to recognise and

explore 'what is'. In other words, it overlooks the logics and dynamics that underpin the actual and everyday political dynamics in Bangladesh and how these affect people's lives. These dynamics are the starting point for this study.

Following the parliamentary elections of 1991, political arrangements in Bangladesh have centred around two main political parties: the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, with alternating periods in office. For many, this post-1991 period is best characterised as an era of 'partyarchy' (Ahmed et al., 2014), a political arrangement where the ruling party enjoys a monopoly of power, ignoring oppositions, side-lining the parliament as a meaningful forum for political debate, and undermining political accountability to citizens (Sobhan, 2004).

After that, there was a noticeable shift from two-party dominance and competition to single-party dominance with Awami League winning four consecutive parliamentary elections since 2008. This single-party dominance led to increasing concerns about a deterioration in the quality of democratic governance. This deterioration, or 'democratic backsliding' (Riaz, 2021), was demonstrated by an intensification of the ruling party's monopoly of power over key organs of the state; electoral manipulation and the political encroachment on key institutions like the judiciary and media; the increased use of extrajudicial violence by security forces; institutionalised corruption; and a greater reduction in the space for independent voices and civil society action. Rather than a period of democratic consolidation, the post-1991 era has therefore seen the gradual emergence of a hegemonic authoritarian regime in Bangladesh (Jackman, 2021).

Despite using state power and violence against opponents, the Awami League also developed ideological narratives, such as the spirit of the liberation war (*muktijuddher chetona*), to legitimize its position and unite segments of the population (Maîtrot and Jackman, 2023). The 'partyarchy' regime resulted in a *de facto* rent sharing arrangement in which elites could 'police' the limited access (North et al., 2009)

of citizens to state resources. This generated some political stability, and supported the successful pursuit of market led growth. The policing of limited access by elites grew exponentially during the 'one party state' rule. However the 15 uninterrupted years of Awami League rule was tainted by rampant injustices, unchecked corruption, and a failure to satisfy the political aspirations of the people (Ghosh, 2024).[2] On 5 August 2024, after weeks of protests against quota reforms[3] and violent state repression, the Prime Minister was forced to flee the country, bringing the Awami League's rule to an end. The regime's repressive and anti-democratic actions, including a brutal crackdown on peaceful student protesters, fuelled unrest that led to the death of over 800 people.

Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus became the Chief Adviser of an interim government which faced the immediate challenge of restoring law and order in the country. Initially, there were numerous reports of attacks against Awami League supporters, women and minorities. Meanwhile, the growing use of misinformation only deepened the sense of insecurity among much of the population, particularly minority groups, as reported by multiple news media.[4,5,6] It is too early to assess how recent political developments will impact the country in general and minority groups' rights, entitlements and security in particular. There is currently a lot of uncertainty and

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[2] Ghosh, J. (2024). Lessons from Bangladesh's Uprising. *Project Syndicate*. Accessed 19 October 2024 from: https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/india-and-imf-should-heed-the-lessons-of-sheikh-hasina-downfall-by-jayati-ghosh-2024-08

[3] The mass mobilisation that led to the eventual ousting of the government on 5 August 2024, started out as a series of protests in June 2024 against the reinstatement of a quota that reserves 30% of government jobs for children of independence war veterans. This quota had been cancelled by the government in 2018 in response to large scale student protests in 2018.

[4] https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240811-attacks-and-online-misinformation-frighten-bangladeshi-hindus

[5] https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2n8pzk7gzo

[6] https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/persecution-hindus-bangladesh-fake-posts-uncovered-bbc-914141

unpredictability, highlighting the complex context for development achievements. For this study, recent events highlight the opportunities and constraints that citizens and development partners have to navigate in pursuit of specific goals.

Civil society in Bangladesh: pitfalls and potential

The consolidation of the Awami League's political dominance over the past years has coincided with a significant increase in the restrictions placed upon civil society activity as well as an intensification of the acrimony and lack of trust embedded in the wider political culture. Bangladesh has a rich history of civil society organisations (CSOs) based around an array of interests, such as labour, religion, business, party politics, philanthropy and so on. In the 1980s, one particular form of civil society group came to dominate the formal civil society space, namely non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These development organisations benefited from the support, financial and non-financial, of the international community, but also from the energy of local traditions of charity, self-help, and social activism. The NGO sector grew at an exponential rate, turning into sophisticated and creative institutions that became world leaders in development (Karim, 2018; Rahman & Tasnim, 2023). In their heyday, NGOs also played a leading role in championing human rights and democracy, political accountability, and the empowerment of citizens (Devine, 2003).

Today, NGOs in Bangladesh no longer enjoy the prominence that they had in the 1990s and early 2000s, for several reasons. First, there has been a clear shift in the operational priorities of most NGOs. While initially, most were involved in social mobilisation activities, today their "task has [...] been limited to apolitical delivery of welfare services" (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020: 197). This move to greater service delivery places NGOs in a more subordinate position to government, reducing the space for contestation to what is often

described as 'soft political issues', such as some areas within gender empowerment, the environment, and microcredit, and away from issues such as state accountability, rights enactment, and governance. This shift has fuelled criticism of NGOs, questioning their claim to 'represent the poorest and most vulnerable' in the country, and opened them up even more to accusations of working on behalf of foreign interests.

Second, there is no doubt that the prominence of NGOs has been weakened by a series of government legislations, criticised for stymying freedom of expression and arbitrarily punishing detractors of the ruling party. The first of these legislations was the Information and Communication Technology Act of 2006 (amended in 2013), which was followed by the Digital Security Act of 2018. Although still in force, the Digital Security Act is planned to be replaced by the Cyber Security Act. Described by the US State Department as "one of the world's most draconian laws for journalists" (The Daily Star, 2023),[7] the Digital Security Act has led to the arrest of hundreds of people, including some high-profile human rights activists, accused of arbitrary crimes. Critics have pointed out that these legislations effectively weaponise the law and allow the government to stamp out any dissent and opposition voiced by political or civil society actors. The legislations have been criticised for nurturing a climate of impunity and intimidation and have resulted in a significantly weaker oppositional force. Meanwhile, the NGO sector has also come under closer scrutiny since the introduction in 2016 of the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act. The Law lists a series of offences, including anti-state or subversive activities and making malicious or derogatory statements, which can lead to the immediate deregistration of NGOs.

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[7] The Daily Star (2023). DSA one of the world's most draconian laws for journalists: US. Published 11 April 2023. Accessed 15 January 2024 via: https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/dsa-one-the-worlds-most-draconian-laws-journalists-us-3294361

Assessments of the current situation of NGOs in Bangladesh inevitably rely on comparisons with the NGO heyday 1990–2010, when the sector was described as vibrant, powerful, and world-leading in terms of its capacity and reach. Today, instead, the sector is described as weak, in decline, irrelevant and 'squeezed out', which has implications for the poorest and most marginalised.

The overview of the status of civil society as well as of the general political situation in Bangladesh (highlighted in the section above) points to a challenging political terrain in which to think about the experience of, and efforts to counter, poverty and marginalisation. In the section that follows, we examine more closely the first question driving our research, i.e. the trends in and entrenchment of poverty among minority groups.

Ethnic and religious minorities in Bangladesh

Before proceeding, there is a need to elaborate on the meaning of ethnic and religious minorities in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi population is predominantly Sunni Muslim (91%) and Hindu (8%). The remainder of the population is largely Theravada-Hinayana Buddhist, Roman Catholic, or belongs to smaller communities of Shia Muslims, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha'is, animists, ISKCON members, agnostics, or atheists (United States Department of State, 2022).[8] Family law, enforced in secular courts, contains separate provisions for different religious groups. Ethnic minorities, generally practising non-Islamic faiths, are dispersed across the country, but with a higher concentration in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and northern

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[8] United States Department of State (2022). Bangladesh 2022 International Religious Freedom Report. Office of International Religious Freedom, United States Department of State. Accessed 15 February 2024 from: https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/bangladesh/

districts of Bangladesh. The Garo in Mymensingh is predominantly Christian, as are some of the Santal in Gaibandha or Rajshahi. Most Buddhists are members of the indigenous populations of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Although drawing a line between ethnic and religious minority groups is difficult because of their significant overlap, it is important to consider these differences in our analysis. In this report, we use both the term 'ethnic minority' and 'religious minority'. While we accept that these are clearly not coterminous, this study did not differentiate between minority groups based on ethnicity and religion for a number of reasons. First, most ethnic minorities do not practice Islam – the country's dominant religion – implying that they are also religious minorities. Second, the rationale for this study is anchored in another study (Ali et al., 2021) that found a statistical association between extreme poverty prevalence and belonging to a religious or ethnic minority. This study attempts to bring new qualitative empirical insights to this statistical findings. Third, the term 'minority' in the context of Bangladesh has to be largely understood as mutually constitutive of ethnic and religious dimensions. Finally the scope of the study is limited in time and resources and separating out 'ethnic' from 'religious' identities requires a study with a significantly larger scope. By targeting the Chakma, Santal and Dalit communities, therefore, we are able to explore experiences of groups whose identities are shaped by the interplay of ethno-religious backgrounds.[9]

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[9] The Dalit community brings an added dimension of caste to our study. However our decision to include Dalit respondents in our study was not driven by considerations of caste but by i) our previous research that showed high prevalence of extreme poverty and discrimination among Dalit respondents; and ii) a commitment to include three minority communities with different historical, political, economic, and social contexts and characteristics. We were not therefore making a distinction between caste and ethnicity in our case selection but looking to include diverse contextual conditions. Dalits remain one of the largest minority groups in Bangladesh, and offer a distinct context to study minority marginalisation in Bangladesh. As our findings will show, the label of being a Dalit strongly influences the experience of marginalisation in a way that is distinct from that of the Santals and Chakmas.

The exact number of ethnic and religious minorities in Bangladesh is unknown. The last estimate of the demographic composition of ethnic populations was made in 1991. The last two national population censuses did not update this information. Officially, the Government of Bangladesh recognises 27 ethnic minorities in the Small Ethnic Minority Cultural Institute Act of 2010. However, different rights-based organizations claim that more than 45 ethnic minorities lived in Bangladesh before independence in 1971 (Barman and Neo, 2014). There are also disagreements over the size of the ethnic minority population. Some estimates suggest there are around six million Dalits (Devine et al., 2015) and two million 'indigenous' and tribal people living in Bangladesh (Barman & Neo, 2014; Chakma & Maîtrot, 2016). However the latest population survey, from 2011, claims that ethnic minorities represent 1.1 percent of the Bangladeshi population, in other words roughly 1.6 million people. Finally, disagreements over the size of ethnic minorities in Bangladesh will of course depend on how ethnicities are defined.

There are no detailed and systematic empirical studies of the socio-economic conditions of religious and ethnic minority groups in Bangladesh. This study is a first attempt to address this lacuna. There are a few studies focusing on ethnic groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts but fewer focusing on plainland ethnic and marginalised groups (Islam, 2014). Existing studies tend to explore issues related to the history and culture of specific minority groups, not the dynamics of inclusion or exclusion of the groups, nor on their socio-economic conditions. There is also a body of grey literature on minority groups, predominantly commissioned by NGOs, focusing on specific development projects and programmes. Besides this, the national press regularly carries reports on communal violence against marginalised groups, but these rarely analyse the nature of the relations between different groups of the population.

Moving beyond state-centric approaches: living in an intermediation society

In looking at the relationship between marginalisation and minority groups, we anchor our analysis in the routine and daily exercise of power. This, we believe, is entirely consistent with Sida's Multi-dimensional Poverty Analysis framework (see below for further discussion). Marginalisation refers to a process whereby in and out group behaviours, deeply embedded in social relationships and cultural norms, and often entrenched in economic arrangements, generate forms of inequalities (Kabir, 2000; Hickey & Du Toit, 2013). It is therefore the result of contingent factors as well as longer-term structural conditions (Maîtrot et al., 2021). In this section, we set out some key insights that have shaped our approach to studying marginalisation and shed light on how power shapes opportunities for citizens, and for marginalised groups more specifically.

The state is usually considered the main player in shaping social policies and providing security to citizens (Hall & Midgley, 2004). Yet, the enactment of social policies has mostly been understood to affect individuals and households through informal enforcement mechanisms. One of the key premises of this study is that the formal policy process has either ignored or been mostly ineffectual in affecting the marginalisation of minority groups. It is well documented that in Bangladesh, the quest for wellbeing and security (antonyms of marginalisation and deprivation) is driven much more by the strength (or otherwise) of informal, highly personalised networks and relations. As noted by Maîtrot et al. (2021: 904), insecurity forces marginalised groups to:

> seek protection and security through informal activities and personalized relations precisely because they are not able to claim entitlements or access opportunities, services and benefits from agencies with any sense of guarantee or predictability (Maîtrot et al., 2021: 904).

This statement by Maître et al., points not to a distinguishing feature of marginalised groups but to the broader political economy context in Bangladesh, which both rich and poor navigate albeit on very different terms. The importance of informal and personalised relations reflects conditions in which the rights and entitlements of citizens are not guaranteed by the state or any other actor, but are negotiated outcomes. In this context, it is more accurate to describe citizens as clients, and rights or entitlements as favours distributed by patrons to clients in exchange for loyalty and allegiance. For marginalised groups, the terms of these negotiations are more exploitative and akin to what Wood (2003) has referred to as a 'Faustian Bargain'. The best outcome for marginalised groups is therefore some form of 'dependent security' or 'relational security' (Akram & Maître, 2023), always insecure, always exploitative but equally always necessary. All dependent security comes at a price, with strong gendered and intergenerational implications (Akram et al., 2020).

The significance of the informal in producing some form of security means that formal organisational rules and expectations are often subverted in order to meet more personalised obligations or expectations. These might emerge from relations with clients, patrons, relatives, or others with whom past obligations are owed or future loyalties are desired. Formal and official decisions can never be protected from private interests, while the latter can never be openly articulated or used as justification for the latter.

If rights or entitlement outcomes are a function of personalised claims and exchanges mostly kept hidden from view, the idea of pursuing security or degree of autonomy can be considered problematic and amoral in some contexts. Why then do marginalised people not rebel or resist? Levels of tolerance of the accepted 'rules of the game' (i.e. the reliance on semi-exploitative clientelist relations) is high across society and the price for defiance is even higher among marginalised communities. This produces disincentives for more accountable institutions and organisations.

Finally, an important way to explain the 'subversion' of organisational behaviour in favour of private interests is to focus on an important distinction between institutions and organisations. By definition, institutions shape society and the way in which actors behave within it. Organisations populate the broader institutional landscape and, like actors, reflect the imperatives of the same landscape. This cuts across all sectors of society: rich and poor, progressive and conservative forces, political and civil society actors. This is why non-compliance with the institutional 'rules of the game' is difficult, in some cases dangerous.

