



SAFERWORLD **briefing**

PREVENTING VIOLENT CONFLICT. BUILDING SAFER LIVES

Bangladesh: Capacities for Peace

February 2016

Introduction

Bangladesh has faced a severe political crisis since 2013, when political parties (both in power and in opposition) disagreed on the organisation, and subsequent results, of general elections held in January 2014. Increasing political rivalry between the reigning Awami League (AL) and the opposing Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and Jamaat e Islami (Jel) sparked protests, blockades and violence, resulting in a large number of deaths and injuries among protesters. Alongside political rivalry and violent confrontations, the government's establishment of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in 2010, to prosecute war crimes committed during Bangladesh's War of Independence in 1971, has triggered violence across Bangladesh. Developments around the ICT's verdicts and sentences heightened divisions between those championing secularist ideas and those wanting the establishment of an Islamic state in Bangladesh, resulting in the murder of several secular bloggers and writers.

The political tensions and surge in violence have had a significant impact on people across Bangladesh. There is still a lingering risk that given the political rift, there could be an escalation of political violence, human rights abuses and crime. The public's disillusionment with the political situation, rising corruption, economic downturn, and poverty could make Bangladesh even more fragile.

Civil society is traditionally a strong actor in Bangladesh, working alongside communities, essentially in the social sector to provide them with basic services and meet their basic needs such as healthcare, education, livelihood and disaster management. While violence and conflicts are some of the key challenges Bangladeshis face, civil society engagement in peace and security issues has never been significant throughout the country, and efforts so far have not been well-coordinated or maximised. In the framework of the Capacities for Peace (C4P) project funded by the European Union (EU), Saferworld worked with 26 civil society organisations (CSOs) in three south-western districts of Bangladesh (Jessore, Faridpur and Satkhira) to accompany them

in a process of analysing conflict dynamics and formulating options for response. The process also involved setting up district-level committees meeting on a quarterly basis in order to continue the analysis process and work out ways to adapt their community-level engagement accordingly.

This briefing provides an overview of the analysis conducted in the three districts between November 2014 and January 2015. The second part of the briefing highlights what capacities rests at local level to address main issues of concern to communities, their strengths and weaknesses as well as opportunities to maximise their potential to address conflict and violence. The final part focuses on lessons learned throughout this process, on the role that local actors play to address conflict and violence, and how best external actors can support them.

Conflict dynamics in Bangladesh: between district-level grievances and structural causes

Between November 2014 and January 2015, Saferworld worked with 26 CSOs, media, academia, business and community representatives (men, women, youth) from Satkhira, Jessore and Faridpur districts to analyse tensions and conflict dynamics (causes, consequences, actors involved, changes needed). Participants involved in the process identified the following issues as the drivers of conflict that create tensions and divisions across the three districts.

Unregulated and unaccountable education and health sectors

Tensions have arisen between the public and authorities around education and health services, for example over issues such as a perceived commercialisation of education, a lack of transparency over the appointment of teachers, alleged interference over student admissions, and poor quality of health services. Not only do these shortcomings prevent the poorest and most marginalised from accessing basic services, they also fuel people's resentment towards state institutions. For example, in Jessore and Faridpur, appointment of teachers, admission of

students and exam results are fraught with nepotism and corruption in total impunity. Similarly, in these two districts, repeated cases of doctors' negligence and lack of proper credentials have resulted in deaths of patients and poor quality health services, and left communities (especially the poorest and most marginalised) feeling disillusioned and neglected. They see little or no willingness from authorities to be held accountable and address unregulated practices within the health and education sectors.

Politicisation and criminalisation of public procurements – tender

Political interference and corruption are common in the award of public tenders and procurements. Violent clashes regularly erupt between competing bidders and those trying to prevent them from doing so. Besides, in most tender cases, a large amount is paid as a bribe to secure contracts, leaving less budget, and therefore poorer quality, to the actual delivery of the works. These common features of local public procurement processes not only fail to deliver sustainable development to the people, but eventually undermine public faith in the integrity of public authorities. For example, workshop participants in Jessore analysed how a tender for a road construction project recently affected the entire city, and eventually fuelled resentment towards local authorities. The tender process was controlled by a group who had political connections, involved violent confrontations between political parties over the bidding process which also affected public and business safety in the city. As a result of these hurdles, the actual road construction was delayed for several years and once it was achieved, the general public still blamed the poor quality of the work done

