Dilemmas in Planning Crisis Prevention: NGOs in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh


1. Introduction

The signing of the Peace Accord between the Government of Bangladesh and the Parbattya Chattragam Jana Samhati Samiti (JSS) on 2nd December 1997 has been recognised worldwide. The peace accord has been rewarded with the general appreciation of donor agencies and other international players in the development business. The various multilateral and bilateral organisations have expressed their will to provide active support for the peace process and to increase their efforts to develop the Chittagong Hill Tracts Region (CHT), which had been badly neglected for about 20 years. Among the agencies engaged in energetic planning is the German Technical Cooperation organisation (GTZ). Since they enjoy well-established relationships with the Bangladeshi government resulting from long years of intensive development-cooperation, the Germans have been considering ways of launching an area of activity devoted to development and peace-building in the CHT.

This article deals with the problems and difficulties of designing a project that will, so far as possible, avoid conflictive issues in a post-conflict region. It is based on extensive research done in the CHT 1999 and 2000; the second phase was conducted during an internship with GTZ’s Appraisal Mission in the CHT. Following a short overview of the international discourse on crisis-prevention and peace-building, I will show how donor agencies attempt to deal with the CHT case, with German policy and concrete ideas as the focus. The next step will be to define what the donor agencies call "local framework", by which is meant the context surrounding a possible project. In the case of the CHT as a post-conflict region, ethnicity might be the most important category that structures the social context. After considering how to analyse ethnic diversity in the CHT, I will concentrate on the discourse of civil society, which has become, duplicating the Bangladeshi mainland model, an important stage from which various actors move into the development business, in Bangladesh predominantly in form of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The main thrust of the article will then be to analyse the ethnic relevance of NGOs operating in the CHT, in order to point out some important issues which might affect peace-building efforts. The central argument will focus on the question of choosing a counterpart without taking over the standpoint of one of the parties to the conflict, which is a basic policy concern on the donor side.
2. Peace in the Hills: Intervention Possible

The various members of the "international community" welcomed the Accord, expecting that it would not just help to stabilise the internal situation but contribute to peace and stability of the whole South-Asian region. Immediately after peace was established, different institutions started to assess the situation in the hills in order to contribute to the development process of the CHT, which had been at that point almost untouched by donor agencies' interventions. The few organisations that had worked in the CHT throughout the conflict have made informative assessments. Further UNDP, which has been nominated to take over the coordinating function among the various international and bilateral institutions, carried out a mission assessing the overall state of development in the Hills especially in relation to the Peace Treaty. The UNDP mission report attempts to provide guidance for the various agencies, dealing as it does with the main problems of various areas - for example administrative and political capacities, state of health and education services, the problem of land issues and rehabilitation of ex-combatants. Interviews with the different agencies revealed that their overall position towards the CHT issue generally coincides. But the agencies are following different strategies: some development agencies prefer to support predominantly local and national NGOs on a small scale. Other development cooperation institutions expressed interest in implementing projects on specific issues in the CHT at the time of research. Various UN organisations and several international NGOs were planning to start their programmes soon, if they had not begun yet.

The common interest in the CHT needs to be seen in relation to a current international debate: since the end of the cold war and particularly since the genocide in Rwanda in 1995 international agencies have become increasingly aware of so-called "intra-state conflicts" predominantly appearing in developing and transformation countries. This has not only to do with the numerical increase of such conflicts or the ethically motivated attempt to help suffering populations, but also with preventing the destruction of development efforts' fruits. Further it is commonly assumed that the conflicts must have something to do with underdevelopment and poverty. Accordingly several international organisations have developed possible strategies and guidelines which have been largely adopted by the national policies of their members. The overall strategy is two-fold: on the one hand the donor community highlights the importance of "structural stability" for crisis-prevention. On the other hand "local capacities for peace" have been singled out as important. The underlying paradigm is based on normative issues, such as democratisation, good governance or decentralisation, which are seen as necessary to the creation of peace and stability. Since 1998 the German development institutions have tried to integrate crisis-prevention into their overall development approach. The German Ministry of Development as
well as the GTZ\textsuperscript{4} have agreed to develop a crisis-prevention concept which shall give guidance how to implement projects which are not just conflict sensitive, but also help to prevent conflicts.