Poverty and marginalisation

Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) data[10] confirm reductions in both moderate and extreme poverty in rural as well as urban settings in Bangladesh (Table 1). Over the past 15 years, the country has almost halved the number of people living in moderate and extreme poverty, with extreme poverty levels falling from 25.1 percent to 12.9 percent, and moderate poverty levels falling from 40 percent to 24.3 percent.

Poverty estimates in Bangladesh are based on the Cost of Basic Needs (CBN) method, which calculates the cost of securing a consumption bundle that satisfies basic consumption needs. The upper poverty line (moderate poverty) reflects the cost of a bundle that includes food and non-food items, like shelter and clothing, while the lower poverty line (extreme poverty) reflects a bundle that is mostly made up of food.

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[10] This study draws on another study that used HIES data from 2016. In 2022, a new round of HIES was completed and findings are currently emerging.

Table 1: Poverty Trends 2005–2016

Lower Poverty Line	HIES 2006 (%)	HIES 2010 (%)	HIES 2016 (%)
Rural	28.60	21.10	14.90
Urban	14.70	7.70	7.60
National	25.1	17.60	12.90
Upper Poverty Line	**HIES 2006 (%)**	**HIES 2010 (%)**	**HIES 2016 (%)**
Rural	43.80	35.20	26.40
Urban	28.40	21.30	18.90
National	40.00	31.50	24.30

Sources: HIES data (2005), (2010) and (2016), based on CBN method.

Despite the country's apparent economic success, estimates suggest that one in four of its citizens continues to live in poverty, with some regions getting poorer (World Bank, 2017; Ali et al., 2021). Data also reveal that the country's economic success has not been shared equally. In 2010, the top 5 percent of earners in Bangladesh possessed 24.6 percent of national income. By 2022, according to estimates from HIES 2022, the top 5 percent had increased their share of national income to 30 percent.[11] The roots of inequality extend well beyond the economic sphere and manifest themselves across different aspects of daily life, including access to basic goods and services.

While aggregate poverty levels have declined in rural and urban areas, significant spatial disparities in terms of extreme poverty prevalence can be observed at the district level (Ali et al., 2021). The map presented in Figure 1 illustrates the extent of these disparities and clearly demonstrates the existence of pockets of extreme poverty,

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[11] The Financial Express (2022). Socioeconomic revelations in HIES report. Accessed 02 September 2024 from: https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/economy/inequality-increases-as-50pc-amass-304pc-wealth

predominantly found in the country's most vulnerable geographical areas. Between 2010 and 2016, the prevalence of extreme poverty increased in 24 of Bangladesh's 64 districts.
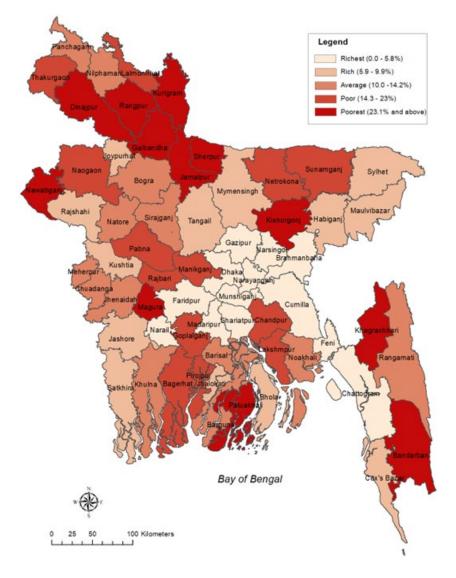
Figure 1: Extreme poverty headcount distribution by district

Source: Ali et al., 2021 (based on data HIES data 2016).

In sum, poverty reduction in Bangladesh has occurred while inequality has steadily risen. Inequality matters for poverty reduction because it reduces the potential impact of pro-poor growth and can threaten social cohesion. Inequality can be observed in many ways and here, we look at both vertical inequality (referring broadly to socio-economic inequality among individuals or households, including across genders) and horizontal inequality (referring to inequality among groups typically defined in relation to ethnicity, religion or race). While our analysis of extreme poverty is limited by data available in the HIES, we were keen to explore the 'horizontal dimensions' of poverty prevalence.

Importantly for this study, the recent analysis of poverty by Ali et al. (2021) established that the majority of the extremely poor population belongs to ethnic or religious marginalised groups (Table 2). This is a groundbreaking analysis because it offers a first statistical corroboration of previous qualitative work highlighting this (Maitrot and Chakma, 2016).

Table 2 shows that all but two minority ethnic groups, Khasia and Manipur, belong to the poorest wealth quintile of the population, with many groups having extreme poverty levels higher than 70 percent when the lowest two quintiles are added together. In other words, most ethnic minority groups that do not self-identify as Bengali are significantly overrepresented in the poorest quintile of the Bangladeshi population.

Table 2: Distribution of ethnic group by wealth quintile

Wealth Quintile	Bengali (%)	Chakma (%)	Santal (%)	Marma (%)	Tripura (%)	Garo (%)	Tonchangya (%)	Mro (%)	Khasia (%)	Manipur (%)	Other[12] (%)	Total (%)
Poorest	23.1	71.0	48.8	65.4	77.4	47.8	74.2	98.1	16.7	7.7	61.1	24.2
Second	21.9	8.0	32.6	10.4	2.8	4.3	9.7	1.9	16.7	15.4	7.4	21.6
Middle	20.2	10.3	11.6	9.7	6.8	13.0	9.7	0.0	0.0	23.1	9.3	19.9
Fourth	18.9	7.9	7.0	8.4	7.9	26.1	4.8	0.0	33.3	23.1	12.0	18.6
Richest	15.9	2.8	0.0	6.2	5.1	8.7	1.6	0.0	33.3	30.8	10.2	15.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Ali et al. (2021) based on MICS 2019.

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[12] As explained earlier, there are many other, smaller ethnic groups in Bangladesh. The list in the table is not exhaustive and mostly presents the largest ethnic minority groups.

Although as argued above, it is important to note that the categories of 'ethnic minority' and 'religious minority' are not coterminous, the data on religion show commonalities in the situation of non-dominant groups in Bangladesh. Table 3 shows that levels of extreme poverty are significantly higher among religious minorities in the country. Buddhists and Christians, for example, are twice as likely to be extremely poor as Muslims, and those belonging to 'other' religious communities are three times as likely to be extremely poor. These findings are significant because the association between religion and poverty had not previously been systematically explored.

Table 3: Share of extremely poor by religion

Religion	Extreme poverty (%)
Muslim	11.1
Hindu	13.9
Buddhist	22.3
Christian	21.4
Others	32.7

Source: Ali et al. (2021) – calculations based on HIES 2016.

Moreover, these data provide crucial information to the government, which is committed to equality among its population, irrespective of religion or ethnicity. The Bangladeshi constitution designates Islam as the state religion through the 15th amendment of 2011, while upholding the secular principles upon which the country was founded. The revised Constitution legally recognizes the peaceful practice of other religions (Article 2A) and upholds the need to eliminate all forms of communalism (Chaney & Sahoo, 2020). Importantly for this research, the constitution prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees equality for all. However, while accountability and legal rights are enshrined in the constitution, their enactment is weakly enforced and often ignored in practice. This is where the formal and constitutional commitment to accountability and rights meets the logic and imperative of living in an intermediation society where the power of the informal prevails and

as we argued above, rights and entitlements are translated into discretionary favours. This has deleterious impacts on any claims for accountability or rights pursued by ethnic and religious minority groups. As Guhathakurta (2022) notes:

> the religion of the dominant community, gradually became woven into the national identity of the Bangladeshi state, which culminated in the Eighth Amendment. Although the Eighth Amendment provided that minorities could observe their respective religions peacefully, the government did not seem to be very concerned with this. Debates in the National Assembly were dominated by an apologetic argument that the equality clause and fundamental rights would be sufficient to safeguard against abuse, but it totally disregarded the concerns expressed by minorities (p. 113).

Swedish development cooperation in Bangladesh

Sweden is one of Bangladesh's oldest development partners, having signed the first long-term bilateral agreement in 1972. Sweden has had a strong and progressive commitment to human rights and justice, and its approach to development cooperation has rested on a deep understanding of power and its mechanisms (Cornwall, 2009). This commitment is captured nicely in the overall objective of Swedish development cooperation, i.e. "to create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression" (Sida, 2017: 5).

In the early years of its development cooperation with Bangladesh, Sweden contributed mostly through import support. By the late 1970s, import support was found to create and deepen dependency

while failing to have a distributional impact (Sida, 1994). Sida therefore adopted a more targeted approach through a range of public, private and civil society organisations.

Since Bangladesh's independence, Sida has contributed approximately 17 billion Swedish Kronor (around 1.5 billion Euro), to support a range of poverty reduction initiatives in the country (Sida, 2022). For example, Sida was one of the first development partners to support the Grameen Bank, which has gone on to become a globally recognised microfinance model and whose founder, Mohammed Yunus, was awarded the Nobel Peace prize in 2006 and became leader of the government in 2024. For about 20 years, Sweden contributed to the Intensive Rural Works Programme (IRWP), later known as the Rural Employment Sector Programme (RESP), established to improve the living conditions of the landless poor. The programme was innovative in developing methods to reach the poorest through public agencies as well as empowering the landless poor to defend themselves against the exploitative practices of elites and other powerholders (Sida, 1998). Sida also pioneered Bangladesh's early warning system and disaster prevention to protect citizens against frequent natural disasters.

Sweden's overarching policy guiding its development cooperation between 2016 and 2023, The *Policy framework for Swedish Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Assistance,*[13] set out Sweden's approach to combating poverty, emphasizing a multidimensional approach. The policy spelled out the aim of Swedish development cooperation to create preconditions for better living conditions for people living in poverty and under oppression (Government of Sweden, 2016: 4), also reaffirmed in the current policy (Government of Sweden, 2023a).

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[13] Government of Sweden (2016). Policy framework for Swedish development cooperation and humanitarian assistance, Government Communication 2016/17:60, Government of Sweden. Accessed 31 December 2023 from https://www.government.se/contentassets/43972c7f81c34d51a82e6a7502860895/skr-60-engelsk-version_web.pdf

This commitment was well-aligned with the 'leave no-one behind' principle that underpinned the UN approach to sustainable development, also endorsed in 2016.

Asserting that development cooperation should be tailored to specific contexts and evolving circumstances, the Swedish policy framework emphasised the need for Swedish development cooperation to be rooted in knowledge and analysis, and to demonstrate the value added of Swedish development cooperation. This anchoring of development cooperation in specific contexts reflected a previous commitment, enunciated in the government bill *Shared Responsibility. Sweden's Policy for Global Development (2002/03: 122)*[14,] to shape cooperation around the perspectives of the poor and to avoid externally imposed solutions.

In pursuing its objective to leave no-one behind, Sida has developed and adopted a Multidimensional Poverty Analysis (MDPA) framework that serves as a tool to understand mainly 'who is poor and in what way?'. The framework focuses on the following four dimensions of poverty: resources, opportunities and choice, power and voice, and human security. The MDPA asserts that the answer to the key question 'who is poor and in what way?' differs according to socio-economic conditions and if viewed from different social positions, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and sexual identity (Sida, 2017).[15] This objective thus highlights situational factors that transcend but deeply condition individuals' ability to live their lives in dignity. These factors are framed within four contexts: the economic and social, political and institutional, environmental, and conflict contexts (Figure 2).

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[14] Government of Sweden (2003). Shared Responsibility: Sweden's Policy for Global Development 2002/03:122. Government Bill. Accessed 2 January 2024 from:
https://www.government.se/contentassets/8de3998852514bfca457152418faa322/shared-responsibility-swedens-policy-for-global-development/

[15] Sida (2017). Dimensions of Poverty Sida's Conceptual Framework. Sida. Accessed 03 January 2024 from:
https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida62028en-dimensions-of-poverty-sidas-conceptual-framework.pdf
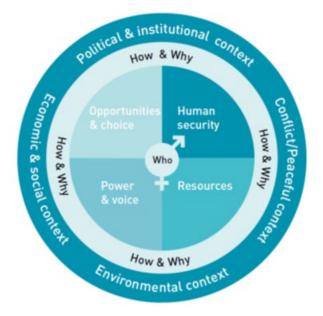
Figure 2: Sida's four-dimensional approach

By elucidating different dimensions of poverty as well as multiple situational contexts, the MDPA offers a comprehensive account of poverty that is crucial for formulating and executing a transformational development cooperation agenda (Sida, 2022). [16] In its recent update on the Bangladesh MDPA of 2023, Sida acknowledges the 'invisibility' of ethnic and indigenous minority rights in its portfolio. This study directly addresses this lacuna.

In December 2023, Sweden announced a new policy framework for its development assistance entitled "*Development Assistance for a New Era – Freedom, Empowerment, and Sustainable Growth*" (Government of Sweden, 2023a). This agenda emphasises a long-term, transparent, and effective approach to development assistance. The framework

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[16] Sida (2022). MDPA and MSD – what are the differences and how could they be combined? Sida, June 2022. Accessed 03 January 2024 from: https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2022/06/21094118/10206294_Sida_Poverty_Toolbox_MDPA_and_MSD_webb.pdf

aims to enhance synergies between development cooperation, trade promotion, and economic growth, with the ultimate goal of improving the living conditions of people living in poverty and oppression. Furthermore, the new strategic framework intends to "promote strong civil society and support organisations, pro-democracy movements, actors and networks that stand up for human rights and freedoms, democracy and the rule of law" (Government of Sweden, 2023a: 13). [17] At a global level, the framework also signals Sweden's intention to concentrate on fewer countries in order to have a more notable impact, to support democratic processes through free elections, and to use Sida as a platform for influence in the countries where it is present (Government of Sweden, 2023b). [18]

The current development cooperation strategy of Sweden with Bangladesh commits a total of SEK 1.75 billion for the period 2021 to 2025 (Sida, 2021). [19] The key goals set out in the country strategy relate to four main thematic areas, including democracy, human rights, the rule of law and gender equality; climate and environment; inclusive economic development; and health including sexual and reproductive health and rights.