Farmers struggle to make a living and to find support from authorities

Farmers are often caught in a vicious circle of debt, forced eviction and violent credit-collection methods. Workshop participants stressed that they feel powerless and disillusioned about the perceived inaction and lack of willingness on the part of authorities and leaders to address their grievances. For example, in Satkhira, 'Dadon' is a practice that involves rich farmers, traders, and money lenders financing poor and marginalised producers. In the absence of alternative solutions at the local level, many farmers opt for this mechanism to finance their crop production. Generally, by accepting the terms and conditions of this system, the farmers are compelled to sell their produce at a rate that is much lower than the market price. Due to the harsh conditions of this system and strict enforcement by the creditors, it is very difficult for the marginalised farmers to sustain their livelihoods. Many of the farmers who are unable to cope will be compelled to sell their land and their properties to pay back their loan. Others are stuck in a cycle of debt that they cannot get out of, or face forceful eviction, harassment, torture, or physical harm by their creditors. In all three districts, farmers face challenges in getting fair prices to enable them and their families to make a living, as a result of middle men who buy

products at a significantly lower price than market price, as well as frequent strikes that obstruct the transportation services and compel farmers to sell their product at lower price, farmers feel powerless and disillusioned. The inaction of authorities and leaders (on purpose – because of self-interest or by lack of leverage) to monitor and regulate the market is also fuelling resentment among these farmers.

Land conflict

Farmers are also affected by the increased pressure on 'Khash land' in coastal areas, where companies with political support want to expand their shrimp business at the expense of landless farmers. Dispossession and forced evictions result in increased vulnerability and poverty among these groups, as well as migration and disillusionment and resentment towards businesses and their political backers. Land grabbing is a broader issue all over the country whereby people with access, influence, wealth and political affiliation acquire land through the use of extra-legal means. Workshop participants in Satkhira emphasised once again how the dispossession process, exerted in collusion with authorities, is surrounded by violence and is reinforcing disillusion and resentment against the authorities, business groups and political leaders who are suspected to benefit from these actions.

Access to drinking water causing conflicts

Tensions and violence have erupted as a result of contention over ownership and use of water sources. Conflict between individuals, groups or even between entire settlements/villages over drinking water were particularly prevalent in Satkhira. In this area, sources of drinking water are scarce, and many are either contaminated with high levels of arsenic or saline. Moreover, many of the water sources such as wells, ponds and tube wells are owned and controlled by wealthy landowners and elites and are not accessible to the general public. This is restricting people's access to water, especially the poverty-stricken population in Satkhira. As a result of water scarcity, people – mostly women – have to travel long distances to fetch or buy water, which puts them at risk of physical assault, including rape. Tensions and violence have erupted as a result of contention over ownership and use of water sources.

The conflict analysis workshops in all three districts identified the following issues as structural causes and risks relating to the challenges faced at district level:

Divisive politics

Bangladesh's political landscape has been known for its highly polarised politics since the country's independence from Pakistan in 1971. The longstanding rivalry between The AL currently in power (led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina), and the BNP (led by former prime minister Khaleda Zia) has played out as a bitter personal feud between the two leading personalities, and resulted in significant violence

between opposing camps throughout the country. This political climate has not only hampered democratic debate at the national level, but is also reproduced at district level through strikes and violent confrontations, especially since late 2013. There were many deaths and injuries in 2014 and 2015 in particular. Strikes, blockades and violence created a general climate of lawlessness with violence targeted at religious minorities, a clampdown on the opposition, arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforced disappearances, and allegations of extra-judicial killings.¹ As hopes of reconciliation between these two parties fade, the divisive and confrontational politics appears to be heading towards a collision course. To begin with, the election boycott by the opposition has left the parliamentary politics of Bangladesh in disarray due to the absence of an opposition and there is even a prognosis of a military intervention if the impasse continues. The marginalisation and the clamp down on BNP actors and their activities could be retaliated with resistance and/or other retributive activities as well, which would cause more violence. Workshop participants were also concerned that these divisions cause weak governance at all levels, and religious fundamentalist groups and criminal elements could exploit the rift and take this opportunity to advance their respective objectives.

Rising religious fundamentalism

Confrontational politics, corruption, nepotism and weak governance create a perception of dysfunctional democracy and cause overall resentment towards the state, mainstream politics and, more generally, the possibility of achieving change through non-violent ways. Religious extremism and violence were considered by workshop participants as a worrying trend in Bangladesh and gave examples of the series of explosions targeting Shia Muslims in November 2015, the submission of a 13-point demand for the institutionalisation of Islamic Sharia law in Bangladesh, and the murders of liberal/atheist bloggers.

Fundamentalist groups such as Jel have taken advantage of these divisions and flourished. Jel and its student wing, Islamic Chattra Shibir (ICS), are regarded as one of the most well-organised political forces in the country. The group espouses fundamentalist Islamic ideals and is attracting those that are disenfranchised and see these ideals as the recourse to what they deem as an unavailing democratic political system. The group has been engaged in violent acts following the prosecution of its members by the war crime tribunal verdicts. Jel members have lately perpetrated acts of terror by dismantling railway lines and bridges, burning down public transport with passengers inside, petrol bombing and other attacks on people.