Although the Germans have developed some ideas and instruments aimed at the prevention of conflicts, they lack appropriate experience. Moreover intervening in partner states' internal conflicts is a very complicated issue: for example, the explicit approval of the partner government to implement crisis-prevention measures is needed. On the other hand the Germans want to support the \textquoteleft least developed\textquoteright, who are often not the government-supported groups. Another problem relates to the selection of an appropriate project area: The measures are usually not allocated with enough money to cover a whole region or even country, and it must be decided which upazilas (in the Bangladeshi case) can be included and which not. Finally it must be decided with whom the development agency should cooperate, with which governmental institutions as well as with which NGOs. The latter question will be the guiding one in the following sections of this article.

German development cooperation was one of first to express interest in working in the Hills. The willingness to support the development process can be traced back to two factors. First, the German donors are, like the other agencies involved in development business, greatly interested in developing and testing measures which contribute to peace and stability in line with the international consensus as well as the new German development policy. The second argument relates to the well established relationships between Germany and Bangladesh. For decades Germany has been one of the most important donor agencies operating in Bangladesh, and reliable structures and channels have been set up. In comparison to countries where civil war has forced development cooperation to remain passive for years, the regionally limited post-conflict situation in Bangladesh appears an appropriate field for carrying out pilot projects. After identifying possible areas and sectors for assistance, the Germans agreed that the proposed project should try to avoid difficult, ethnically determined aspects. Consequently it was agreed to focus on the \textquoteleft non-controversial issue\textquoteright of supporting the health-sector, combined with some modest income-generating measures. These areas have been identified as very needy ones. The attempt was thus made to combine the development of the chosen area with some peace-building activities. In order to establish how the peace-building component might be integrated into the conventional development efforts, it is necessary to assess the social structures and processes in respect to ethnic relations. The following overview deals with the main features of ethnic complexity and segregation processes in the hills. These are of central importance when analysing the chances of newly emerging civil societal structures in the context of development cooperation in order to problematise this issue with a view to donor agencies' interventions.
3. What the donors call "local framework"

The conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has a long history, which I want to touch on only in its most significant aspects. Under British Rule the CHT belonged to Bengal under the British East India Company. The region is inhabited by about thirteen different ethnic groups, which claim to be of differing origin and which differ from one another in language, religious preferences, their dressing habits and other cultural features. The British introduced an administrative system based partly on traditional chieftainship and at the same time integrated the CHT into the Bengali administrative structure as well as the Commonwealth. The colonial administration tried to take cognisance of the specific cultural features of the region and accordingly introduced a set of regulations pertaining to them. The most important one for the following decades, in addition to a special administrative set-up, was the provision that "no person other than a Chakma, or a member of any other hill tribe indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, ... shall enter or reside within the Chittagong Hill Tracts unless he is in possession of a permit granted by the Deputy Commissioner at his direction". Of significance too was the abolition of so-called jhum cultivation: this ancient slash and burn method was considered backward and undeveloped land use; besides, the jhumia's nomadic way of life hindered the territorially based approach to administration under colonial rule. People were trained by imported Bengali farm workers to practise wet-rice cultivation. With the partition of India the CHT were ceded to Pakistan, although many locals, especially the Chakma, opted to become part of India. The Pakistani government declared the CHT a "project area" for economically useful development and decided to construct the Chandraghona paper mill and established the Kaptai Hydroelectric Project, including a dam at the Karnaphuli river. The result was that about 40% of the best cultivable land went under water. The CHT people were uprooted. In particular those who had adopted flat-land cultivation modes under the British were thrown into confusion by these events. Rehabilitation measures initiated by the Pakistani government worked only insufficiently and the gap between the CHT people and the "others", be it Pakistanis or Bengalis, deepened. Additional problems occurred after the liberation war. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's conception of nationalism based on the idea of strict secularism, but also the nation-building programme, emphasised the importance of "Bengaliness" in the sense of creating a homogenous nation characterised by a common language and culture. The culturally distinct CHT people felt affronted by this political programme, since their own languages and cultures were not recognised. The conflict between the government and the Hill People's political representation increased. At that time M.N. Larma represented the CHT, and made the following famous statement, which perfectly sums up the political interests of the CHT people: "Our main interest is that our culture is threatened with extinction ... we want to live with our separate identity", while Sheikh Mujibur Rahman answered in his only speech ever
held at Rangamati: "From this day onward the tribals are being promoted into Bengalis". The citations reflect the problem that existed between the Bengali government and the Hill People. Frustrated by the leadership's ignorance towards Hill Peoples interests, the Larma brothers founded the JSS with its armed wing, Shanti Bahini, in order to protect the rights of "their people".