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[17] Government of Sweden (2023a). DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE FOR A NEW ERA- Freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth.
Accessed 19 March 2023 from:
https://www.government.se/contentassets/b4067f9e566b4e4e8c621087f2225a0b/development-assistance-for-a-new-era--freedom-empowerment-and-sustainable-growth-accessible.pdf
[18] Government of Sweden (2023b). The Government reforms development assistance, with focus on freedom, empowerment and sustainable growth.
Press Release, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, dated 21 December 2023.
Accessed 04 January 2024 via: https://www.government.se/press-releases/2023/12/the-government-reforms-development-assistance-with-focus-on-freedom-empowerment-and-sustainable-growth/
[19] Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2020). Strategy for Sweden's development cooperation with Bangladesh 2021–2025. Ref# UD2020/12624 & UD2020/19041.

The strategy acknowledges the declining trend of democracy, human rights and rule of law but does not highlight the conditions of marginalised groups in Bangladesh. In this reference, the strategy further indicated "limited cooperation" with the Bangladeshi Government "in view of the negative trend for human rights, democracy and the rule of law". Despite the strategy's focus on poverty reduction, human rights, democratic development, and economic empowerment, none of the 125 interventions supported by Sida 2021–2025 (amounting approximately SEK 1316 Million) exclusively targets marginalised groups. [20] This rhymes with the findings in Sida's latest MDPA, which brings up the invisibility of minority groups in the country aid portfolio. The current study is thus timely and feeds directly into thematic areas 1 and 3 of the strategy, and points to important factors contributing to the poverty and marginalisation of ethnic and religious minority groups that could inform future development cooperation interventions.

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[20] Data generated from openaid.se

Methodological approach

As indicated above, there is a significant number of minority groups in Bangladesh but no detailed analyses of the dynamics of poverty, marginalisation, and discrimination that they experience. This limits our understanding of the intersectional dynamics that exist in practice. While these groups are all minorities in a nation dominated by Muslim Bengalis, it is important to note that they differ in important regards, and no single group can be seen as representative of Bangladeshi minority groups overall. Instead of being driven by an ambition to ensure a fully representative selection of cases, the choice of groups to include in this study was made based on the intention to study groups associated with divergent contextual conditions. Thus, we focus on three distinct groups – Chakma, Santal and Dalit – related to varying historical, political, economic, and social contexts and characteristics. We believe that this enrichens and broadens the breadth of the study of the experience of poverty and marginalisation, enhancing the opportunities for learning. These three minority groups are described in greater detail below.

Data collection and analysis

The study adopts a qualitative case study approach to address the research questions. More specifically, to collect empirical material concerning the experiences of poverty and exclusion, we have used a combination of life history interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with members of the minority groups, and key informant interviews (KIIs) with community leaders, locally elected leaders, public officials and members of civil society organisations.

The aim of life history interviews is to shed light on how individuals present their life narratives, personal histories and daily challenges. This approach serves to generate an emic view (i.e. enabling localised understandings of lived experiences and cultural systems) of the power dynamics at play and the lived experience of the marginalised

groups. FGDs and KIIs provide a broader, more structural, understanding of the constraints and barriers to inclusion within the scope areas identified in the life history interviews. The FGDs broadly reflected upon sensitive issues around structural violence and other kinds of exclusionary and marginalising conditions. The aim of the KIIs was to explore the dynamics of marginalisation and to better understand the contexts that shape group behaviour, whether this be of the dominant or minority group.

A total of 30 life history interviews were carried out, evenly distributed across the minority groups (10 per group). 16 male participants and 14 female participants were interviewed. The average age of the interview participants was 51 years, with a range from 19 to 75 years. In addition, 10 FGDs were conducted: three with the Dalits, three with the Chakmas, and four with the Santals. Furthermore, 10 KIIs were conducted with community leaders, NGO activists, local elected representatives, and local/regional public officials.

Interviewees and focus group participants were selected based on their socio-economic status (i.e. mostly living in conditions of extreme poverty). Transect walks coupled with informal discussions with community members were carried out in the communities to gain an initial understanding of living conditions. Furthermore, discussions with local NGO workers in the Dalit and Santal communities were held to gather their perspectives on the living conditions of the people in the areas. These measures facilitated the identification of potential participants for the life history interviews and FGDs. In certain cases, individuals who participated in the interviews were also invited to take part in the FGDs. The majority of interviews lasted approximately one hour, while FGDs lasted around 90 minutes. The KIIs lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.

Data was collected over an extended period of time (March 2023 to November 2023), in different phases in Dinajpur and Joypurhat (for Santals), Khulna and Satkhira (for Dalits) and in one of the districts of Chittaging Hill Tracts (i.e. Khagrachari for Chakma). Chittagong Hill Tracts presented two research challenges. First, given

the military presence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its history of conflict, there are travel restrictions in the area. Second, while many of the communities residing in the area understand Bengali, most primarily use their own, local language. A research assistant with experience of conducting research in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and with a strong network of collaborators in the area, was employed to carry out fieldwork there. This helped us address the challenges associated with mobility and language.

We utilised three distinct sets of interview guides (see Annex III–V) to facilitate life history interviews, FGDs and KIIs with the intention to pose open questions to derive individual and personalised responses. The interview guides were used as prompts to control the discussion flow rather than to structure the interviews. The interview questions were chosen and formulated to capture the different dimensions of poverty contained in Sida's MDPA framework and guiding questions.[21] Thus, questions around resources, opportunities and choices, human security, and power and voice were key to our interview discussions. The interview guides for the life history interviews specifically centred on the lived experiences of exclusion, particularly regarding access to social protection and opportunities, and how these experiences were understood in relation to the perceived experiences of other citizens (dominant groups). During these interviews, participants shared experiences of social marginalisation, stigmatisation, negligence, violence, harassment, abuse, fear, and insecurity. Participants were also encouraged to discuss how they navigate these experiences, whether through resistance, acceptance, inaction, or the adoption of other strategies.

The data was recorded in the language preferred by the respondents, mostly Bangla or Chakma. The recorded material from the life history interviews and the FGDs was then translated into English and transcribed. The KIIs were not recorded, but notes were taken during

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[21] MDPA Guiding Questions, Accessed 02 January 2024 from: https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2021/08/24161355/MDPA-Guiding_Questions.pdf

interviews. We subsequently carried out a thematic analysis of the transcribed data in order to identify specific policy response patterns.

In terms of data analysis, we derived the main themes and codes primarily from the life history interviews. Through iteration, we built a set of codes that reflected MDPA priorities, and continued this process until we reached what we considered a point of empirical saturation. Importantly the first attempt at matching codes and data was carried out independently by at least 2 of the 3 study researchers. The different codes were then compared and discussed and this then fed into the processes of iteration that led to the final set of codes. At the point of writing the report, we selected quotes that were pertinent to the main argument but we were also mindful of trying to present voices from respondents of different minority groups.

When working on the FGDs and KIIs, we followed a similar process of coding but our aim here was to identify codes that helped validate or support the findings from life histories. The KIIs in particular were useful in that they generated insights from citizens who were not necessarily from the minority groups and, in some cases, held public sector jobs.

Where quoted in the report, participants have been anonymized so that only their initials, gender and age are referenced.

Analytical approach

In the sections below, we discuss the lenses through which we have analysed the empirical material, namely the multidimensional poverty framework.

The multidimensional poverty framework

The empirical analysis is structured according to Sida's multi-dimensional poverty framework, which includes opportunities and choice, power and voice, resources, and human security. The sub-

categories of these dimensions, in focus in the analysis, have been chosen based on the definition and scope of each MDPA dimension. The dimensions are conceptualized in the following way (Sida, 2017, 2024):

Opportunities and choice pertain to the disabling context that hinders individuals or groups from engaging with and leveraging resources critical for navigating their conditions, such as access to education, work, market and livelihoods.

Power and voice refer to "people's ability to articulate their concerns, needs and rights in an informed way and to take part in decision-making affecting these concerns" (Sida, 2017: 16). This encompasses the socio-cultural and institutional dynamics that contribute to discrimination based on one's age, ethnicity, caste, religion, identity, and so on. Our analysis of this dimension focuses on everyday practices and experiences of marginality, subordination, discrimination and lack of political voice, as evident in the narratives.

Resources encompass both material and non-material elements that an individual or group can access or control, which are instrumental in ensuring a decent standard of living. In this reference land, state support and basic facilities and services emerged as potential themes from the narratives.

Human security deals with the risks and situations that inhibit individuals' and groups' abilities to enjoy their rights and overcome their poverty. Although this in Sida's framework relates more directly to conflict situations, we broaden this dimension to encapsulate the subjective perception or experience of insecurity. Thus, we focused on how the studied groups demonstrated their everyday state and experience of insecurity.

Our analytical approach to examining these dimensions of poverty involves the exploration of the means through which the three groups are being kept poor, as experienced by them, i.e. emically.

Limitations

This study is not an exhaustive analysis of the dynamics of exclusion and marginalisation in Bangladesh. As indicated above, our selection of minority groups was intended to enable the inclusion and analysis of the dynamics of marginalisation in different contexts. The selection of participants makes no claim to being representative and our findings are not intended to be generalized to all minority groups in Bangladesh. That said, we believe that the findings provide important insights into the lived experiences of specific groups and individuals that can be useful in understanding minority group exclusion and marginalisation more broadly, in Bangladesh as well as in other contexts.

It is also important to note logistical limitations over which the research team had no control. Visa restrictions prevented the main author from travelling outside of Sweden, which meant that he was not able to complete the data collection by himself. Initially, we decided to hire a research assistant to collect data for the Chakma group in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This made sense because the Chakma have their own language and the main author would have required research assistance in any case. However as the visa situation took longer than anticipated to resolve, we also needed to hire another research assistant to complete the data collection for the Santal group.

Hiring research assistants who have not taken part in the development of a qualitative research project always carries risk. We were fortunate in that both research assistants had a solid track record of working with the respective minority communities. When we received the empirical data from the research assistants, we carefully read it and if we required any clarification we asked for this from the research assistants immediately. In the end, the quality of the work delivered by the research assistants was very good and we were confident that we would be able to work across the datasets from the three communities.

Finally, the team acknowledges that conducting research that is more 'emic', i.e. based on localised knowledge and experiences, requires longer and more co-produced interactions with participants. Time and resource constraints meant that we had to make certain trade-offs that allowed us to balance the study's breadth of coverage with its depth of exploration. See Annex I for a note on ethics and research approval.

The three minority groups: Chakma, Santal and Dalit

The Government of Bangladesh does not recognize indigenous groups or Dalits as official minority groups. The country has never ratified the ILO's Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169, which came into force in 1991 and recognizes the rights to internal autonomy and self-determination. The national context in which discourses around the rights and entitlements of minority indigenous groups exist is therefore one where notions of self-determination are denied.

Below, we offer a brief description of the three groups included in the study. As described above, we use Sida's MDPA framework to describe the contextual conditions associated with the different groups in relation to poverty (Sida, 2017).

Chakma

The Chakma group resides in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in the Southeast of Bangladesh and is the largest minority group in the country. The Hill Tracts is home to 13 different ethnic groups and the Chakma is the single largest group, with a population of around 300,000.

Political and institutional context: Chakmas also call themselves Jumma people, which refers to groups that practice jumm or jhum [22] cultivation and includes other ethnic groups. Usually, Chakma communities have their own traditional local governance and leadership system, headed by Karbaris (Chief Administrators) and Circle Chiefs, which coexists with the state's administrative structures. While the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord granted districts in the area some autonomy through the newly formulated Hill District Councils, issues concerning land rights, customary practices, growing militarisation, and Bengali resettlement have incited tension in the region. Different interest groups and local political parties have added to the tension in the region. The Chakma's struggle for recognition as "indigenous", rather than "tribal", has remained crucial.[23] Historically, their rights have been undermined by state actions, and the constitution's focus on Bengali identity has marginalized other ethnicities. There remain reported restrictions on the hill people's interactions with outsiders, as the government has put restrictions on unsupervised interaction of the Chakmas (along with other indigenous groups) with national and foreign activists/people. Civil society and media engagement in the region is also controlled.

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[22] Jhum is a traditional shifting cultivation practice of the ethnic groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. This has been banned as such practices are considered to be harmful for the environment causing deforestation and soil erosion.

[23] Through the 15th amendment of the constitution of Bangladesh in 2011, the government started to use the term 'tribal' instead of 'indigenous' denying that there are indigenous people in Bangladesh. The constitution also mentions that people of Bangladesh will be known as Bangladeshi. This means to progressively diluting their identity and status through various legislations that threatens their rights and entitlements. Ignoring the indigenous identity also risks the group without being protected by the international conventions and treaties where Bangladesh is signatory (Chowdhury, 2014; Barau et al., 2019).

Conflict/peaceful context: 1977 marked the beginning of a sustained and violent period of conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, involving resident minority groups and the Bangladesh military. Through the conflict, the minority groups sought assurances of autonomy as well as recognition of their right to traditional land and culture. The Chakma were at the forefront of this conflict. A Peace Accord was signed in 1997, recognising the special status of residents in the Hill Tracts. Despite the Peace Accord, the Hill Tracts remain the most contested and militarised area of Bangladesh. A recent statement by a senior UN official raised concerns about the failure of the state to return illegally occupied land to residents; the lack of progress in rehabilitation of indigenous refugees in their respective lands; and the failure to remove temporary military camps. In addition, there are frequent reports of human rights abuses, violence against residents, and failures to protect residents' rights and entitlements.

Environmental context: Over the past few decades, and related to processes of climate change, the Hill Tracts have faced significant challenges due to land use changes, forest degradation, biodiversity loss and infrastructure encroachment. The area has moreover seen a significant change in rain fall patterns and an alarming depletion of water sources.

Economic and social context: The Chakma constitute a large minority group. It is the largest group in the Hill Tracts and among the groups with the highest levels of extreme poverty in Bangladesh (Ali et al., 2021). In the Hill Tracts, intermediary–peasant relations are rooted in the historical processes of 'deep ethnicisation' of markets where the indigenous hill people's power and control over the markets are systematically barred (Chakma, 2022).

Santal

The second group, the Santal, resides mostly in the Northwest of the country, close to the border with India. It is the second largest minority group in Bangladesh and the largest minority group in the plainland. Santals tend to live separately but adjacent to the Bengali Muslim population.

Political and institutional context: Santals were active in the liberation war that led to the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. Like all minority groups in Bangladesh, the Santals are denied the status of ethnic minority group by the state (see above) and their entitlement claims are not acknowledged. Even before 1971, Santals were systematically dispossessed of land. Despite being large in number, the Santals do not have established political representation at state level.

Conflict/peaceful context: Unlike the Chakmas, the Santals have not been involved in prolonged periods of overt conflict. However, there are episodic reports of violence against the Santals, especially in relation to natural resource extraction and land dispossession. The protest against the Phulbari Coal Mining Project in 2006 is a well-known case, and so is the more recent forced eviction of over a thousand Santal families in 2016 in order for the state to take possession of almost 2,000 acres of land in the Shahebganj-Bagda farm area.