Besides murders and other violent incidents, workshop participants were concerned with the spread of

religious extremist narratives through religious sermons or the activities of banned groups. Hizbut Tahrir (HT) is one such banned Islamist outfit that is involved in spreading ideas of religious intolerance through its activities across Bangladesh. They are spreading their messages through their website, posters, leaflets and occasional rallies. In a marked departure from the other fundamentalist groups that target the disenfranchised middle or the lower strata of the society, HT's followers now mainly comprise of urban youth from affluent families that have attained quality education from various prominent academic institutions in and beyond Bangladesh.² Despite their small numbers, their access and influence in Bangladeshi society is reportedly significant. This group is vehemently opposed to the mainstream political forces, namely AL and BNP, and brands them as slavish puppets of the US and India. Lately, HT reportedly has been prodding the Bangladeshi Army to take over and end the rule of AL and BNP and establish a government run by what they consider true faithful Muslims.

Migration to gulf countries too is increasingly being attributed to this surge in religious fundamentalism. Hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi migrant workers are reportedly working in various gulf countries. While in the gulf countries, they are exposed and sometimes adhere to the stricter Wahabi Islamic principles and practices common in those countries. Workshop participants highlighted that when they return back to their communities, they impose these practices on their families. According to several interview respondents, Wahabi practices are often perceived as different from those that are more current in Bangladesh. Moreover, adherence to the Wahabi norms is considered to be causing intolerance over other currents and a rise in religious fundamentalism.

Remnants of the CHT conflict

Despite the signing of a peace accord in 1997, the Jumma people³ frequently report that they feel their political, cultural and social grievances have not been met and have been largely ignored. While this movement has on the whole remained peaceful in the form of demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts, the possibility of a return to violence cannot be entirely ruled out, and this risk is heightened by other factors mentioned above, such as weak governance and the lack of accountability of authorities in the face of injustices and impunity. Workshop participants expressed concerns over the fact that a return into conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts would further weaken the whole country just as it is facing a political crisis and the rise of religious fundamentalism.

Local Capacities for Peace

Workshop participants identified several actors who are well placed to address tensions and conflict dynamics at district level:

¹ <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/03a9b202-deac-11e4-b9ec-00144feab7de.html#axzz3ybqntELt>

² <http://www.thedailystar.net/religious-extremism-in-bangladesh-4677>

³ Jumma is the collective name given to the 11 indigenous tribes inhabiting the CHT region. They are also known as the Paharis.

Union Parishad

Union Parishads (UPs) are the lowest rural administrative units that serve as local government in Bangladesh, and are considered critical to any citizen's daily life. Each Parishad is an elected body representing nine wards and comprises of a Chairman and twelve members, including three members exclusively reserved for women. Union Parishads are formed under the Local Government (Union Parishads) Act, 2009. They have 13 standing thematic committees tasked with formulating and implementing development plans and ensuring people's participation. The UP's Law and Order Committees was considered key to issues of peace, conflict and security. Also, with the local police under their command, UPs are endowed with the capacity to enforce the government's writ at local level.

The public usually shares positive impressions of their UPs, whose chairmen and other members are elected by communities. However, UPs are stretched beyond their means and are overburdened with a multitude of tasks ranging from overseeing schools to dealing with local planning. Most UP members have not received proper training and lack the adequate resources to do their jobs. Political interference sometimes impedes their work and affects their professional credibility among the public. As they operate on a budget allocated by the central government, they do not have the financial independence to plan and implement projects that address the critical needs of the community, despite their wish to do so.

Shalish

'Shalish', is a widely used community-based and informal dispute settlement mechanism that communities view as more rapid, amicable and legitimate than the complex, expensive and lengthy formal justice system. As such it is a key peacebuilding tool at the local level and has proven to be a reliable framework to address civil, criminal or family issues and contestations constructively. As such it is a key peacebuilding tool at the local level and has proven to be a reliable framework to address civil, criminal or family issues and contestations constructively. However, workshop participants warned that in some cases, Shalish decisions can also be instrumentalised or co-opted by various stakeholders (for example politicians, businesses or other middle men). It is also a male-dominated mechanism, which raises obvious questions about its sensitivity and responsiveness to women. In order to overcome these problems, village courts have been established to give citizens easier and free access to more formal and objective justice. Yet, the Shalish remains the most commonly used dispute settlement mechanism at the community level, and as such holds a lot of potential to dispense more equitable decisions.⁴

⁴ For more information on Shalish and Village courts, see: The village court, a neglected but potential rural justice forum. Available at <http://archive.thedailystar.net/law/2008/08/01/index.htm>

Civil society

Workshop participants highlighted that civil society in Bangladesh is vibrant and has enormous potential to contribute to peacebuilding. Traditionally, civil society has been a fundamental actor in the country's development, thanks to its presence on the ground to improve people's access to basic services and alleviate poverty, as well as its vital role in raising awareness of both the public and authorities on various socio-economic and political issues. CSOs continue to serve as effective conduits between the public at the local level and the authorities, and transmit advocacy messages to both parties. Their ability to reach out and mobilise the public also stands as a testament of the key role they have played in Bangladesh's development in the last decades.