The historical events outlined here show how boundaries between groups are constructed and how ethnic polarisation takes place. By a sequence of action and reaction, minority groups and state systems become involved in a process of boundary drawing. As a result, forms of ethnic identities emerge and ethnicity becomes fuelled with tradition and meaning due to the significance of historical events. After the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the national secularisation programme was replaced by a more religiously defined one. The CHT people follow a number of religions, but not Islam; and they felt even more alienated by the Islamisation of Bangladeshi politics and the dynamics of ethnic polarisation intensified. The state aggravated the situation with a number of actions which were anything but a concession to the CHT people: constitutional changes towards Islam, settlement programmes for Bengali families violating the CHT Regulation of 1900, militarisation and much more. The Shanti Bahini reacted with violence against the military and Bengali settlers.

Ethnicity in the sense of belonging to distinct groups with different traditions and cultures has thus been largely constructed here. It determines the relationship between the majority-Bengali population and the state on the one hand, and the CHT people and their representational body, mainly in the form of the JSS, on the other. The deeply inscribed contours of difference have not been extinguished with the signing of the Peace Accord.

The situation continues to be determined by highly polarised ethnic difference, constructed during a long period of intervention in the CHT from outside. This needs to be recognised as a key underlying factor in the post-conflict interventions by international development agencies, because such development action always implies tackling the various local actors in such a way that development processes can be set in motion and conflict diminishes at the same time. Bilateral institutions, such as the German GTZ, need to include the state. But in most of the intra-state conflict cases the state is one of the conflict parties. In order to avoid being perceived as partial, donor agencies have thus emphasised that supporting "Local Capacities for Peace" could be an appropriate strategy to avoid becoming part of the conflict and at the same time reaching the people at "the bottom" and contributing to their development. The "Local Capacities for Peace" appear in the form of civil society actors, which in the Bangladesh context are predominantly NGOs.

 Bangladesh is a country with one of the greatest NGO densities world-wide. The conception of NGOs as major civil society actors is of central importance. Their significance, according to Sarah C. White, can be explained in terms of the historical and political context of this
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country. Consequently, the donor agencies draw much attention to the potentials of non-governmental initiatives, since most of them are specialised in developmental issues\textsuperscript{13}. As such they target predominantly landless families, women and other groups which are perceived as being marginalised\textsuperscript{14}. The NGOs of Bangladesh have, led by prominent and well-known examples like Grameen Bank and BRAC, gained not just a great deal of influence in the interplay between state, market and civil society, but have taken over many developmental responsibilities\textsuperscript{15}. The well established NGOs in Bangladesh are usually characterised by a high degree of competence and professionalism. In Bangladesh in particular NGOs are thus expected to have the necessary expertise in developmental matters related to crisis-prevention. Donor agencies are very well aware of this and usually welcome possibilities to cooperate with them. The cooperation between development agencies and developmental NGOs has thus been institutionalised and the necessary structures have been established.

The situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts however is somewhat different. Prior to the Peace Accord there were only very few NGOs working in the region, partly because it was heavily militarised, so that national NGOs were not able to implement their programmes, not least because local NGO activities had been largely prohibited in Kagrachari and Rangamati district. In the southern district of Bandarban however, international and national NGO activities have been allowed for about 20 years already. In fact, local NGO activities started to be established in Kagrachari and Rangamati after the cease-fire in 1992, while in Bandarban the move took a bit longer\textsuperscript{16}. At the time of research in 2000 a number of national NGOs had already started with working in the CHT; some are of plain-land origin, but have specialised in the CHT. At the same time a boom of new local NGOs has been observable. Due to the special significance of these civil society actors in the Bangladeshi context, many people expect to earn a good income in NGOs. Because initiatives were absent for so long, there are many NGO entrepreneurs to be found: people, some of whom have a certain amount of knowledge of developmental issues, will try to establish a local NGO by registering at the NGO office. They organise a sign and flyers, which are distributed to the representatives of visiting donor agencies. These organisations are often not active due to a lack of financial resources and experience in the “business”. This phenomenon of “phantom NGOs”, although not peculiar to the CHT, characterises the post-conflict situation, in the sense that they reflect the necessity of establishing the essential first before such organisations are able to function. The donor agencies have different positions towards the problem. Some argue that it is particularly important to support these NGOs financially, to build up necessary capacities. Others claim it is better to keep away from the NGO sector and not pour money into doubtful receptacles, where the high risk makes any efficient output most uncertain.
The newly established NGO scene is very diversified. There are a lot of initiatives which focus on “traditional developmental issues”, but there are also some focussing predominantly on human rights advocacy or the protection of the environment. At the same time there are a lot of international initiatives which are nationally organised. Examples are World Vision, Caritas or the Red Crescent Society. They usually have considerable financial resources and are highly professionalised. In Bandarban these organisations are important developmental actors which have a great deal of influence on various levels, and are, due to their long standing presence, well established and recognised by the target communities.