Environmental context: Santals reside mostly in the Northwest of Bangladesh, which is home to the Barind Tract, an agrarian upland covering most of the districts in the Northwest. The Barind Tract typically has much longer spells of dry weather and shorter periods of rainfall. It is one of the most 'at risk' areas for droughts in the country, which is problematic given the high dependence on agriculture. Until recently, pre-harvest seasonal famine, known locally as Monga, was disturbingly frequent which is common to the region and equally impact all the poor and vulnerable in that region. Deaths were not uncommon; mass migration was routine.

Economic and social context: Despite living near the dominant Muslim Bengali community, the lines marginalising the Santal run deep. They are among the poorest and most vulnerable minority groups in Bangladesh (Ali et al., 2021; Roy, 2006). Today, most Santals work as wage or agricultural laborers. Hossain (2011) has demonstrated that extremely poor Adivasis, or indigenous groups, have very limited access to government-provided Social Safety Nets (SSNs) despite their clear eligibility to these as among the poorest in the country.

Dalits

The third group included in the study is known as Dalits, a collective term used to describe a number of Hindu lower caste groups. It is estimated that around five to six million Dalits reside in Bangladesh, although the term Dalit is not found in the census and the exact size of the population is unknown. Dalit communities are spread across the country, with large concentrations in the south-west of Bangladesh. The Dalit community comprises numerous castes and sub-castes, leading to a complex and intricate evolution of their individual identities.

Political and institutional context: The situation of Dalit communities can be best understood in relation to Hindu caste discrimination. Dalits face discrimination not only from the dominant Muslim group, but also from other Hindu groups of higher castes. Dalits live on the margins of societies and residential settlements, usually in segregated areas characterised by poor socio-economic conditions. They are stigmatised on account of fears around their 'untouchability' by the dominant groups, and as such are often barred from accessing basic amenities, such as education and health services. Politically, the Dalits are poorly represented at both local and national levels in Bangladesh.

Conflict/peaceful context: Violence against Dalits is endemic but often goes unreported. In October 2021, there were widespread reports of an attack against Hindus celebrating Durga Puja in Begumganj. In the wake of this incident, attacks against Hindus swept across the country, leading to deaths and injuries, the ransacking of homes and destruction of temples. In addition to these profile cases, there is a quieter form of violence levelled out at Dalits, exercised through the denial of their access to public institutions like schools, hospitals, shops, and restaurants.

Environmental context: Dalits can be found in all parts of the country and therefore, the environmental concerns vary for different Dalit populations. For this research, we focused on the south-west of Bangladesh, which is known for frequent extreme weather events, such as cyclones, storm surges, floods, and riverbank erosion. There are also concerns around the impacts of saline intrusions and sea level rises. Due to the precarious situation of many Dalit populations, their exposure to and vulnerability for these environmental problems are particularly severe.

Economic and social context: The identity of the Dalits is often characterised by the manual and low-status nature of their occupations, which historically were considered unclean and impure. For this reason, many Dalit communities are also referred to as "untouchables". Nevertheless, not all Dalits are employed in occupations that are deemed unclean or impure. For instance, the Malo [24] work as fishermen, while Rishis [25] are involved in leatherworking and have expertise in bamboo and cane handicrafts. While we do not have specific data on Dalits, recent research has shown that in Bangladesh, Hindu communities have lower multidimensional poverty scores than communities from the other main religions (Islam, Christianity and Buddhism) (Ali et al., 2000).

The information above is summarised in the table below

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[24] A sub-caste of the Dalit group.
[25] Ibid.

Table 4: Contextual conditions of the three minority groups

Group	Political & institutional Context	Environmental context	Conflict/peaceful context	Economic & social context
Chakma	1977–1997 prolonged conflict/violence, followed by Peace Accord.	Land use changes, forest degradation, biodiversity loss and infrastructure encroachment.	Reports of human rights abuses, violence against residents, and failures to protect residents' rights and entitlements.	Largest group and among the poorest.
Santal	No overt conflict.	Plainland, suffering general environmental challenges.	Repeated stories of forced eviction and land possessions.	Extremely poor and marginalized from state welfare services.
Dalit	Stigma around purity/untouchability etc.	Population higher in south-west – coastal and prone to cyclones etc.	Reports of violent outbursts.	Traditional occupations considered impure.

Findings: Emic views of multidimensional poverty

The following sections present the results of the analysis of the experiences of poverty and marginalisation among the studied minority groups. We aimed to explore the groups' experiences of the means of exclusion emically. Our analysis sheds light on the means of legitimation used by the dominant group to sustain their marginalisation. Data emerging from life history interviews and focus group discussions offered emic insights into the relationship between livelihood opportunities, exclusion, and marginalisation and on how inequalities are structurally produced and reproduced.

Opportunities and choice

To be poor in terms of opportunities and choice broadly entails lacking or having limited access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, energy, markets and information, and/or productive employment, i.e. opportunities to move out of poverty (Sida, 2020).

Productive employment and livelihoods

Participants frequently reflected on their livelihood opportunities and restrictions revealing their importance for social and political connectedness. Such connections are crucially associated with their survival and living. Respondents from all three studied groups reported having limited (formal and informal) opportunities and choices in terms of employment. Participants' experiences shed light on how discrimination practices in the marketplace have evolved and on how these, in turn, can create and sustain inequalities and shape forms of marginalisation. To some extent, the limited livelihood opportunities have always been a defining feature of the minority groups' identities. The Dalits, for example, are traditionally and

historically associated with low-paid, low-status occupations, such as working with leather, disposing of animal corpses, scavenging with bare hands, or carrying out sanitation work, such as handling latrines. These occupations are considered impure and polluting, and those carrying out these jobs are also considered polluted and polluting.

The Chakma are traditionally involved in what is called *jumm* cultivation. This is a defining feature of their ethnic identity and practice. Given the landlocked, hilly and remote environment characterising the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the group's cultivation practices partly enable the group identity to sustain, but also threatens their fragile ecosystem and environment.

A novel research finding, emerging from the empirical material, is that some of the traditional occupations of the studied groups are under threat, which further limits their economic opportunities. In the case of the Chakma community, the ban of *jumm* cultivation and the implementation of state-sponsored rubber plantations have increased livelihood insecurity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This has forced many Chakma people to migrate to small towns, new spatial settlements, creating *notun paras* (new hamlets). While these hamlets offer some new developments (e.g. proximity to schools, hospitals, markets etc.), they also pose a risk as Chakmas now live in much closer proximity to the dominant Bengali group. In addition, being distant from forests means that some of their traditional activities (e.g. *jumm* cultivation) is no longer viable.

In our research, we also learnt about cases where sweeping jobs (atraditional occupation for some Dalits) have been outsourced to Bengali companies. Many of the Dalits were also found to lack an income as they are often not preferred to be hired for day labouring (the common livelihood option). Participants also shared that the number of days spent unemployed was higher for them than for non-Dalits. Limited livelihood opportunities have increased the risk of unemployment for Dalits, forcing them to take on even more degrading jobs in order to survive. This, in turn, marginalises them

further. GD, a Dalit interviewee, for instance, shared one such reality, illustrated in the following quote:

> I do not want to lie to you. To be honest, sometimes I also work as a *methor* (Sweeper) when situation becomes worse. I go to the other sub-district. I have a network of people who do the same. They call me when they are contacted by people for such a job. When there is no work in the field, I go there. It's far from here (to avoid shame and stigma). We visit house to house if they need a cleaning of their latrines. Once we find and do the job, we share the money and get around 150 to 200 taka each. What will I do? I have to feed my family. There is nothing wrong in doing this, at least I am not doing anything illegal or stealing or cheating with people. (GD, 45, Dalit Male)

The market

The marketplace is a central sphere within which power dynamics are expressed and experienced. This is a common pattern and concern, mostly for the Dalits and the Chakmas. At the market, the Dalits are not treated as equals by Bengalis in that people generally do not want to buy goods from them. Therefore, their stalls tend to be significantly less profitable than those of the dominant group. Some Santals also reported this, but not to the same extent. For example, one Santal FGD participant expressed:

> Occasionally, we encounter challenges in selling our stuff. For example, some people do not want to buy milk from us in the market, particularly those familiar with our background. While this occurrence is infrequent in our area, it is more common in other areas. (FGD 2, Santal, Dinajpur)

The fact that the occurrence of this in the area was infrequent may be attributed to the fact that the Santal engages in market transactions as sellers to a limited extent. Only a few of the Santals recounted instances of discriminatory treatment by the shopkeepers. Those who described instances of this recounted being forced to wait in queue longer as Bengali customers were served before them.

The Chakma community reported experiencing challenges in relation to price setting at the market. Their experience tells us that the Chakma, unlike the Bengalis, sit on the market floor and are rarely given a formal space in the form of stalls or shops. This means that they are often physically positioned lower in relation to buyers. Many Chakma respondents reported that Bengalis often force them to sell their goods at a lower price than the market going rate or the asking price. Regardless of how low the offered payment is, Chakma people feel that they have to either accept it or face the risk of violent exchanges with Bengali business owners (mostly wholesale buyers) or, in extreme cases, with the army. Moreover, because the goods sold by the Chakma are perishable (e.g. vegetables, fruits, green chillis etc.), they cannot afford not to sell them as this would require vendors to transport them back to their villages and risk expiring. These journeys can be arduous and long and are therefore costly. The Bengalis in the market know this and use this to force down any asking price.

The Santals reported that social interactions with other dominant groups have improved tremendously over the past 10 to 15 years, as they have increasingly worked together with other groups in markets and fields. Respondents shared having regular and positive interactions with Hindus and Muslims, which makes their experience quite distinct from that of the Dalits and Chakmas. A significant number of Santals mentioned that it is common for Muslims/Hindus to invite them to their homes, or for Santals to invite Muslims/Hindus, during various social occasions. This is exemplified in the following statement made by a 60-year-old Santal man, who noted that relationships with dominant groups improved with the increasing opportunities of collaborative work:

The more we have had the chance to mix and the more we have worked with them, the relations got better. We raise our livestock in their field or when our women go to collect woods and dry leaves, they do not say anything. (BB, 60, Santal Male)

There are also cases of economic or business success. One of our Dalit key informants referred to "muchir taka" (a term that means "money of muchi[26] or Dalits" and infers business success of Dalits) and explained the ambiguity of such success. The term 'muchir taka' can therefore either mean:

i. That the Dalits should not have such money or success but should remain poor (and this reinforces the point raised earlier about the moral anchoring of the discrimination against the Dalits).

ii. That even if they have money, it gives them no right to the muchi (referring to derogatorily the Dalit identity of someone) with other people or even dare to have equal social status (again a reference to the moral inappropriateness of mobility and aspirations).

Similarly, Santal participants shared examples of successful community members who had been educated and established themselves. However, the participants simultaneously expressed their concerns regarding the acceptance of their success by the dominant group. For example, MT shared:

I know one Adivasi who became magistrate. He tried hard and he didn't give up. But I don't think he will be allowed to do good. 'Ki je obostha hobe!' (you can't imagine what will happen to him). (MT, 70, Santal male)

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[26] The term 'muchi' literally refers to someone who works with leather, in this case someone who disposes animal corpses and scavenging with bare hands.

Education

Education is viewed by all groups as holding great prospects for social mobility and escape from discrimination. In practice, however, education has limits – educated Chakma still need to pay bribes to obtain decent employment and educated Dalits are discriminated in schools, local markets and in options around marriage. Educated Santals, as reported by the participants, are not benefitting from quotas in the public employment sector, reserved for indigenous groups.

Education is often seen as an escape or social mobility route by Dalits. But while many have succeeded in education, they continue to be discriminated against. In one case, a female respondent spoke of her husband who was the first in their hamlet to secure a bachelor's degree. In a meeting to prepare for local elections, she recounted how:

> Everyone was offered tea except my husband. You can't withdraw from the meeting. You cannot show your face (emotions) when such things happen. If we take the issue seriously, there will be huge chaos, so we tolerate and we face this silently. (FGD 2, Dalit, Satkhira)

There have been a number of cases of religious conversion among the Dalits. There seems to be some success in communities with large-scale religious conversions in terms of education attainment, socio-economic development, and relations with nearby dominant groups as evident from the FGDs. However, white Christian missionaries from the Western countries have had to play a role in brokering these relations, offering in effect protection as well as access to basic services (Devine et al., 2015). Santal participants also reported cases of religious conversion. However, they also shared another perspective on such conversion and adapted lifestyle. The following quote reflects this: "We have nothing left as Adivasi… Religion and identity is like your parents. A new religion can never be the same" (BK, 65, Santal Male).

Participants from all three groups expressed significant apprehension about employment prospects once educated. In other words, they doubt that education alone will help widen the scope and opportunities for their work. In the public debate, concerns have been raised about the adequacy and effectiveness of the employment quota designated for indigenous people.[27] This was also brought up in the focus group discussions where participants highlighted that despite their children getting educated, they are unable to secure public employment. In most cases, interviewees pointed out that they could not afford the bribes required to secure public jobs. As a result, individuals from the studied groups are systematically underrepresented in many government sectors and outside of what is perceived as traditional occupations for them. These dynamics contribute to reenforcing their marginalisation. This feeling is common across the groups. For instance, BDC, a Chakma female participant, shared:

> I have never been to any office. If I go there, I will need somebody to accompany me. I don't know anything about offices. 'Raja-o tara, montri-o tara' (they (Bengalis) are the king and ministers). They are everything (run government and administration), isn't it? (BDC, 70, Chakma female)

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[27] Ethnic minorities had 5% reserved quota in first and second class jobs which has been abolished in 2018. See more in this article: https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/why-quota-reservation-significant-ethnic-minorities-2143736

Women and work

The gender dimension of work is not irrelevant to the changes mentioned above. Female Dalit interviewees talked about the limited options for women's work and about the difficulties for women to navigate livelihood options. Women typically experience multiple pressures and expectations, having to consider their family's honour and livelihood as well as their personal security. The following quote from a Dalit woman illustrates these tensions clearly:

> My husband does not allow me to work. He completed 8th grade education. He says, whatever I will earn, we will eat, you do not need to work. He says, 'tomra ghorer bou, kosto korle somman jabe' (you are the housewife, if you do hard jobs outside our reputation will be at stake). I think if I can work maintaining my dignity, it's not harmful, but do we have any such thing? People say, I can stitch quilt, but it's a huge work and you get nothing at the end, moreover I get back pain as you need to do it sitting for a long time. (KG, 26, Dalit female)

It is not uncommon for Chakma women to be working outside their homes and travelling to local markets. Their experience in the market, however, involves harassment, and this is experienced frequently and in different forms. For example, NC (19), shared that, "Sometimes there are Bengali men who push so I stay away from the Bengali". Chakma women also demonstrated less willingness to visit public offices to access social services.

