Transformative Young Leadership

An Anthropological Assessment of Youth Empowerment and Sustainable Social Change in Dhaka, Bangladesh

A Bachelor's Thesis by Imre van Kraalingen and Nathalie van 't Pad

Utrecht University

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of Social Sciences
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Bachelor's Degree in
Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology

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Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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June 2016

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Acknowledgement

Imre van Kraalingen

I realise how lucky I am with all the opportunities I have had in my life so far. I am using this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone who supported me throughout the process of this research. I am thankful for their support, guidance, constructive criticism and inspiration.

I would first like to thank all the amazing people that I met during my fieldwork and allowed me to be a part of their lives. Secondly, Sara, our supervisor. Sara was always there whenever I had doubts or questions about my research and writing. She consistently allowed us to follow our own course, but steered us into right directions with her aspiring guidance whenever we needed it. I would also like to thank Kees Koonings for being our second reader. Nathalie, thank you for going with me on this adventure. After ups and downs, hard work, astonishing experiences and many deadlines, I think we turned our research into a relevant and good thesis. You were an amazing research partner and friend during the whole process of this research!

I want to express my love and appreciation to my family, my parents, and my siblings, for providing me with emotional and mental encouragement and support throughout my life, my study and now throughout my research. The love of family is invaluable. Miriam, for you a special thanks for your unconditional support, you are way more than just my best friend! Finally, I want to thank my boyfriend, Mihail, for being there for me and coping with my stubbornness and graduation stress. He turned my tears into smiles and my insecurity into motivation. I am very happy to have you in my life! Thank you!

Nathalie van 't Pad

I am very humble to realise how many people have helped me to get to this point. Firstly, I would like to thank my friends. Who have gotten me through the last year by distracting from the most stress I have ever had. Imre, thank you for going on this journey with me. Without you, this thesis would not exist. And thank you for putting up with me in my lesser moments. I would also like to thank Sara for her guidance, that has been so instrumental in carrying out this research and writing this thesis. Thank you Tara and Dipto, for being such amazing hosts to us.

Of course, I want to thank all the amazing young people I have gotten to know and that have helped us to create this thesis with their young wisdom. You have inspired me and forced me to look at the world anew.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, without whom I could not have done this. You are the most important people in my life. You inspire me to work harder and to be the best version of myself. Every time I go away, I return loving you even more.

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List of Acronyms

AAB	ActionAid Bangladesh
BBLT	Building Bridges through Leadership Training
BYES	Bangladesh Youth Empowerment Society
BYLC	Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre
GOB	Government of Bangladesh
GP	Global Platform
HRBA	Human Rights Based Approach
IYC	International Youth Council
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNV	United Nations Volunteers
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
YLCO	Youth-led community organizing
WPAY	World Programme of Action for Youth

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Introduction

Imre van Kraalingen and Nathalie van 't Pad

> *"To make change sustainable, we have to create a long term vision. To get commitment towards integrating initiatives that are long term and sustainable, there is need for more information for and involvement of the youth to develop their capacity and mentality, by letting them participate in issues that affect them."* – Ahnaf, 23, a youth worker at the Bangladesh Youth Empowerment Institute.

The citizens of Bangladesh are faced with a myriad of social issues on a daily basis. Poverty is an important problem, and so are major social inequalities that persist in the society. Uneven chances are present in all sectors of society. Inequality in job opportunities and in education are clear examples of the many problems in Bangladesh. Many of the consequences of these inequalities are felt by the Bangladeshi youth, who form a third of the entire population of the country. Unemployment is high, especially amongst young people and there are major problems in the education system that affect these youth as well (Rahman 2008, 2-3). Many youths in Dhaka are trying to bring about positive change in their society, to create, as expressed in the quote above, sustainable change.