In the following two sections I will concentrate on national and local NGOs. I will show that the different perceptions the actors involved (NGO representatives and locals) have of each other play an important role in analysis. It will be illustrated further that the national NGOs can actively shape and reproduce the dynamics of ethnic polarisation between majority and minority within the state. The local NGO landscape in contrast is determined by ethnic segregation. Mainly targeting their ethnic group of origin, the resulting community-orientation has implications for development interventions by donor agencies, since it raises significant questions concerning the implementation of development cooperation projects.

4. National NGOs: "developing our backward tribals"

The well-developed Bangladeshi NGO scene ranges from small rural initiatives to company-like organisations. Especially the big ones have expanded by applying the internationally prominent and popular micro-credit scheme. By organising the “rural poor” in credit-receiving groups, the NGOs can effectively provide them with other services such as income-generating activities, skills training, education and health services. Sometimes this strategy is criticised as representing a threat to state authorities, since their service supply seriously competes with the traditional governmental sector. On the other hand it can be argued that the NGOs are providing services which help the rural people and relieve the overburdened state.

The well established NGOs have enormous interest in expanding their activities to the CHT, since there had been almost no activities there in recent years. Some organisations have specialised in CHT, but are counted as a national NGOs because they are of non-CHT origin and thus perceived as a national NGO by the CHT people. After the Accord, the opposition to the national NGOs was already so strong, that in 1998 a ban was placed on national NGOs, forbidding them to expand their activities into the CHT. Although this measure was effective to a certain extent, the large organisations are nevertheless very present. During my research their staff expressed indifference towards the ban. The authorities which made the
special provision have insufficient capacity to implement it, and are not taken seriously by the powerful organisations.

In the interviews many people voiced complaints about the national NGOs. The majority employed cultural arguments to explain their resistance. Many people criticised the fact that the national NGOs tended to duplicate schemes developed for the plains in the CHT, although it was not appropriate to the needs of the CHT population. The most complaints of all concerned the micro-credit scheme. The interviewees argued that especially the indigenous people carried out subsistence production to a significant extent with low monetary in- or output, the money being obtained predominantly from occasional day-labour. At the same time they would get loans from the big NGOs, but they were not able to get any profits due to the less monetised economic structure in the hills. People would get into the difficult position of having received loans but not being able to repay them, since they do not have a real income. Sometimes they even need to take up loans from other organisations in order to pay the former loans back. Additionally people stated that interest rates were too high. The NGOs themselves gave figures ranging from 15% to 20%, but local people complained that the charges are sometimes unofficially much higher. An interviewee described the overall strategy of the national NGOs as follows: First, they come and establish an office. They capture the people by giving them loans, which is very attractive to many of them. After being integrated into the NGO groups, people are offered other services like health clinics, schools or nurseries for homestead gardening. Only if they are members are they provided with good services for free or for a small amount of money. The non-members by contrast have to pay a relatively large amount for the services, which are usually much better than the governmental ones. Thus people who have been reluctant to become members because of the credits have to become members in order to profit from the essential services and become bound into the loan-activities as well. Even when people do not need credits, they have to take them up and become dependent on the financial support. The NGO meanwhile profits from the service charges, expands and becomes more powerful.

In a talk with a local person this strategy was sarcastically labelled "micro-colonialism".