While Chakma women felt discrimination, Santal women seemed to have more positive experiences of working as day labourers in terms of being paid more or less an equal wage as male counterparts, being paid on time, and being treated with more respect by their employers. However, in relation to accessing social protection services, they had similar experiences as the Chakma women in that they experienced

neglect when making visits alone. For example, TK (65), shared: "I do not run after *sahajjo sohojogita* (literally 'help' or 'assisstance' and referring to social protection services). No one will listen to me if I go there alone."

Power and voice

To be poor in terms of power and voice entails lacking the ability to articulate, and participate in decision-making at different levels related to, one's needs, rights and concerns (Sida, 2020). This ability is typically contingent on a person's ethnicity, gender, caste etc. as power relations and socio-cultural hierarchies create patterns of discrimination affecting individuals and groups. The dimension of power and voice is one that cuts across all other dimensions and was brought up in most interviews and FGDs. This is perhaps not a surprising finding in a society where people's access to resources, opportunities and security often are contingent on identity.

Political and bureaucratic neglect

During interviews and FGDs, interviewees reported numerous instances of political and bureaucratic neglect. This indicates a form of powerlessness and voicelessness in relation to duty-bearers and to the state, represented here by local government officials. Neglect was experienced both collectively and individually.

Collective neglect was primarily observed through prolonged delays in receiving benefits or in the consideration of requests for welfare benefits. Colloquially, it is exercised through duty-bearers telling members of minority groups to 'come back tomorrow' or 'at a later time'. This response is typically repeated until those seeking support just give up. The experience of neglect was shared by all groups, typified in the following responses:

I went to UP [Union Parishad][28] a few times. They disregard us. Once I went to ask for solar panels for our village people and the other time to apply for VGD[29] card. They said 'we will give you when the time comes' (shomoy ashuk). Later, when I went back again, they said 'the time (to list names or submit application) is over, you can't get (the benefit) anymore'. (KC, 62, Chakma male)

Even if I am shown in the list as an eligible person and something came actually for me, they give it to someone else. I have no clue. Who will go to challenge them? Everything is in the hand of the powerful. (PCD, 48, Dalit, male)

If we meet the Member or the Chairman somewhere on the streets or in the market and ask for few minutes to discuss something, they always respond, 'wait I am coming in a while'. Then you never find them. (SHD, 50, Dalit, female)

While for some phrases, such as 'come tomorrow', or 'I will help next time', might be associated with hope and possibilities, for marginalised groups, they hold a different connotation. They are understood as a strategy to discourage their return, implying that they should not visit again. This message is often reinforced through negative experiences during repeat visits. For instance, KG was advised to be patient when visiting a second time. During her third visit, despite not receiving any assistance, she was rudely questioned, 'how much more do you want me to help you?' (KG, 26, Dalit Female). She had waited, hoping for help, but this failed. Telling people to 'come back at some other time' is a powerful

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[28] The lowest tier of local government unit in Bangladesh also sometimes known as Union Council (UC).

[29] A social safety net scheme known as Vulnerable Group Development Programme (or VGD).

exercise of power: it delays and yet does not explicitly reject or exclude. And, of course, the experience of waiting over extended periods of time and with uncertain outcomes is tiring, causing anxiety and feelings of neglect, humiliation and powerlessness.

Neglect is also experienced by individual respondents as a form of discrimination reminiscent of what extremely poor Bengalis often experience. Among all of the groups, a common concern was identified, encapsulated in the phrase '*eka gele dam deina*' (if you go alone, they will not pay attention to you) which conveys the notion that without the support of a patron, an individual's claims are delegitimised and they are viewed as less than a full member of society. This dynamic also serves to perpetuate the traditional patron-client relationship. Neglect in this context refers to the act of sustaining patronage.

This form of individualised neglect is illustrated in the following quotes:

> We face each other every day. But he (the Chairman) never feels anything about me. My condition doesn't touch him at all. (KD, 60, Dalit male)

I do not run after 'sahajjo sohojogita' (a phrase referring to social assistances distributed by the UP). No one will listen to me if I go there alone. (TK, 65, Santal female)

Sohai and sompotti

The above quotes, coupled with those presented below, help capture some in-group/out-group dynamics. Several participants understand that their claim to what they are entitled to, i.e. their rights (for example social protection), can be denied due to corrupt practices and because they are excluded from the dominant group's patronage network. This leaves people from poor and marginalised groups in

precarious conditions and can alienate them further, disincentivising them from interacting with the state. A Santal man shared:

> Most of the political leaders are distributing the resources among themselves. They are not distributing what has actually been there for us. We are not even getting a quarter of what we were actually allotted officially. We are getting one tenth of what they distribute. (BK, 65, Santal male)

Dalit participants emphasised the absence of a social guardianship for them, leading to feelings of humiliation and vulnerability. This was evidenced by their experiences of being directed to seek assistance from various officials bypassing responsibility, as well as being disregarded as citizens of Bangladesh. For instance, HM, a Dalit man, recounted, "whenever we go to the Chairman with issues, he instantly shows us the way to India" (HM, 40, Dalit male). Another Dalit man explained:

> There are two things, one of 'sohai' (protector/guardian/defender) the other is 'sompotti' (property/wealth). For example, if the Chairman is by our side, that is a 'sohai'. And if you have something, it is your 'sompotti'. We have neither 'sohai' nor 'sompotti'. Not even one in a thousand among us gets the favour of the Chairman. The age we are living in, there is no chance of earning 'sohai'... If the Chairman or Member [30] renders their support to us, then something can happen, otherwise not. (NC, 75, Dalit male)

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[30] Local elected representative

Knowing that they are not seen as entitled to services, several interviewees reported that they choose not to visit the UP to avoid further humiliation. Despite having some entitlements, they feel unable to access them. SND, a 65-year-old Dalit man, explained why he did not attempt to join the cash-for-work program, stating, "I don't think even if we have tried, we would have got it. They give few of those benefits to the Malos" (SND, 65, Dalit male).

Political voice

None of the studied groups are politically well-organised or electorally significant. This places them in a structurally disadvantaged position because as one of our key informants commented: "benefits are distributed along political party lines" (Administrator, Hill District Council, Khagrachori). For the Chakma in particular, there is no sense of wanting to even approach official government bodies for support. Their strategy is to avoid contact. The Dalits do approach duty-bearers for support and while there are cases of success, in general their experience is one of exclusion, neglect and contempt. The Santals are to some extent receiving recognition and assistance, yet they are *pichiye pora* (lagging behind). Because they are labelled as *matal* (drunkards), they are perceived as warranting neglect. As one of the Santal community activists stated: "they think 'ora nichu jaat, oderke na dileo chole' (they are the low caste, you do not need to give them anything)" (BM, 53, male Santal activist).

By far, the dominant response to discrimination or exclusion is one of internalised subordination, and this is found equally among the three groups. Thus, the Dalits often refer to themselves as 'nichu jat' or a low status group; the Chakmas refer to themselves as 'chikon jat' or a thin/small group and Santals call themselves 'pichiye pora', or the left behind group. The following responses illustrate this further:

We can't go to any (public) office easily. There is no Adivasi people who works in those offices. So, we do not dare to visit. (AT, 45, Santal female)

I have been to the UP office many times. I can only go to people up to that level, I can't go to offices above that. They don't listen to us or give attention to our needs. (KC, 62, Chakma male)

Resources

Being poor in terms of resources implies lacking access to or power over material and nonmaterial resources needed to sustain a basic standard of living or to improve one's life, such as education, land, social security, and information (Sida, 2020). Below, we discuss some of the central resources, and the patterns of exclusion in relation to these, brought up by interviewees.

Land

Across all three groups, past histories of injustice were consistently cited as a major factor contributing to their poverty and limiting their life prospects. The most commonly cited resource was land, partly due to the fact that the studied groups all reside in rural areas, where access to land is important.

Santal participants recounted the history of injustice where their ancestors and relatives were forced to migrate, internally in Bangladesh or to India, and sell their land and property. In other cases, they were deceived by dominant Bengali settlers, resulting in land dispossession. This account illustrates a common sentiment:

> I was very young at that time. I would not be able to tell clearly but I have heard from my parents that at that time, the Muslim tortured the Adivasis. They used to come and threatened them and asked the Adivasis "leave Bangladesh, this is not your country". But this is my father's and our ancestors' land. The Muslims came here much later. I have heard from my father that during the early period, rather the Muslim used to work for us but now we work for them. Everyone says, they (Santals) left because Bharat [India] is a Hindu state and Bangladesh is a Muslim state. (BH, 60, Santal male)

For the Santal and Dalit groups, who live in the plainland, land-leasing or sharecropping are seen as viable sources of income, for which access to land is primordial. However, the Dalits were found to be less likely than others to benefit from the patronage system and were therefore excluded by landowners from obtaining access to land-leasing or sharecropping opportunities. During focus group discussions, individuals reiterated these experiences, as illustrated in the following quote:

> We have many rich families here who never help us. They do not offer their lands for lease or sharecropping to us. They will rather give it to someone else. They hate us. They say, 'ora ki ar pare ora choto jaat' (can they do this, they are lower caste), they are not able to produce crops they are pig rearers, they eat pigs. (FGD Participant, Dalit)

Santals expressed concerns that access to land will become increasingly competitive in the future due to competition with Bengalis offering higher leasing payments to landowners. For example, an FGD participant explained:

> We are still able to lease lands, which is not a problem. However, the increasing trend is that if we lease land for Taka 15 000 this year, next year a Muslim individual may offer Taka 18 000 for the same land. Consequently, the landowner will choose to lease to the other person in order to receive a higher price. Additionally, landowners become more cautious with us regarding our ability to cultivate the land due to the significant costs involved, leading them to doubt our capacity to maximize the yield from the land. (FGD Participant, Santal)

For the Chakma community, accessing land is identified as crucial. As there is ban on jumm cultivation, land leasing or sharecropping has in some cases emerged as the sole option to maintain livelihoods. However, access to land in such forms has become more challenging for many Chakmas, as the following quote illustrates:

> I tried to get land on a sharecropping basis. It is difficult to get land for sharecropping. You need to arrange 4 000 Taka to pay the owner. Even if you can arrange the money, it is important to know and convince the owner to give the land to you for sharecropping. (SP, 35, Chakma male)

Many Chakma respondents shared their experience of being denied access to social safety net programmes because they do not own land. For instance, AC, a Chakma man, shared his experience of being ineligible for housing support on the grounds of not having ownership of the land that his family resides on. He further added:

> Three persons in this village got their houses built through government support. I don't own land so I couldn't get a house. I am living on others' land. 'kichu nai, kichu no pai' (I have nothing, so I don't get anything) (AC, 50, Chakma male).

Also, the suspension of formal land allotments was found to push people to adopt many arbitrary strategies to establish informal possession/claims over land. This kind of problematic possession of land keeps them vulnerable. For example, a Chakma man shared:

> Our Headman gave advice to plant fruit trees like mango and jackfruit on the land to keep the land in possession. If there are fruit trees, then people's claim on the land gets stronger in case the land gets allotted to the Bengalis or someone makes competing claims. Formal land allotment process is closed since 2000. (KC, 62, Chakma male)

State support

One of the most common and unsurprising findings, given how clientelist societies work, is the importance of networks and personal connections to access state support. Most respondents, regardless of their group identity, explained their situation with reference to their lack of connections. For example: "People get benefits when they have connections (porichoy thakle shubidha pawa jai)" (SP, 35, Chakma male).

Despite their experience of limited access to government social protection schemes, all three groups were found to have more frequent access to seasonal assistance than to long-term social protection programs like food-for-work, cash-for-work or similar public works programmes, which are more effective in reducing poverty (Khandker et al., 2009; Sharif & Ruthbah, 2017). As articulated by a Dalit interviewee, recounting an instance of receiving rice, "once, during the Eid festival, I received 10 kg rice and I have received nothing else from the UP in my life" (GD, 45, Dalit Male). Similar concerns were expressed by Santal participants, such as MT:

> It's not like we are not getting benefits. We are
> getting support. But are they enough? I have never
> seen intensive efforts aiming to change our
> lives … You are going to the UP and getting some
> rice, this doesn't help. What changes this will
> bring to your life? It doesn't make sense to depend
> on such support. (MT, 70, Santal male)

A minority of participants in all three groups discussed direct exclusion when it comes to accessing goods and services, while the majority claimed that any inclusion in social protection programs was irregular and tokenistic. Often, the intermittent inclusion becomes the excuse for not including minority groups in more sustainable and longer-term forms of support and assistance. As indicated above, many interviewees reported being excluded from programs and opportunities with greater and longer-term welfare benefits, such as cash-for-work or road construction programs. When they try to be included in these initiatives, they are met with comments such as *diyechi to* ('I gave you before')*, ar koto debo* ('how much more do I give you?'). These are all references to having received less valuable, intermittent benefits.

Basic facilities and services

Forms of collective neglect, explored in the previous section, were mostly experienced by the Chakma and the Dalits and were articulated through the denial of state resources for entire villages or hamlets. The Dalit and Chakma groups shared commonalities in their limited access to basic government resources, such as clean water, basic education, and health services. For Chakma people, this can partly be explained by their remoteness and distance to facilities, as well as their 'unease' or discomfort associated with being at a hospital where most doctors and other hospital staff are Bengalis. According to interviewees, this is in part because of the fear of not understanding other people, but also due to the fear of not fitting in.

Dalit respondents reported experiencing outright exclusion from accessing important resources and facilities. Dalit communities and Dalit-inhabited hamlets lack basic amenities, such as access to roads and safe drinking water, which interviewees attributed to resource misallocation and social exclusion. Their Dalit identity associated with perceived impurity, means that those belonging to the dominant group (politicians, teachers, or market traders) are unwilling to mix with or cater to Dalits or to be seen doing so. Their limited access to resources affects their health and opportunities. For example, a Dalit FGD participant mentioned:

We cannot easily go out to the main road and the market from this hamlet, we cannot move a van or tricycle easily from and to here. The rich, the upper caste Hindu, the Ghosh family, they bad-mouth about our ancestors and parents. We do not have a tube well of our own to fetch safe drinking water. We went to the Chairman countless times, but they do not pay heed to us. We know support for installing tube wells and latrines come for us, but we never get them. (FGD 1, Dalit, Satkhira)

Human security

Being poor in terms of human security implies being exposed to or at risk of violence or insecurity, which inhibits one's human rights and possibilities to escape poverty (Sida, 2024). [31] Concerns of human security take different forms across our studied groups. When we explore how the means of domination or discrimination are legitimised, we can see important differences between the groups. Often, questions of violence or threat to safety are central to how domination is exercised, and discrimination experienced.