Young people have often felt unable to actually do this and this results in frustration on their part, while they are viewed by the rest of society as stereotypically uncaring and ignorant (Phil 2010, 67). Worldwide, they are largely left out of policy making (United Nations 2010, 42). While they might be subject to policies and processes of social change, they are not sufficiently able to influence them (Clark 2008). The continued ignoring of youths voices has led to a call for inclusion of their views in policy making and governance by both young people themselves and in the developmental discourse. To make this happen, the position of the youth in Bangladesh and the rest of the world has to change. Through empowerment, these caring young people in Dhaka can acquire a voice. If investment in their development is made, they can be crucial in the striving for sustainable social change (Voicu 2011, 17). The potential to make this happen is already present (Cornwall 2008, 272), by stimulating their involvement and promoting the continued development of young people's skills and knowledge, youths can become powerful actors (Costanza-Chock 2012, 4-5).

This thesis explores the position of youths with ages ranging from approximately 15 to 24 years old by looking at the notion of youth empowerment, the strategies and motives behind it, the other processes that are involved, and the consequences it can have in the context of

Bangladesh. This will guide us in answering our research question: *How do youths and institutions working with youths construct youth empowerment through institutional participation and how is social change carried out in the community through social participation in Dhaka, Bangladesh?* In service of this question, the research is split into two different, complementary aspects of the processes of youth empowerment and social change. The first part of the research concerns itself with the institutional participation of young people in the empowerment process. Various sub-questions provide an insight into the notion of institutional youth empowerment as seen by both the institutions and the youth that are involved in the process. The second part of the research deals with a different part of the empowerment process, the social participation of the youth in Dhaka, in which they carry out youth empowerment in the form of social change in their communities and society. These two parts of the research will provide us with an overview of the motivations, influences, obstacles and chances that relate to youth empowerment, social sustainability and social change. It will help us understand how youth empowerment can be constructed and how it can provide the Bangladeshi youth that are trying to bring about change, with the tools to participate in their society.

As discussed, social inequalities play a major role in Bangladeshi society, therefore, youth empowerment will be studied in its relation to social sustainability and social change. A concept that the youth we have studied feel strongly connected to. The concept of social sustainability is closely related to the other dimensions of sustainability, the environmental and the economic (Patridge 2005, 5). But the social part of the sustainability discourse is mainly concerned with social relations and aspects of community. Social sustainability is all about social cohesion, social equity and equal access to social capital for all current and future members of a community (Dempsey et al. 2009, 292-294; Koning 2001, 10-11).

Social sustainability and social change are closely related. Through social transformations in the fabric of society, the thought processes and behaviour of people can be altered (Sharma and Monteiro 2016, 72). The central notion of this thesis is that the process of social change can lead to socially sustainable development, and through their empowerment youth can strive to influence these processes. This research aims to provide insight in the difficulties and prospects of youth empowerment, so the youth in Dhaka can be involved in the process of social change. It will be an assessment of how youth empowerment can be constructed in different ways and how it can provide the young people with the tools to participate in society. So as to describe how these Bangladeshi youths and institutions working

with them construct youth empowerment through institutionalized and social participation in the context of social sustainability.

To get to a deeper understanding of this process, it is crucial to approach the concepts of youth empowerment and social change holistically and through the eyes of all involved parties. Anthropology has a good position to address this, but is not able to provide a complete picture without research of other aspects, such as historical, political and economic features. A more complete picture of the situation surrounding youth empowerment and sustainable development can be especially helpful to the organisations and people that are working in the field of socially sustainable development. But it is also important to note that this understanding can benefit societies in general. This research can assist in the work that is done in the process towards a more sustainable world, which benefits many marginalised people and groups that are facing inequality. Precisely because sustainability is a process that strives for equal chances and a world that will, in the end, benefit everyone that is either living in this world now, or will live here in the future.

Within the development discourse, quite some research has been done on social change and youth empowerment. However, the academic sphere remains behind. There are few academic references that address processes of social change and the importance of youth empowerment.[1] Besides, as two anthropology professors from Dhaka told us, there is a lack of anthropological research in Bangladesh. This research will help to fill the gap in current literature on these subjects and make a contribution to the theoretical debate by involving both developmental and academic fields in our research. Our anthropological view is vital when it comes to the relation between social change and youth empowerment. It provides us with an understanding of the motivations, of both institutions and the youth itself, and the influences, obstacles and chances that youth empowerment entails. If we integrate different perspectives, we can identify opportunities to establish transformative and sustainable social change and utilize these chances to the full (Eriksen 2004). Zehadul (2014) argues that in Bangladesh there is need for an anthropological responses for national processes of change. With a holistic approach, the anthropological discourse can provide perspectives on the motives of social actors in Bangladesh and their understanding of current developments (Zehadul 2014). This way, we want to get a deeper understanding of the motivations of both youths and institutions working with youths, and the influences, obstacles and chances that youth empowerment entails within the broad debates on social sustainability. Thus, this thesis is based on anthropological