Such judgements need to be seen in the context of the conflict between the majority Bangladeshis and the minority CHT people. The NGOs are perceived as representatives of the plain-land Bangladeshis, who are accused of attempting to exploit the indigenous people. On the one hand the CHT people suspect the plain-land Bangladeshis of seeking financial dominance, taking advantage of the minority in order to bring the capital back to the plains. This needs to be seen in the context of the economic exploitation of earlier times, namely the industrialisation efforts by the Pakistani Government and their continuance after Bangladesh's independence, which did not benefit the CHT People at all, although the resources exploited were seen as theirs. On the other hand the national NGOs are accused
of exaggerating cultural dominance. The model applied by the NGOs reflects the majority culture, which is perceived as being different from the Hill People’s cultures. Due to ethnic conflict and their struggle for recognition the CHT people are suspicious of “everything that comes from the plains”. Development approaches and strategies are criticised in particular, since earlier efforts to “develop” the Hills have been pursued by the governmental institutions without paying much attention to the needs and opinions of the CHT people.

It is important in this context to note that the people usually do not distinguish between government projects and NGO activities\textsuperscript{17}. Both are perceived as representatives of the oppressing majority within the nation. This is revealed by Sarah C. White's observations\textsuperscript{18} on how the big NGOs are regarded nowadays in rural Bangladesh. She argues that in many cases people lump them together with government officials and that the staff is frequently closer to the government employees than to the grassroots due to their socio-economic status. White further argues that the NGOs have developed a paternalistic way of thinking about the villagers, tending to perceive them as ignorant people who need to be taught enlightened ways of thinking. The successfully established organisations thus have distanced themselves from the grassroots and their activist visions have been replaced by an ethic of efficiency and professionalism\textsuperscript{19}. One of the results is that the NGOs as civil society actors are becoming more and more depoliticised and the villagers see them principally as service providers. The NGOs in turn see the "representation of poverty - and the poor - as a technical problem"\textsuperscript{20}. The predicament facing the big NGOs and the CHT people is more complicated than comparable problems arising in the plains, since the differences between villagers and NGO workers with their culture of professionalism and technocracy are exacerbated by the ethnic distinctiveness and the existing boundaries between the Bengali population and the CHT people. This is not restricted to the problems of differing languages, which was stressed by many interviewees, either. The CHT people often perceive the chasm between themselves and the NGO staff as the result of ethnically determined boundaries rather than one of the differences between rural grassroots and professionals, however. An interviewee summed this up by asserting: "This model might work in the plains, but not here in the Hills, our people and our culture is different".

The issue of cultural difference can be analysed by looking from the "other side" as well, i.e. by examining how the NGO representatives construct images of the CHT people and how they deal with the apparent differences. The dominant picture is one in which the Hill Tracts are perceived as the most neglected and backward area of Bangladesh. The backwardness is not just a historical construct, but has been made evident even in the statistics of the international organisations\textsuperscript{21}, which assess the developmental situation by applying quantitative statistics rather than paying attention to the diverse perceptions as well as the strategies of the various people interacting in the specific environment. The national NGOs
thus justify their development activities in the CHT with the humanitarian argument of the necessity to develop the poorest of the poor. Just as the CHT people have a certain perception of the NGOs' representation, the employees of the national NGOs showed in the interviews that they have specific images of the CHT people as well.

During the interviews the members of national NGOs highlighted above all the "backwardness" of the CHT people. One officer in a big NGO explained to me during an interview that they had a general philosophy, which was to educate the groups and to explain to them why they are poor. By making the poor aware of their poverty, they are able to do something actively for their development. He also stressed that the CHT people in remote areas are especially affected: "people don't know that they are poor. We have to give them a big shock so that they see why they are poor". The reason for this poverty has been described by the NGO worker in relation to the differences between Bengalis and the CHT people. "The Bengalis are also poor, but somehow they are more smart and intelligent for surviving". The citations suggest that the NGO representatives construct cultural differences in a hierarchical order. According to his explanation the people of the Hill Tracts are at a lower stage of development; they are "backward" and less intelligent. This kind of notion of cultural differences between the plain-land and hill Bangladeshis is one which is related to the perception of indigenous peoples labelled "tribals" (as is commonly done in Bangladesh) in general. The construction of hierarchy is thus to a large extent the result of colonial rule, which introduced not just the term "tribal" itself, but its connotation of backwardness as well: in the case of the CHT people their mode of cultivation (jhum) and the nomadic way of life this entails has resulted in their state of backwardness. The process of Bangladeshi nation-building, focussing on the high culture Bengali language has reproduced this construction and has consolidated it within Bangladeshi society. The resulting ethnic polarisation thus becomes reproduced with the intervention of national NGOs.