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[31] Sida (2024). Multidimensional Poverty Analysis (MDPA): How to analyse poverty A methodological guide for using Sida's analytical framework for poverty analysis. Retrieved 28 June 2024 from: https://cdn.sida.se/app/uploads/2024/06/13135253/62693_MDPA-How-to-analyse-poverty_WEB.pdf

Chakma: A political threat

As a minority group, the Chakma is fundamentally seen as a political threat, and this came out strongly in our interviews. Almost all interviewees claimed that they were living with Bengalis in a peaceful way and that the conflict and violence of the past had mostly disappeared. However, the ongoing presence of the army as the main representative of the state in the Hill Tracts is a constant reminder of the years of conflict and the threat of reprisals should the Chakma not conform to current arrangements. One respondent illustrates this nicely, stating that:

> Now we are in a better position. But we still have the army camp nearby and [...] we still live in fear. They accuse us of being involved with political parties, for donating money (chanda dei) to the political parties and being involved in violence. (LC, 60, Chakma male)

Ironically, one of the reasons why Chakma do not have access to basic social services is that they are not affiliated or associated with the dominant political parties in Bangladesh, the leaders of which police access to key resources and benefits. However, in the Hill Tracts, there are several political parties led by minority group leaders and although not electorally significant, they are seen as a political threat. However, according to some of our respondents, these parties extract payments from communities, and this is perceived as a negative and abusive form of control and threat.

While in their accounts, the Chakma talk about violence and repression as something that happened in the past, the threat of violence persists today and is managed in different ways. Rather than dealing with first-hand experiences of violence, a recurring theme in the Chakma's responses was their experience of the threat of violence. Many reported feeling "very scared" during instances of local violence or riots and expressed the sentiment that it could easily escalate and spread. As one Chakma respondent recounted:

> I heard that a riot started and got very scared about thinking how to get back to village from Maishchari (7 km away). I prayed and promised to give a *cheebor* to *bhante* (religious offering) in the monastery. It was controlled by the *proshashon* (army and bureaucracy) quickly. If something happens in Khagrachari town or any other place, then the violence is spread everywhere. It is scary when such riots occur. They (Bengalis) create a riot and then burn down Pahari villages in different places. [...] If there are conflicts and we paharis go to '*proshashon*' for help, they beat us up (*danda chalai*) first. (SP, 35, Chakma, male)

As the army by and large is embodied by Bengalis, the experience of the threat of state-sponsored violence is ethicised. The conflict is therefore experienced as an ethnic conflict, where the in/out group dimensions follow ethnic boundaries. The following account reflects these dynamics:

> We live close by and get along well with Bengalis (*mish kore thaki*). But not everyone is good. There are some *shaitan* (bad) people. There is one of them who is a *mahendra* (three-wheeler) driver. Every evening he gets drunk and then he started shouting and sometimes pick up a quarrel. The problem is even if he gets into fight with someone else, if he is beaten up then we (Chakmas) will be blamed. They (Bengalis) will then attack us (Chakmas). That's a risk for the whole village…you know the riot I was talking about…I have told the Member about it a few times. He said he would talk to them. (SP, 35, Chakma male)

Almost all our interviewees stated that they do not have or do not want to have interactions with the Bengalis living in the Hill Tracts. The most obvious avoidance of interaction occurs in relation to land dispossessions. The Chakma rarely contest decisions on land possessions even when, as is almost always the case, they lose land rights and entitlements. In interviews, the Chakma's experience of insecurity was often linked to the fragility of their claim over their land:

> I was born in a 'co-operative farm village' (*joutho-khamar*) in Chengrachari mouja. My father owned a hill there, and we also had our own homestead plot located near the army camp. My father primarily did fruit cultivation on our hill land. We lost our land when some Marmas occupied it. This occurred when I was still young and unmarried, living with my parents. Marmas dispossessed us of our land. We were forced to move out as they said that they possessed a *khatian* (land document) for that land and claimed that the land belonged to them. (BC, 55, Chakma female)

The threat of violence can be experienced as a collective threat, but Chakma interviewees also expressed feeling safer if and when surrounded by other Chakma:

> I don't mix with Bengalis. I feel afraid of Bengalis (*bhoi kore*). Yes, in bazar lots of Bengalis come, but there I don't feel scared because there are also many Chakmas (smile). (BAC, 30, Chakma, male)

Also in the market, almost all our interviewees shared experiences of being forced to trade in ways that benefitted the Bengalis. One of our key informants talked about 'market syndicates' that control the prices at the local markets. Another respondent recounted a recent episode where a Chakma female refused to sell chilies at a lower price. That created tension in the market and in the words of the

respondent: "me and other *paharis* were just standing quietly. We don't speak up due to the fear of riots" (BC, 55, Chakma Female). However, the most salient coping tactic of the Chakma is their refusal to describe themselves as 'excluded'. Instead, they see themselves as 'the same as the Bengalis, except we receive less'. We return to this in our discussion about internalised dominance below.

Dalits: A moralised segregation

In contrast to the Chakma, who are perceived as a political threat, the underlying narrative that legitimises domination over the Dalit is one of impurity and low status. Dalits are seen and treated as unclean. Although the degree of segregation has decreased over time, many of our interviewees recounted instances when they were not allowed to enter restaurants for fear of polluting the place or 'defiling' other customers. Equally, some of our male respondents claimed that they were not able to access day labourer jobs because these were normally awarded to groups and no group of labourers wanted to have a Dalit member among them. Where possible, therefore, Dalits try to hide their identity because if exposed, they are segregated. An interviewee recounted a story about a Dalit student at Dhaka university, who shared a dormitory with Hindu students. When they found out that he was a Dalit, he was thrown out overnight.

In addition to segregation, the threat of impurity leads to responses in the form of hatred and disgust from the dominant group. Almost all our interviewees referred to their group as one that is hated. For example, one respondent noted: *"amader sobai ghrinar chokhe dekhe"* (everyone sees us through eyes of hatred). Although the sense of impurity and the response of hatred is connected to the Dalit's traditional occupations, such as pig rearing or leatherworking, the stigma remains even when Dalits abandon these occupations.

Given the contempt faced by Dalit communities, the threat of violence is always present. Unlike in the case of the Chakma, this threat has no obvious public face, such as the army, but is embedded in local social relationships. This is exemplified in a case recounted to us by an interviewee, where upper caste Hindus and Dalits together paid to build a crematory. Despite every family making an equal financial contribution, the crematory in the end had separate places for the upper caste and Dalit burial ceremonies. The segregation experienced in this life is perceived to move seamlessly to the next life.

The Dalits was the only group reporting instances of gender-based harassment and sexually predatory behaviour by the dominant group towards young female community members:

> They (the Muslim or upper caste) run after a girl if they find a beautiful girl (*pechone lege jai*). They show it as credit if they can have a girl from us (she hesitated to explain this, but it seems she is referring to something like: having a sexual relation with a Hindu girl makes those rough guys proud). This has also happened to the daughter of my brother-in-law and also my granddaughter (daughter of her son who lives with them) had an issue. She couldn't go to the school. Some local leaders were following, harassing, and teasing her. We went to their family to discuss and find a solution, but nothing worked. They didn't care about what we said. The main guy was from an influential Muslim family. It was a matter of family honour. We then decided to get her married early. (SND, 65, Dalit female)

A sense of insecurity may thus force the girls in the marginalised households to be married off at a young age and thereby quit school earlier than otherwise, leading to a shorter education and intergenerational cycle of failure.

Box 1: GD, Dalit, male (45): A case of a Dalit participant

GD shared with us about his struggles and the experiences he faced as a marginalized Dalit. He was born into a Hrishi family. Because his father died early, he had to start working as a cobbler. In addition, he was involved in bamboo work (making handicrafts from bamboo). From childhood, he has had to work hard and live in extreme poverty. As a result, today he has poor health, is unable to work every day, and can not even find employment. His eldest daughter was married off several years back, paid via a loan which he is still paying off. To manage the rest of the family, including his two other children, his wife also goes begging when GD fails to manage for the day.

GD shared many of his experiences of facing social discrimination, insult, humiliation, and indignity due to his Hrishi identity. He recounted an incident where he was humiliated in a restaurant for ordering food. As soon as he ordered his food, the other customers stopped eating and one furiously asked the restaurant owner, "Do you know who you have served the plate to? I won't eat in your restaurant if you allow him to eat here. He is a muchi".' GD reflected and asked the Lead Researcher, "Can you imagine how this felt?"

Although GD is a cobbler by profession, when he faces a severe crisis, GD also goes to work as a methor (latrine cleaner/sweeper/scavenger). He is connected with a network of Dalits who do the same job. But he does this in another location, hiding himself from people he knows.

GD contacted the local union parishad, the Chairman, and the Member several times for different reasons, but without success. He referred to a neighbour living in a pucca house (brick built) and claimed that although he is much richer than GD, he gets everything because he is well connected with the Chairman. He asked the Lead Researcher during the fieldwork, "Do you think he needed support? Do you think he is poor?".

GD even shared how he has been cheated by one of his Bengali neighbours. Because GD and his family lived in very poor housing conditions, the neighbour pretended to have good connections with political elites and promised to offer him housing if GD could advance 10,000 taka. Seeing other Dalits had also trusted him and given him the money, GD decided to move forward and borrowed 10,000 taka with high interest from a moneylender. Once he gave the money to the neighbour, GD received 400 bricks immediately. GD thought his dream of a decent housing would come soon. After the initial payment however, GD received nothing. He realized he had been cheated. He couldn nott take any action against his neighbour. GD shared, "Amra nichu jaat tai sobai amader sathe emon kore, amader ghenna kore" (Because we are of a lower caste, everyone can do this to us, they all hate us).

GD dreams of his children being able to get educated but at the same time raised concern that even if educated, they will not earn equal status. "Once a Dalit, you are always Dalit", he repeated. GD asks why his fate is written in this way and noted: "Amra choto kaj kore khai, churi dakati korar cheye to bhalo" (We people do small jobs, but at least these are better than stealing and robbery). When the interview was almost done, GD couldn not control his emotions and said, "You asked me all these, and from inside my heart is bleeding".

Santals: An imperfect inclusion

Santal participants reported that the Santal communities are grossly labelled as *matal* (drunkards) due to their production and consumption of *chuani*, a locally manufactured rice alcohol. This stigmatisation by dominant social groups acts as a justification for Santal exclusion from various opportunities. Although Santals did not report any direct threats or experiences of violence, they articulated a feeling of insecurity, as illustrated in the following statements:

> Adivasis are scared always. This is because they do not get justice anywhere. Most of the Santals do not know about office and bureaucracy. But Bengalis know about all these more. (MT, 70, Santal male)

> If the government changes in the next election, we may have to face lot of issues. Maybe theft and insecurity will increase, or houses will be burnt for simple issues. (FGD 3, Santal, Joypurhat)

Whether there is a relationship between the historical injustices and the current persistent sense of insecurity remains a subject of ambiguity. The degree of (in)security is contingent upon a group's level of integration into social, political, and institutional spheres. While the exclusion of Dalits is rooted in their perceived impure status, Santals attribute their exclusion to their numerical representation. The worth of a citizen is found to be contingent upon the size of the voting population of his/her specific group in a political constituency. This is illustrated in the following statement by a Santal activist:

> There is a saying 'Songkha jar, rashtro tar' (those who are more in number own the state). I think this is true. In Kaharol upazila, I think the total number of voters is 130.000, where we are only five to seven thousand voters. Do you think they will count us? (BM, 53, Santal Activist)

To most of our interviewees, the means or mechanisms of discrimination present themselves as core livelihood challenges, including limited or no access to entitled services and benefits. This is not specific to minority groups as previous research has shown that all those living in extreme poverty face discrimination, insecure livelihoods, weak entitlements, and lack of agency (Devine et al., 2017: Wood et al., 2018; Ali et al., 2021). These mechanisms of legitimation can take many forms: authoritative claims, moral values, or rational

choice. Insecure livelihoods and access to welfare and bureaucratic neglect are therefore, by definition, common in the lives of all extremely poor people, and are not specific to minority groups.

If the narrative for the Chakma legitimises external intervention and the ambition of the dominant group to keep the Chakma close, the legitimising narrative for Dalit discrimination is one of separation and segregation. It is therefore interesting to note that while the Chakma and Santals reject the idea of 'being excluded' and claim to be treated like the dominant group, except for 'receiving less', the Dalits more clearly articulated the experience of direct and hostile exclusion. This exclusion is experienced physically, socially, politically, and economically.

Discussion

A central precondition for development cooperation to contribute to poverty reduction, and to leave no one behind in these efforts, is to understand how poverty is manifested for different groups. Sida's MDPA framework, where the experience of poverty is analysed across the four dimensions of opportunities and choice, power and voice, resources, and human security, provides an important tool for such an understanding.

In this study, we have analysed minority groups' experiences of poverty and exclusion through the lens of these four poverty dimensions. The analysis is based on fieldwork and the understandings and perspectives expressed by members of the three groups – the Santal, Chakma, and Dalit – in interviews and focus group discussions. Below, we reflect of the findings of our analysis of the four dimensions of poverty across the three group in relation to our main research questions. Following these reflections, we discuss some policy implications of this study in the next section.

In this section, therefore, we are focusing on insights that help us understand patterns, processes or structures that underlie and, by implication, condition the findings reported above. Overall, our analysis has demonstrated that the identity of the groups under study has acted as a force of marginalisation or discrimination.

All three groups reported experiences of i) **limited opportunities** in relation to, for example, employment/livelihoods, market access and participation, and education; ii) **powerlessness and voicelessness** in terms of being unable to articulate needs, rights and concerns; iii) a **lack of resources**, evidenced in limited land ownership, and poor access to welfare support; and iv) **vulnerability or exposure to structural or episodic violence**, which reduces the overall sense of security and wellbeing. A key question for reflection is whether these outcomes can be explained by reference solely to the groups' minority identities. We would argue no. We know from previous

research (Ali et al., 2021) that the combination of limited opportunities, lack of power and voice, poor access to resources, and insecurity are intrinsic to extreme poverty. Conversely, improved opportunities, a strengthened voice and ability to articulate needs and rights, increased resources, and improved security are known routes out of extreme poverty. So, what, if any, difference does ethnic minority status entail for an extremely poor individual?