However, civil society's potential to improve people's security and to resolve conflicts has not yet been fully maximised. Many workshop participants stressed that the subjects of peace and security have largely remained outside their remit and most of them were unaware of the discourse and the potential role they could play as peacebuilders. Civil society is a wide and mixed sector in Bangladesh. While some organisations have played a critical development role, the sector is also at risk of being increasingly politicised and polarised, a trend that could affect its autonomy and impartiality.

Lessons learned and way forward

The C4P project has built the capacities of a number of actors in three districts to better analyse conflict dynamics and identify peacebuilding responses. As well as accompanying these actors in a process of rolling conflict analysis, this project also provided an opportunity to learn lessons about ways donors and peacebuilding practitioners can provide effective support to capacities for peace in the country:

Towards more engagement on local-level peacebuilding

The conflict analysis process undertaken in the three districts highlighted how communities are faced with a wide range of issues that are both inherent to their specific area or related to the broader political deadlock. The most pressing challenges all boiled down to the lack of effective accountability measures and appropriate channels to voice and address injustices and grievances. Initiatives like community security⁵ bring together different actors (such as communities, local authorities, security actors, media, businesses, and civil society) in order to share information, articulate a joint analysis of conflicts dynamics and identify responses is key to not only find solutions to the problems people face, but ultimately to restore or establish a sense of trust between communities and state representatives.

⁵ For information on Saferworld's community security approach, see <http://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/view-resource/806-community-security-handbook>

- The EU and other donors should support local-level peacebuilding processes in Bangladesh to encourage collective engagement by communities, local authorities, civil society organisations, business, media and other relevant actors to analyse and solve issues creating tensions and conflicts at local level.

Synergies between state and non-state actors at the heart of peacebuilding progress

The prevailing sentiment among CSOs is that conflict and security issues are the sole prerogative of the state and CSOs have little or no role in these issues. The state too feels a sense of entitlement in this domain and ignores the role others can play in contributing to peace. Synergy between the authorities and CSOs can only serve to complement the process of addressing security concerns and contribute to peace, as each side has their respective strengths. With these strengths combined, there is a higher probability that conflict will be addressed more effectively than if it was only by one of the groups.

- While support to formal institutions is necessary, it should build in requirements to also reach out to non-governmental and/or private actors who can have a role in bringing about positive changes and make a difference for people's daily lives.

Supporting effective capacity building on peace and security

CSOs that work in communities facing violence and tension have the best knowledge about the dynamics of their own context. The challenge is how best to use this insight in ways that do not harm to the CSOs themselves. This project provided a helpful methodology and framework to structure an analysis of challenges that communities face, in a systematic way, while supporting their own organisational development. Beyond skills and understanding, real capacity building is about developing relations between CSOs, and between CSOs, communities and authorities (including security and law enforcement). This requires overcoming initial reluctance and facilitating what can be difficult conversations using a step by step approach. This graduated process, responsive to local dynamics, is key to empowering different actors, building trust, and strengthening agency.

- Capacity building of local actors in Bangladesh should aim to raise awareness about ways they can contribute more actively to building peace and security for the people through better understanding conflict dynamics and applying conflict-sensitive approaches to their programmes.
- Capacity building support to CSOs in Bangladesh should aim to strengthen their capabilities, skills and understanding as well as their ability to engage key decision makers at the local and national levels, and bring

different actors together to foster collective action.

Putting peace and security on the agenda

While peace and conflict were never high priorities in Bangladesh's development agenda, evidence shows that they are of high concern to the public. Given the volatility of the Bangladesh context and the fact that conflict and insecurity adversely affect all other development activities, sustainable support from donors to peace and security would represent an effective investment. This will mean viewing development holistically rather than a series of discreet and niche approaches, and a greater degree of collaboration among the donor community and practitioners of different sectors. It also means raising awareness of national-level decision makers about conflict risks in the country and about ways to address them constructively and collectively.

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About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. We work with local people affected by conflict to improve their safety and sense of security, and conduct wider research and analysis. We use this evidence and learning to improve local, national and international policies and practices that can help build lasting peace. Our priority is people – we believe in a world where everyone can lead peaceful, fulfilling lives, free from fear and insecurity.

We are a not-for-profit organisation with programmes in nearly 20 countries and territories across Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Europe.

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