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[1] Some exceptions of relevant academic references are: Patridge (2005), Khan (2013), Jennings et al. (2006), Ho et al. (2015) and Clark (2008).

fieldwork carried out in the capital of Bangladesh, Dhaka, over the course of ten weeks in the Spring of 2016. During this time, we have carried out participant observation at multiple organisations involved with youth empowerment and social change, as well as various youth-led organisations that deal with these same themes. Our research population contains institutions working with youth and youth empowerment on one hand, and on the other hand we included the Bangladeshi youths that are involved with youth empowerment organisations, and (independent) youth groups that advocate for socially sustainable change in their communities.

During our fieldwork, we used different ways to secure our data. Our main research method was participant observation. Additionally, we used conversations, open interviews and semi-structured interviews. Many informants spoke English and so many of our interactions were in in this language. However, not everyone we came into contact with had sufficient knowledge of any language other than Bengali. With many of the more marginalised youths – who often have not received any (higher) education – and the youngest of our research participants, we conversed with the help of a translator. These were either volunteers of organisations that were accompanying or hosting us, or young people that had become important informants. Besides translating, these young people often provided us with their own insights about the conversations afterwards. We always instructed our translators beforehand, telling them to translate everything they hear – not just what they deem important – and to translate everything as literal as possible. We often reminded them at some points during the interviews or conversations as well. Throughout the research activities we wrote down jot and head notes that we developed into expanded field notes. As we expanded our field notes and transcribed our interviews, we started the process of open coding. We derived general codes from different subjects appearing in our data. After this, we continued with axial coding, through which we took a closer and more specific look at our codes, exploring contradictions, similarities, patterns and exceptions. In this way we selected important information from the less important information. During the coding process we used Nvivo to keep our data and codes structured. To increase validity and reliability of our data, we also kept meta-notes. Through meta-notes we captured our thoughts and feelings during data processing. This way we were able to keep track on how we developed thoughts and theories based on our data and it gave insight in the choices we made during our research and data analyses. These methods were instrumental to get an holistic insight into social sustainability and youth empowerment in the context of our research.

To understand how the notions youth empowerment and social sustainability are constructed in Bangladesh, it firstly is necessary to provide the theoretical framework on which this research is based. This will be the focus of part one of this thesis. In part two, the context of the research is further explored. Here we will discuss the social situation in Bangladesh and the current processes involving youth empowerment and social change. After this, we can focus on the empirical aspect of the thesis. Part three will discuss the results concerning the questions around institutional participation of youth in Bangladesh. This will be followed by part four, focussing on the results acquired from the sub-questions involving social participation. In the final part we will turn to conclusions that can be drawn from the results of both parts of the research as they relate to each other and what our findings can add to the literary debate around youth empowerment and sustainability

Part I   Theoretical Framework

Sustainable Development and Social Sustainability
Nathalie van 't Pad

With the world becoming ever more globalized, a new notion of worldwide consciousness has been created (Lombardo, Zakus and Skinner 2002, 363). At the same time, the spread of capitalism and the growing interconnectedness of people form a strain on the environment and economic and social relations (Koning 2001, 3; Sharma and Monteiro 2016, 72). The new global consciousness has given rise to the idea that these problems can only be tackled together, through a focus on sustainability (Lombardo, Zakus and Skinner 2002, 363). An expression of these concerns are the newly created Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. In their resolution for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development they describe the challenge as a global one, and they go on to explain what the goal of these SDGs is:

> *"We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind."* (United Nations 2015, 1)

The concept of sustainability has become a regular topic in academic debate over the last decades as well, but until recently this debate was mostly focused on the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability. Only just have people started discussing the social dimension of sustainability (Partridge 2005, 2; Dillard, Dujon and King 2009, 2). To get a sense of the meaning and scope of social sustainability we will first discuss the definition of sustainability as a broader concept, after which we will turn to its social dimension.