In terms of opportunities, voice, and resources, the conditions of our respondents are similar to those of non-minority group members living in extreme poverty. A difference can be observed both from the life histories and the group discussions, however, with regard to security. **It is clear that the extremely poor belonging to ethnic minority groups face greater and more continuous threats to their security than those part of the dominant group**. The security dimension is important because it fundamentally affects the other dimensions of poverty, i.e. individuals' opportunities, choices, voice and resources. As noted by Maîtrot et al. (2021: 904), insecurity forces marginalised groups to:

> seek protection and security through informal activities and personalized relations precisely because they are not able to claim entitlements or access opportunities, services and benefits from agencies with any sense of guarantee or predictability. (Maîtrot et al., 2021: 904)

Bangladesh is an example of an 'intermediation society' where options for security are fundamentally brokered through informal patron-client relations, which are dynamic and have evolved to take on different forms over time. For those living in extreme poverty in an intermediation society, security is a function of relationships with patrons, extended kin, neighbours, religious institutions, and of inclusion in social security systems by local politicians and officials. These relationships do not deliver rights or entitlement-based

security but dependent, informal or relational forms of security, provided in exchange for personalised loyalty and compliance (Wood 2003; Akram & Maîtrot, 2023).

The significance of the informal in producing some form of security means that formal organisational rules and expectations are often subverted in order to meet more personalised obligations or expectations. Formal and official decisions can never be protected from private interests, while the latter can never be openly articulated or used as justification for the latter.

By definition, the bargaining position of the extremely poor seeking dependent security is weak because they have relatively little to offer in exchange. Minority groups living in extreme poverty have an even weaker bargaining position and as such, their choices are more limited, and the trade-offs required to make the choices are sharper. All three studied groups are acutely aware of their weaker bargaining position. This is most evident in their accounts of belonging to groups that are numerically small and dispersed. This already makes them vulnerable as they have adverse engagements with dominant groups, who exercise power over social institutions like marketplaces, the labour market, education and health institutions, land, and so on. As reported above, the minority groups rarely contest the terms of these engagements because they fear that the dominant group will use more coercive measures, including direct violence, in response. Moreover, their numerical insignificance also translates into 'electoral insignificance', limiting the prospects to use this in exchange for greater security or access to protection of assets such as land or to social security.

To elaborate on the arguments above, we reflect further on two observations from our fieldwork. First, across all groups, **we observed very limited access to long-term social protection programs, such as food-for-work, cash-for-work or similar public works programmes**. Some minority group members claimed to have secured access to more seasonal or ad hoc benefit support. However, the longer-term programmes are preferred

because they tend to be more generous and are offered over extended periods of time. As a result, they constitute more reliable means to support the development of security and resilience. At the same time, because they are more generous and longer-term, they tend also to be highly politicised and used as incentives or rewards for political support. Given their electoral insignificance, the ethnic minority groups do not figure prominently in these political calculations. During fieldwork, we heard many narratives of Santal and Dalit members making claims on longer-term welfare programmes but being ignored. The Chakma, on the other hand, do not even try to access these benefits as they know that they will never be successful and are frightened that any such claims might lead to greater dispossession of land, weaker terms of trade at the market, or violent retaliation.

Although all three groups recounted experiencing constant threats to their security, important variations between the groups were observed. At one end of the spectrum, the Chakma live surrounded by the dominant group and with a significant army presence. The threat of violence, coercion and control is thus constant. In any calculation made by the Chakma, avoiding this threat is paramount. At the other end of the spectrum, the Santals are aware of the threat of violence, but this is not present on a daily basis and incidences of violence are infrequent. Our hypothesis regarding the reason for this is that the Santals play a key role as labourers in local agricultural production, on which the local dominant groups depend. This 'co-dependence' lowers tensions and gives Santals greater (it is always limited in terms of claims around entitlement-based security) room for manoeuvre in seeking security. It is not surprising, therefore, to observe that in the past, the Santals have been relatively successful in negotiating some access to the longer-term welfare benefits referenced above.

Our findings suggest that the threat to security is a feature that distinguishes the discrimination and marginalisation faced by ethnic minorities from that of other extremely poor groups. **A second**

important feature of their marginalisation is the process of legitimisation of discrimination of this through hegemonic exercises of power and various forms of labelling. This is clearly evident in the level of neglect that minority group members experience, for example when approaching bureaucratic or political offices or seeking legal protection but also when being denied access to shops (Dalits) or experiencing land dispossession (Chakma). This kind of neglect is of course an exercise of violence and abuse of power. Although these actions are often 'rationalised', they stem from discriminatory labels or judgements. Thus, the Dalits are labelled 'impure', the Chakma 'backward', and the Santals 'drunkards'.

This lends legitimacy to the actions but also results in the internalisation of the same labels and the internal acceptance of the status quo. In this way, land dispossessions and segregation (Shafie and Kilby, 2003), low levels of access to services (Sarker et al., 2006), and the exercise of violence coupled with a general lack of recognition of rights and entitlements (Chakma and Maitrot, 2016) are all seen as routine, acceptable and justifiable. Why then do minority groups sometimes rebel? When subordination or discrimination is internalised, the need for violence and coercion is reduced. When the same subordination is contested – and there are many sporadic episodes of this among the Dalits and a longer history of prolonged insurgency in the Hill Tracts – it is usually met with violence and coercion. Levels of tolerance of the accepted 'rules of the game' (i.e. the reliance on semi-exploitative clientelist relations) is high across society and the cost of defiance is even higher among marginalised communities.

Policy implications

In the previous section, we attempted to deepen the understanding of the study findings, i.e. to elaborate on the underlying patterns and processes that help explain outcomes in relation to poverty across the dimensions of power and voice, opportunities and choice, resources, and security. These underlying processes are understood not as pathological, but structural, phenomena. As such, the violence and insecurity that characterises the lives of minority group members are deeply entrenched in the Bangladeshi society.

In this section, we outline a set of policy implications that emerge from our study, of relevance for decisionmakers and policymakers in Bangladesh as well as for multilateral and bilateral development partners, such as Sida. In line with our analysis, the below reflections are purposefully broad because they deal with structural problems.

Shedding light on and addressing these problems is important for two main reasons. First, Sida has recently acknowledged the "invisibility" of ethnic and indigenous minority rights in its development cooperation portfolio. While Sida acknowledges this invisibility, many other development partners do not. Our policy reflections therefore largely focus on how to make marginalised minority groups in Bangladesh more 'visible'. This requires an opening of policy space and dialogue about how to address marginalisation and discrimination. That space currently does not exist. Second, the recent events in Bangladesh which led to the removal of the ruling party is still unravelling and the political settlement is in a state of flux. There are, for example, reports of increased violence against minority groups as well as of members from the dominant Muslim group trying to minority rights. There is therefore a political urgency, and a potential window of opportunity, to shape the extent to which minority rights are guaranteed in the future. This, however, requires a recognition of the deeper structures that lead to the continued exclusion of minority groups.

In what follows, we discuss four policy implications in this study:

1. A sustained focus on extreme poverty

As Bangladesh has moved toward middle-income status and 'zero extreme poverty' status, the policy attention paid to tackling extreme poverty has declined, as can be observed in the political statements and priorities of the government as well as development partners. The eradication of poverty no longer has the priority status or organising force that it had a couple of decades ago, around the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals. This change in emphasis is justified with reference to other pressing priorities, such as climate change or migration, or to the significant advances in reducing poverty. However, doubts over the success of poverty reduction in Bangladesh, along with and warnings about growing inequality and the emergence of 'new poor' as a result of the COVID pandemic and high inflation, have led some to question the de-prioritisation of poverty reduction. With less policy attention to poverty reduction, the invisibility of ethnic and religious minority groups is likely to increase as will their marginalisation. Given the high prevalence of extreme poverty among ethnic and religious minority groups, we argue for sustained efforts to reduce poverty. At the same time there is need to have an updated census survey that list all the minority groups. Absence of such information impede realistic comparison of poverty and exclusion.

A sustained focus on tackling poverty brings one important advantage in relation to specifically focusing on strengthening minority groups and rights. For reasons outlined above, it is unlikely that a policy discourse focusing on minority groups alone will receive much policy traction in the short to medium term. Any acknowledgement of specific claims by minority groups is politically unappealing and has so far been publicly rejected by Bangladesh's political elite. With recent political developments in the country, this may change, but it might as well be for the worse as for the good. The fate of minority groups in the new political landscape is uncertain. Embedding support for minority groups in a broader

policy commitment, such as poverty reduction, will ensure that they do not fall completely off the policy radar or are assumed to be 'integrated' into more general policy concerns.

However, a focus on poverty is not sufficient. We also see the need for a strategy that moves away from a projectised development agenda to an evidence-based social policy agenda in which rights and entitlements are respected and enacted. Such a strategy acknowledges the need to look beyond the confines of 'projects' and incorporate sustained consistency in social policy planning. Our evidence clearly shows that minority communities face structural discrimination that impacts their access to resources, opportunities and choice, power and voice, and security. The causes as well as the impacts of discrimination are both intersectional and inter-generational. The limited focus of projects entails limited impacts. While the longer-term policy development is the responsibility of the Bangladeshi government and policy makers, moving beyond projects poses great challenges to development partners who are much more bound to short-term project cycles.

2. Accountability to protect the rights and entitlements of all

Our research into ethnic and religious minority groups has identified a number of potential policy gaps and challenges. In the above discussion section, we presented evidence of both bureaucratic and political neglect that serves to delegitimise these groups' individual and collective claims in relation to state institutions and services. Understanding how the Government of Bangladesh exercises power locally and how local government officials maintain their legitimacy, has huge policy implications. The Government of Bangladesh has opted for a politics of inclusion rather than of recognition in relation to minority groups. As indicated in the previous section, this makes the task of specifically targeting minority groups through national policy a challenge. Moreover, any national policy is 'reworked' or 'translated' locally during implementation. This implies that patterns of minority discrimination are difficult to change.

One crucial means through which local government officials exercise the neglect of marginalised groups is by delaying opportunities for inclusion or delaying responses to welfare claims. The deliberate and institutionalised exclusion from local decision-making results in the unfair distribution of social protection, exacerbating the marginalisation and exclusion of the studied groups and perpetuating structural violence and inequality. Our study has also highlighted that the state's welfare interventions and allocations are *de facto* defined by the electoral significance of a group. None of the studied groups are politically well-organised or electorally significant, which explains why their welfare claims are perceived as illegitimate.

Political and bureaucratic neglect are deliberate means through which rights and entitlements of the ethnic and religious minorities are redefined and ignored. The possibility of exercising voice to seek accountability is offset by the threat of violence and insecurity. Again, addressing this challenge requires a greater understanding of the structural dynamics that underpin the social contract between citizen and the state. In particular, we need a greater understanding of the everyday encounters between minority groups and the state locally. Our findings raise an important question which the Government of Bangladesh, Sida as well as other international development partners might consider:

How can accountability of local government officials be strengthened, paying particular attention to the ways social protection schemes and allocations are granted? In other ways, how can the entitlements of minority groups be respected *and* enacted?

3. Policy: From integration to calibration

Our study has clearly brought to the fore a complex dynamic involving the relationship between 'majority' and 'minority' groups. This dynamic is neither new nor specific to the context of Bangladesh. For policy purposes, there seems to be two main approaches to this dynamic. The *first* advocates for the full integration of minorities or the submission of difference as the route for all citizen entitlements, rights and claims. The *second* advocates

for diversity and calibrates policy commitments in a way that respects differences. Since independence, Bangladesh has arguably adopted the former approach. The disproportionately high incidence of extreme poverty among and prevalence of discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities indicates that this approach has failed. For policy purposes, therefore, we would argue that Bangladesh needs to take a radically new approach, one which recognises intersectionality and horizontal inequalities. In the conditions of horizontal inequality 'ethnic groups find themselves in radically different situations' (Das, 2019: 236).

This study has built on previous work showing higher prevalence of extreme poverty among religious and ethnic minority groups. It has made an important contribution by providing qualitative insights into the experience of discrimination and marginalisation of religious and ethnic communities while recognising a) the singular significance of the threat to security for religious and ethnic communities, and b) the different experiences of marginalisation both between and within different minority communities. While the lead focus into the study was the prevalence of poverty among religious and ethnic minorities, poverty is ultimately an expression of underlying inequality. By implication, a focus on poverty alone that disregards inequality is likely to result in outcomes that does not address the challenges of deep rooted discrimination and structural violence.

A commitment to addressing inequalities is particularly pertinent to Bangladesh that has seen poverty levels decline but inequality differences increase. Given the more structural anchoring of inequalities, this is likely to have a deleterious impact on the lives of marginalised communities. However inequality is historically a more abstract concept than poverty, and development partners have been either reluctant or at least slow to take up this challenge. If Sida wishes to engage with the 'invisibility of ethnic and religious minorities in Bangladesh' (invisibility is their own words), it needs to proactively engage with the challenges of inequalities. However as

our analysis suggests, this will require an approach in development that engages more with politics and how this manifests itself in patronage relations, patriarchy, and racism.

Our analysis shows how structural patterns or processes legitimises forms of discrimination that entrenches poverty across all four dimensions explored. As argued above, these patterns are structural, intersectional and intergenerational. A greater policy focus on intersectionality, intergenerationality and multidimensionality means more than just 'moving beyond income and assets', and indeed poverty eradication. It recognises that changes in any specific life domain impacts others. The dynamic of and the extent of any impact will differ for different members of a given society or indeed for different members of the same family or household.

Sida's commitment to a multidimensional poverty framework considers these challenges but is difficult to implement. Commitments to intersectionality, intergenerationality or multi-dimensionality through policy invite a re-imagining of integrated development interventions, which requires more thinking about where to locate integrated support and how to ensure the coordination of support (policies and interventions) locally. There are many ways to re-imagine more integrated approaches in development, such as working in specific geographical areas or working with specific groups, such as religious and ethnic minorities.

Arguably, commitments to multidimensionality have not translated into sustained and integrated development interventions. This may reflect the shorter-term imperatives of project thinking and planning. Our analysis points instead to a need for policy experimentation and coordination that embraces multidimensionality and also considers and addresses local level policy dynamics. A development partner like Sida may not be in a position to deliver a truly integrated development intervention on its own, but could potentially coordinate such an initiative (overcoming the siloed ways partners

tend to operate in) or support more innovate policy experimentation aimed specifically at the challenges of multidimensionality, intersectionality and intergenerationality.