The consequence of national NGOs' "arrogance" towards the CHT people is that the latter feel a good deal of resentment, which makes donors' intervention via these organisations a delicate enterprise. In a remote district of Bandarban the local people told that a big NGO had tried to set up an office, but the workers were "driven away". The local people did not want any national NGO. Similarly in other remote areas of Rangamati the local people declared that they do not want any national NGOs working in their area either. Nevertheless, the NGO officer referred to above did not see "any reason why outsiders should not work in the CHT". He still thinks that "the only problem of the CHT is that nobody works with and thinks of the poor, since those on the top determine everything while the poor have nothing to say". The CHT people believe instead that they should establish their own developmental initiatives and NGOs.
5. Local NGOs: Unification or Segregation?

Considering the problems with national NGOs, the donor agencies could alternatively choose to concentrate on local initiatives, which are springing up like mushrooms since the Accord. The local people have learned to adopt the organisational form of NGOs due to the plainland’s success stories. But there is a general lack of experience in the vast majority of initiatives. As Revuelta has put it: “the typical local NGO was established about two years ago, has not received any foreign funding, works in a very limited capacity, has a very small budget, and has supported small-scale activities only in the towns of Rangamati and Bandarban”22. Nevertheless the organisations do play an important role, if one looks at the significance they have for the local people. Local NGOs do pay attention to appropriate grassroots orientation, but they are largely ethnically segregated. The organisations are usually community based and the communities are very often ethnically homogenous.

Talking to local people, almost everybody knows someone who is somehow concerned with establishing as NGO. This can be related to the fact that many people have problems finding employment and the NGO sector is seen as a possible way of earning some income. Additionally, after 25 years of insurgency many people are welcoming the opportunity to be actively concerned with the progress of the CHT. Many neighbourhoods and also private persons with certain skills attempt to establish an NGO. These initiatives are usually very grassroots-oriented, since the problems of the locality are the focus of the NGO and the local networks of the initiators are of the greatest importance. Consequently, many of the small NGOs are community-based initiatives. Some NGOs which were established before the Peace Accord have become skilled, professionalised and active development organisations, which are receiving foreign funding and are relatively well known. Usually the NGOs are backed by a local politician or a traditional leader. Sometimes even the MP of the district or the Raja chairs an organisation. The support from a local in authority helps the NGOs to establish contacts to possible funding agencies, because the local leaders usually have contacts to representatives of foreign agencies and at the same time the matter of trust in the authority plays an important role on the donor side. Although these considerations are very practical and increase the chances for success they once again raise the problem of existing hierarchies between the beneficiaries and the initiators of a NGO. The bigger the NGO is, the more it distances itself from its grassroots23. This formula is borne out by the empirical data as well: a notable NGO in Rangamati district has been increasingly criticised by the local people for being too successful. People start to be suspicious, explaining the organisations’ success is due to corrupt practices. Many local people interviewed thus tended to favour smaller organisations which are more grassroots oriented. But at the same time the donor agencies are very reluctant to support these grassroots oriented organisations for the reason that they would not have sufficient capacities to utilise the funds properly. Their lack of
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experience and professionalisation thus hinders developmental success stories at the lowest level.

Some donor agencies are nevertheless taking the risk of funding these grassroots organisations and are confronted with another problem. Many organisations are working on an exclusively community-based model; but since many communities are uni-ethnic, the grassroots organisations are benefiting their group as well. The Tripura for example have their own welfare association and the Mro are organised separately as well. Additionally, many organisations have been established on a religious basis. But the people of the CHT embrace a broad variety of religions: the Chakma and Marma, who comprise the vast majority of the indigenous population, are Buddhists. The Bengali inhabitants are usually Muslims or sometimes Hindus. The smaller indigenous groups are partly believers in either Buddhism or Hinduism, but many are members of the Christian church and there are some animists. The ethnic and religious orientation makes the NGOs part of the conflict. In Bandarban for example local people stated that the Christian church is becoming more and more attractive for the Animists, because they have easier access to financial resources and better opportunities to articulate their interests against the dominant Buddhists. The process of civil society organisation thus is characterised by the formation of an internal CHT conflict line between Buddhists and Christians. At the same time other conflict lines are emerging between the North and the South. The Chakma and (northern) Marma in Kagrachari and especially Rangamati districts have well established contacts to Dhaka based foreign donor agencies, which produces rivalry among the other groups. In Bandarban one can sometimes hear statements like: "These Chakmas in Rangamati are getting everything and we are getting nothing". Without doubt the process of ethnic segregation will be deepened by the consolidation of an ethnically determined civil-society landscape.