The most commonly used definition of sustainability comes from the World Commission on Environment and Development's report 'Our Common Future' (also known as The Brundtland Report). This highly influential report defined sustainable development as "... *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*" (1987, 31). It becomes clear from this definition that initial interest in sustainability arose in a time when ecological concerns dominated the public discourse (Partridge 2005, 2). But sustainability is not just about the environment, it is about

the connections between all aspects of both ecological and human life (Shohel and Howes 2006, 2; Koning 2001, 6). The definition offered by The Brundtland Report then gives us an idea of the concept of sustainability, but it does not offer us an all-encompassing definition. No real clear consensus can be found on the precise meaning of sustainability. The approach that is used to conceptualize sustainability is to view it as consisting of three dimensions: the ecological, the economic and the social. These aspects of sustainability are interconnected (Partridge 2005, 5; Hawkes 2001, 6). Even though the three dimensions closely relate to one another, the focus of this study will be on social sustainability in particular. This does not mean that we view the social dimension as more instrumental. To study the entirety of what sustainability entails, however, goes beyond the scope of this research. Social sustainability also has attracted considerably less attention from the academic discourse and is thus not as well studied as the other dimensions (Partridge 2005, 1). This study seeks to fill this gap in the knowledge of sustainability. The struggle for a more sustainable world can benefit from these insights. It is also the case that in a more socially sustainable world, there should be room for all people to influence their surroundings. This is where the problem of youth empowerment relates to the problem of social sustainability. Youth empowerment can help influence social change and social change can help bring about youth empowerment, this relation will be explored more extensively later.

Before we continue with the social dimension of sustainability, it is important to note our use of the terms sustainability and sustainable development as interchangeable. It could be argued that there is a tension between the meaning of these concepts. The idea of sustainability originally arose as a challenge to the assumption of continued economic growth as a forward development. When the views of The Brundtland Report gained traction in the discourse of sustainability, this term got overthrown by sustainable development. This conceptualisation is often criticized because is neutralizes this challenge, at least to a certain extent. Many have spoken out against this developmental approach to sustainability (Partridge 2005, 3). The Brundtland definition is just one of the many ways to view the concept of sustainability, but an influential one, thus we would like to stress that our use of the term sustainable development does not presuppose continued economic growth or positive development. Rather, it should be seen as a way to imply that sustainability is not something that one can just achieve. It is not a fixed state, but an ongoing process (Partridge 2005, 11; Koning 2001, 6).

Social Sustainability

As mentioned, academic knowledge of the social content of sustainability is limited. Mostly because this dimension has only recently been accepted as a valuable part of the sustainability framework (Partridge 2005, 2-5). This is peculiar because: "*... sustainability is itself a social question*" (Partridge 2005, 2). Social relations play a major role in the process of sustainability, so social sustainability should be an important focus in the sustainability discourse (Partridge 2005, 6-7). There is no real consensus on the exact meaning of social sustainability at this moment, but agreement does exist on the notion that social sustainability is a complex and multi-dimensional concept (Dempsey et al. 2009, 289-290; Partridge 2005, 4; Koning 2001, 3). We perceive the concept of social sustainability as the developmental process towards a healthy community, where social cohesion (Dempsey et al. 2009, 293-294), social equity (Dempsey et al. 2009, 292; Partridge 2005, 7-8), and equal access to social capital (Koning 2001, 10-11) are assured to meet the needs of its current and future members. Some concrete objectives of socially sustainable development include education, participation in local democracy, health, social inclusion, social networks and interaction, employment, security, cultural traditions and decent housing (Dempsey et al. 2009, 291). The most valuable goals of social sustainability, however, are the three concepts underlined above and we will now briefly discuss what they entail.

The significance of social cohesion mostly concerns the importance of community participation in socially sustainable development, because if issues are not rooted in local communities, sustainability will never take off (Partridge 2005, 11). Socially sustainable communities are communities of equality, diversity, connectedness, democracy and quality of living (Partridge 2005, 9; Dillard, Dujon and King 2009, 3-4). Social cohesion is very important in this context, because it contributes to: *"...strong, fair and just societies for present and future communities"* (Dempsey et al. 2009, 293).