4. Support co-ordinated advocacy to engage the state

The study has explored the question of whether the experiences of the four dimensions of poverty differ for minority groups and others living in extreme poverty in Bangladesh. We argued that in relation to resources, voice and opportunities there may be little, if any, difference. However, we noted differences with regard to the level of insecurity faced by minority groups. The threat to security impacts the choices available to members of minority groups as well as the trade-offs entailed in these choices. Minority groups in Bangladesh are structurally alienated from the core relationships and institutions through which benefits, services and protection can be accessed.

Creating an environment where minority groups feel less insecure requires society-wide change. Though civil society organizations in Bangladesh work to promote minority rights, these tend to be uncoordinated and at times in competition with each other. Given that minority groups are and geographically dispersed, there is an obvious need for more coordinated advocacy. This, in turn, requires leadership.

Nurturing greater coordination between civil society groups working with minority rights is a necessary, but insufficient, strategy for more effective advocacy. Our findings suggest that the 'problem' of minority groups is fundamentally framed as a direct political threat to the status quo and that recognition of diversity and minority groups' status is at odds with the long-standing integrative political approach. In part, such a recognition would entail some acceptance of claims, for example, around land rights or traditional customary practices. These claims are politically unappealing at least in the current political context. Thus, the real challenge is how to make the state part of the solution. From a policy perspective, supporting the agency and voice of discriminated groups such as minorities needs to be calibrated against this very explicit political challenge. This type

of calibration is rarely carried out by development partners who might nominally support agency and voice but stay clear of the messy politics of what this means in practice. This raises a final policy question for partners such as Sida:

In a context of deep and intergenerational low trust, what does support for agency and voice actually mean?

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Annexes

Annex I: Ethics and IRB clearance

Prior to fieldwork, we obtained Institutional Review Board approval for the study from the Institutional Review Board of the Institute of Health Economics (IHE-IRB), University of Dhaka (Ref# IHE/IRB/DU/14/2023/Final). In this reference, the Board examined the study rationale and objectives; the guidelines developed for the LHI, FGD and KIIs, the informed consent forms; the risk analysis; and our commitment to anonymisation.

During fieldwork, we obtained informed consent from all the participants in this study after explaining the objective and scope of the study in the local language. We agreed not to pursue signed consent as this was considered too sensitive and likely to disincentivise participation. We therefore recorded consent with a tape recorder which also included participants' consent to record the life history interview and the FGDs. We did not record the KIIs but consent to take part in the KII was recorded. Communication with participants was continuous and we made clear that participation was completely voluntary and that participants had the right to withdraw their participation and their data without explanation. We also reiterated that anonymisation would be ensured. Participants were not offered financial compensation for their participation.

Annex II: Reference group

The research team was supported by a reference group composed of relevant scholars within and beyond Sweden. The group offered expert advice on the study from its inception until the delivery of the final report. The group provided real added value because it operated as a 'critical friend' both in terms of the rigour of the study and its engagement with Sida, as well as the development cooperation landscape in Sweden and beyond.

Annex III: Guidelines for life history interviews

Interview guide[32]

Tentative organising Notes: *We aim to complete 30 interviews (10 from each targeted community), and will look to have a 50:50 gender split in selecting in responding. Furthermore, at least 4 of our participants should be over the age of 60. It is important to collect basic socio-economic & demographic information, the date of interview (with start and end times), and consent (thumbprints are not allowed, signed and recorded consent preferred). While the focus might be on the interview, we will note any relevant contextual information such as the interview experience, observations, challenges faced by the researcher and so forth.*

1. The life history will follow a life course approach and will encourage participants to recall key experiences from their childhood to date their experiences of social marginalisation, stigmatisation, negligence, violence, harm/harassment/abuse, fear/sense of insecurity and so on. These are all fundamental experiences of exclusion, experiences that lead participants to live a life different life from other citizens. [33] However, in recalling key life history moments, we need to be disciplined (time is precious) because the main focus of the interview is on the current lived context and the very recent past. Potential prompt questions might include:

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[32] These guidelines are intended to help structure interviews. They should be treated as 'prompts'.

[33] The conception of time here is crucial. We refer here to the political timeline of the country and/or the regime pattern. For example: if we take post 1990 we are mostly in a democratic era but have witnessed different expressions of that era through different regimes. So since 1990, has the respondent experienced differences in the way they have felt discrimination of exclusion. So if the regime post 1990 is perceived to have been more 'authoritarian', has this authoritarianism affected the minority communities differently.

a. Do you remember your childhood? Do you remember your group (jati?) being excluded when you were a child? Do you think your family lived better when you were a child or is the situation worse now? As you grew up and married (if relevant) has the experience of exclusion increased or decreased? How has the experience of exclusion changed? Which events/factors contributed most to the changes you experienced?

2. Take special notes on the consequences of exclusion in terms of what led to what including how specific events/incidents impacted other members of the family/community, and how they managed to navigate those experiences in terms of resistance, tolerance, inaction, adoption of other strategies (e.g. *salish*/arbitration, seeking assistance of other influential leaders or patrons and so on). It is always good to get practical examples to talk through these experiences! Does the exclusion for example lead to poverty? Violence? Lack of security? Lack of opportunities? Land grabbing? etc

3. Ask respondent where they go to now when they need support/help. Ask to explain special events/examples; try and find out how these support arrangements actually work in practice. These questions may need prompting. It is often useful to ask what if any help/support the respondent can expect from a range of organisations/institutions such as local elected members, chairman, UP, Upazilla Parishad, NGOs, INGOs, religious organisations and so on. These can be explored with the following types of questions:

a. Has the participant secured any welfare services (within the framework of NSSS). If yes, what services? What made it possible (contacts, favours, support etc)? If no, why not? Is it easy for a member of a minority community to engage with the UP or UP Chairperson?

b. Has the participant received support from an NGO? If yes, what services? What made it possible (contacts, favours, support etc)? If no, why not? Is it easy for a member of a minority community to engage with NGOs?

4. The participant is a member of a minority community. In what ways is being a member of a minority community impact their lives? What are the main negative impacts ? and what are the positive ones? As a minority community member, do they feel more isolated, excluded than other citizens in the country? Why? Try and get some examples.

5. Looking forward, does the participant feel things will improve for their minority community or will get worse? Why?

6. Within the minority community there may be some that have managed to overcome some of their marginalisation and are doing better than others. Why is this so? Why do some within the same community feel less excluded?

7. Does the participant feel that all minority communities in Bangladesh are excluded? Are they excluded in the same way and to the same extent? Ask them to explain their responses.

8. Has the minority community come together to resolve tensions around exclusion (use examples such as access to safety nets, land grabbing, marriages etc? How do they do this? And is it successful? Does the group feel it is listened to? Why/why not?

9. Does the respondent trust members of wider society (i.e. Bengali Muslim)? Why or why not? Do they trust members of their own community? Why and why not?

Annex IV: Guidelines for focus group discussions

FGD guide[34]

Tentative organising Notes: *The FGDs will take place after the completion of a number of Life History Interviews. Around 5–6 participants will be invited to each FGD, with a 50/50 gender split and with at least 2 participants over the age of 60. Where possible we will invite a few participants from the life history interviews.*

It is important to collect basic socio-economic & demographic information, the date of interview (with start and end times), and consent (thumbprints are not allowed, signed and recorded consent preferred). While the focus might be on the FGD, we will note any relevant contextual information such as the interview experience, observations, challenges faced by the researcher and so forth.

1. Provide an introduction to the section and ensure everyone is clear about rules and objectives of FGD.

2. Encourage participants to discuss events or moments (with specific examples) where their community experienced social marginalisation, stigmatisation, negligence, violence, harm/harassment/abuse, fear/sense of insecurity and so on. These are all fundamental experiences of exclusion, experiences that lead participants to live in poverty, be disenfranchised and so forth. In FGDs it is often useful to refer to 'abstract' examples (i.e. not personal ones but ones participants know about). Note how the moments of exclusion had direct impacts on their lives (poverty, disadvantage etc) and how the community navigated those experiences in terms of resistance, tolerance, inaction, adoption of other strategies (*salish*/arbitration, seeking assistance from other brokers or patrons and so on).

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[34] These guidelines are intended to help structure FGDs. They should be treated as 'prompts'.

3. Ask the group about what it means to live in that area/society as Santals/Dalits/Chakma. Do they feel any specific type of exclusions because of their identity as Santal/Dalit/Chakma? Try to figure out different types of exclusions in comparison to other groups.

4. Ask about the experience of interacting collectively with a range of actors such as local elected members, political elites, chairman, UP, Upazilla Parishad, and so on. Ask specifically what kind of issues they have tried to resolve as a group or what kind services they tried to avail (within the framework of NSSS). Reflect on a few successful and failed cases. Try to understand why some efforts succeeded and why some failed. Here the objective is to understand the dynamics of collective actions, and participants' perceptions of the value (or lack of value) of collective action.

5. Ask if they feel their experience of engaging with actors mentioned in previous question is different from mainstream groups. How do they explain this difference?

6. Ask about the experience of interactions with external institutions such as schools, religious institutions, market, NGOs. Do the communities suffer in these institutional interactions because they are a minority group? Which institutions are more supportive and which less supportive (use local government, NGOs, religious institutions, schools to help this question). Do the participants feel that all minority communities in Bangladesh are excluded ? Are they excluded in the same way and to the same extent? Ask them to explain their responses.

7. Looking forward, do the participants feel things will improve for their minority community or will get worse? Why?

8. Do the respondents trust members of wider society (i.e. Bengali Muslim)? Why or why not? Do they trust members of their own community? Why and why not?

9. If we start with the return to democracy in 1990, do the participants feel over time (until today) that their position has changed with different governments or regimes? (i.e. has their exclusion got better or worse). Try and explore what made the situation better or worse for the community.

10. In between the discussion where there is a relevant space, initiate the discussion on resistance. In this discussion try to understand how the participants collectively or individually or in small groups resisted to the exclusions, deprivation, violence, abuse, indignity, insult, humiliation and so on. The resistance can be both in tangible or intangible form. Try to probe this with particular events or experience of exclusions, deprivation, violence, abuse, indignity, insult, humiliation and so on.

Annex V: Guidelines for key informant interviews

Interview guide[35]

It is important to collect basic socio-economic & demographic information, the date of interview (with start and end times), and consent (thumbprints are not allowed, signed and recorded consent preferred). While the focus might be on the KII, we will note any relevant contextual information such as the interview experience, observations, challenges faced by the researcher and so forth.

Local level stakeholders

Local level stakeholders may include: UP Chairman, Community Leaders, Local Human Rights Activists

1. What are the most common concerns the Santal/Dalit/Chakma community face in the area?

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[35] These guidelines are intended to help structure interviews. They should be treated as 'prompts'.

2. Assuming there is discrimination and exclusion, what is the basis of this exclusion? (e.g. is it religion, customs, ignorance, struggles over scarce resources, international factors, jealousy, is it because minorities are smaller in number etc.). Use this question to simply explore the roots of exclusion.

3. it is commonly understood that minority groups such as Santal/Dalit/Chakma live in worse conditions than the majority population (many of the extreme poor are minority groups!). How would the participant explain this?

4. Are minority groups targeted in social protection programmes or are they excluded? How would the participant explain this?

5. If we go back to 1990 and the return to democracy, we have witnessed changes in national and local leadership. How have these changes impacted the welfare of the minority groups?

6. If we take three groups as examples: Santal, Dalit and Chakma – are these minority groups excluded in the same way and to the same extent? Encourage participants to explain their answers.

7. Looking forward, does the participant feel things will improve for minority communities or will get worse? Why?

8. Locally, is the situation of local minority groups better than those in other areas of the country? Why?

Non-local

Non-local key informant may include: NGOs like MJF/NETZ/ Caritas/Kapaeeng Foundation, SEHD; Development Partners, journalists, academics, public officials etc.

As starting points for discussion, you might refer to i) recent research showing strong associations between levels of extreme poverty and minority group belonging (reference our work); ii) reports that minority groups are systematically excluded from a range of opportunities in Bangladesh

1. How does the participant see exclusion as a driver of disadvantage in Bangladesh? What are the main forms of exclusion and what are the main impacts of exclusion for minority groups?

2. Are minority groups excluded in the same way as non-minority groups in Bangladesh?

3. If we take three groups as examples: Santal, Dalit and Chakma – are these minority groups excluded in the same way and to the same extent? Encourage participants to explain their answers.

4. Assuming there is discrimination and exclusion, what is the basis of this exclusion? (e.g. is it religion, customs, ignorance, struggles over scarce resources, international factors, jealousy, is it because minorities are smaller in number etc). Use this question to simply explore the roots of exclusion.

5. If we go back to 1990 and the return to democracy, we have witnessed changes in national and local leadership. How have these changes impacted the welfare of the minority groups?

6. Can development and policy interventions help overcome the exclusion of minority groups? In what ways? Is to fair to say minority groups have been overlooked by policy – if so, why?

7. It is said that civil freedoms have been tightened over the past years. What are the implications of this for minority groups?

8. Where it is relevant…. What are the challenges of working with minority groups? What would you do to address the exclusion experienced by groups such as Santals, Dalits and Chakma?

9. Looking forward, does the participant feel things will improve for minority communities or will get worse? Why?

Annex VI: Anonymised list of interviewees

SL	Initials	Gender	Age	Location
Santal				
1	AT	Female	45	Joypurhat
2	BH	Male	60	Dinajpur
3	BK	Male	65	Joypurhat
4	BB	Male	60	Dinajpur
5	LH	Female	36	Dinajour
6	MT	Male	70	Dinajour
7	RB	Female	36	Dinajpur
8	SSM	Male	66	Dinajpur
9	SH	Female	30	Dinajpur
10	TK	Female	65	Dinajpur
Chakma				
11	NC	Female	19	Khagrachari
12	PC	Female	48	Khagrachari
13	SP	Male	35	Khagrachari
14	AC	Male	50	Khagrachari
15	BAC	Male	30	Khagrachari
16	LC	Male	60	Khagrachari
17	KC	Male	62	Khagrachari
18	BDC	Female	70	Khagrachari
19	MC	Female	50	Khagrachari
20	BC	Female	55	Khagrachari
Dalit				
21	KG	Female	26	Satkhira
22	SHD	Female	50	Satkhira
23	KD	Male	60	Satkhira
24	SND	Female	65	Satkhira
25	SD	Female	35	Satkhira
26	PCD	Male	48	Satkhira
27	GD	Male	48	Satkhira
28	HM	Male	40	Satkhira
29	NGD	Male	70	Satkhira
30	NC	Male	75	Satkhira

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