Furthermore some organisations try to network uni-ethnic grassroots initiatives, whereby the cultural distinctiveness should be highlighted. These are not classical developmental initiatives and the representatives stress the importance of preserving the various indigenous cultures. One organisation researched has been initiated by some Chakma; almost all indigenous communities of the CHT are delineated. Various activities are organised in order to present the broad cultural variety to the public and at the same time the organisation tries to promote CHT people's languages, scripts, music, drama and dance among the (young) members of the respective community. Many people fear that the old cultural practices are dying out due to the Bengali influence during the last years. Although the attempt to preserve such habits might be a very honourable one, it provokes much discussion. The thoughts about introducing indigenous languages in primary schools as a medium for instruction for example is a highly explosive political issue. These attempts are usually not at all welcomed by those who support the idea of a homogenous Bengali nation. At the same time some
scholars argue that the preservation of the CHT cultures needs to be taken seriously, because they are part of Bangladesh's cultural heritage. Some of the languages are spoken exclusively in the Hill Tracts of Chittagong and are claimed to be a world linguistic heritage. It has been argued during the interviews that the activities of this networking organisation contributes to a better understanding between the different ethnic groups. Only those who have some knowledge of the way of life in the Hills are able to respect the people's cultures instead of falling back on stereotypes. At the same time people have the opportunity and the freedom to live and preserve their ancient habits.

From another point of view the discourse on preserving Bangladesh's minority cultures involves the argumentation that the promotion of their cultural heritage would lead to a "folklorisation" of culture. It is argued that the CHT people usually have a holistic view of the world, where all different aspects of life are interconnected. Taking cultural features such as dance, clothing or drama out of the social context means the production of artefacts or social performances which have an exclusively aesthetic function. An illustrative example revealing this argument are the indigenous weaving projects initiated by several government and non-government organisations. There are projects where the traditional waist loom technique for producing Chakma dresses has been replaced with hand looms, in order to increase productivity. But local people complained that the introduction of hand looms has led to a decrease in quality. Additionally, the women are often doing the weaving as a full time job instead of using their leisure time after performing their daily activities as was the case in earlier times. The weaving thus is taken out of the culturally determined way of life. Nowadays the Chakma dresses are sold, while previously they were produced for domestic purposes. One can even find them in shops in Dhaka for extremely high prices, since they have become a kind of fashion. On the other hand the Chakma women have started to "rediscover" their traditional dress, which is an important indicator for ethnic consciousness as well. Wearing ethnic dresses is one of the most important markers for the membership to a certain group, since it is the most visible form. The revitalisation of traditional culture hence does not just imply the folklorisation of culture, but at the same time its promotion can enhance ethnic consciousness and maintain boundaries between groups. Nevertheless the weaving projects among the Chakmas has become so successful that other CHT groups have duplicated the weaving project model mainly for economic reasons.

The case of local NGOs has shown that there is an emerging, confident civil society after the Peace Accord with a lot of potential for development and peace-building, although the capacities are often not yet sufficient to cooperate with the foreign agencies. At the same time the organisational structure reveals an ethnic segregation. Supporting such local initiatives thus does not necessarily mean contributing to a better understanding as it is commonly assumed by the donor agencies. Instead there is a danger of distributing the
resources in such a manner that conflicts between advantaged and disadvantaged groups could emerge. Additionally it has been shown that civil society and the local forces are raising highly normative issues, which need to be assessed carefully before intervention by donor agencies.

6. What to do from the donors’ point of view?

The donor countries have agreed that a neutral stance towards the local context in post-conflict societies is a major concern for successful intervention with a peace-building background. Usually the counterpart of bilateral cooperation is the respective government. But in inner-state conflicts, as in the case of Bangladesh, the government appears as a conflict party itself. Consequently, the donor community has proposed investigating how far civil society actors could be supported in order to balance the interests and maintain neutrality. Experiences from other countries have revealed that the active support of NGOs can contribute to peace building. But the preceding analysis has shown that the NGOs operating in the CHT are directly involved in the processes of demarcation among ethnic groups. While the national NGOs are often perceived as intruders or enemies by the CHT people, the local NGOs are ethnically and communally segregated due to their grassroots orientation. While the case of the national NGOs represents the conflict between the majority and minority within the state, the local NGOs draw lines of conflict between the various ethnic groups in the CHT.

It is not a new phenomenon that development cooperation can have negative outcomes where the intention had actually been to produce a positive one. This relates to conflict prevention in a significant manner since it is a new field of action, where a good deal of experience has yet to be gathered. Additionally the implications of conflict for the overall goal of development are considered as enormous. It is thus utterly crucial to make a careful assessment prior the intervention. At the same time development action should start as early as possible, in order to contribute to the stabilisation if the region. The donor agencies are therefore in the delicate position of needing to act as fast as possible and at the same time to carry out a careful assessment in order to avoid unintended effects like giving unwitting support to the segregation processes contributing to conflict. It has been made clear in the analysis that the civil society actors are involved in the conflict dynamics. Focussing on them is not enough to avoid being perceived as partial. Furthermore there is a considerable danger that the distribution of aid or the selection of counterparts for projects might produce ethnic tensions. It is thus of major importance to include a broad variety of actors in order to avoid being perceived as being partial to one or the other side. But in many cases the budget does not allow wide-spread activities. Accordingly the various donor agencies need to
communicate their activities as well as the selection of counterparts to each other, in order to avoid unequal treatments which could produce conflicts over resources. At the same time the agencies also need to communicate about their experiences and recommendations, in order to assess the effects of their intervention. But this often discussed issue of donor coordination is, as much as conflict-prevention in general, only in its infancy. The international, bilateral and non-governmental organisations are continuously gaining experience and trying to integrate the lessons learned into their approaches and guidelines. But it is still a long way to an appropriate crisis-prevention approach.

1 The 1999 research took place during a three month research project for students of the Sociology of Development Research Center, University of Bielefeld. My research topic was "The Construction of Identities. The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh". In 2000 I took the opportunity to combine a four month GTZ-internship with the data-collection for my final thesis "Ambivalences of Development Cooperation in Post-Conflict Regions. Ethnicity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh".


3 For the global discourse on crisis-prevention see Development Assistance Committee (DAC), The DAC Guidelines. Helping Prevent Violent Conflict, Paris, OECD, 2001

4 The German system is, unlike that of the other donor countries, characterised by a decentralised structure. There are not just two different ministries for foreign affairs (AA) on the one hand and for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) on the other, but the executive power has been given to privatised institutions. The main actors implementing Germany's activities are the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the Bank for financial Assistance (KfW).

5 For the administrative system in the Chittagong Hill Tracts see: Wolfgang Mey, Politische Systeme in den Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh, Bremen: Übersee-Museum Bremen, 1980

6 The significance of the CHT Regulation of 1900 has been extensively discussed elsewhere, for example Wolfgang Mey op. cit.

7 Mizanur Rahman Shelley, The Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The Untold Story, Dhaka: Centre for Development Research (CDRB), 1992, p. 77


9 See the works of Amena Mohsin, in particular: Amena Mohsin, The Politics of Nationalism. The Case of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Dhaka, University Press Limited, 1997

10 Both statements are quoted in Amena Mohsin, "The Nationalist State and the Chittagong Hill Tracts", The Journal of Social Studies, No. 74, 1996, p. 44


13 The genesis of development NGOs is explained in depth in Brigitte Jessen, "Einleitung", Von der Fremdsteuierung zur Selbststeuerung. Alternativer Interventionismus asiatischer NGOs, Hamburg: Deutsches Übersee-Institut, 1995, p. 15


15 The NGOs play an important role in economic development by distributing micro-credits and supporting small-scale income-generating activities. Additionally they have taken over many functions within the social sector: many primary schools are run by NGOs as well as a lot of health centres on the communal level. The services provided are often more effective and attractive then the governmental ones.
16 Ina Hume, *Background Study for a Household Livelihood Security Assessment in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, Dhaka, CARE Bangladesh, 1999, p. 34
17 The state has usually channelled development projects through the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board, which has been under the jurisdiction of the centralised government. The Hill People had virtually no opportunity to take part in the decision and implementation processes.
18 Sarah C. White *op. cit.*
19 Sarah C. White *op. cit.* p. 321-322
20 Sarah C. White *op. cit.* p. 325
23 Sarah C. White *op. cit.* p. 321
24 CHT Commission, “Life is not Ours” *Land and Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, Bangladesh, Amsterdam and Copenhagen, CHT Commission, 2000, p. 74