The concept of social equity relates closely to notions of social justice, fairness and equality (Dempsey et al. 2009, 292). In order for a society or community to be socially sustainable, all resources should be distributed equally. Some examples of resources are civic and legal rights, economic resources, education, housing, health, and opportunities for participation in decision-making (Partridge 2005, 8).

Where social cohesion is mostly related to the willingness of individuals and communities to participate in change and sustainability, social capital refers to their ability to do so. Social capital stands for the agency of actors that is created through membership of certain communities or networks (Koning 2001, 10) and: *"…social bonds and social norms (social capital) are seen as the constituent elements of sustainable development and*

livelihoods" (Koning 2001, 11). Social capital is not something that is inherently good, the most important negative consequence being the exclusion of outsiders (Koning 2001, 11). In order for a community or society to be socially sustainable, social capital should be equally accessible for all and it should empower people and communities to influence their surroundings in a way that is positive for them.

The increased attention for the social part of sustainability can be seen in the attention of the Sustainable Development Goals for this dimension (United Nations 2015) and the growing body of academic literature that has been discussed. Even now the attention has shifted to a more all-encompassing view of sustainability, the question of how to accomplish sustainability remains. This is the question that we will now turn to, by discussing the concept of social change and the part that youth empowerment can play in the global aim for a more sustainable world.

Social Sustainability and Social Change
Nathalie van 't Pad

The term social change is used to describe an ongoing process of alterations in the social (and cultural) fabric of society through transformations in the thought processes of people which influence their behaviour (Sharma and Monteiro 2016, 72). These processes vary in different settings and societies (Sharma and Monteiro 2016, 72). All societies are continuously changing, and thus subject to a process of social change. This does not mean that people are always aware of change or that all aspects of societies are evenly susceptible to the process, but even the societal institutions that represent social continuity, like religion and family, have changed over time. Social sciences originated as a way to explain these social changes that were experienced. At first they viewed the process of social change as rather linear and universal, but in recent years they have shifted towards a more fragmented and situational position (Preston 2008).

The anthropological method is an excellent approach to study social and cultural change. Within anthropology there is a tradition of trying to understand how change comes about and how cultural and social norms are reproduced, they see practices "*...as simultaneously shaping and being shaped by a system …*" which is reproduced and at the same time changed by them (Holland and Yousofi 2014, 241). This reciprocity can also be found in the interplay between social change and major social processes. The most significant examples of social change have occurred in relation to broad social trends like urbanisation, industrialisation, modernisation

(Preston 2008). Globalisation, it can be argued, has been one of the recent most important processes involving social change (Lombardo et al. 2002, 363). It has created new risks and opportunities for people and societies (Koning 2001, 5; Giddens 2001, 45). Additionally, Giddens argues that social change is more prominent in modern societies, because the pace and scale of change have intensified as an effect of globalisation (2001, 45). But social change is not just accelerated and intensified by globalisation. The process of globalisation itself is shaping the way people think and act, and can thus be seen as a process of social change.

Now we have discussed what the concept of social change entails, it is time to address how we can influence its process to bring about sustainable change. To do so, it is important to strive to empower people so that they can create a socially sustainable environment for themselves.

Social Change and Youth Empowerment
Imre van Kraalingen

As we have discussed in the previous paragraph, it is necessary to establish sustainable social change within society, in social institutions and in relations among and behaviour of social entities. In many developing countries there are gaps and difficulties in policy implementation and there is a lack of government responsiveness and cooperation with other institutions (Rahman 2008, 452, 459). In this section we will argue that youths can be a bridge between effective policy making in the context of social sustainability and social change, and practical action. Because of underdevelopment and marginalisation, young people have often underutilised or lost potential (Loncle and Moniglia 2008, 7). However, if investments are made in development and empowerment of youths, they can be a foundation for structural, effective and sustainable change (Voicu 2011, 17).

Youth empowerment is the encouragement of youth involvement and youth participation in different areas of society. Involvement is a first step towards participation. Nevertheless, being involved does not mean youths have a voice (Cornwall 2008, 278). When there is space for young people to speak freely and obtain influence, that is when genuine participation starts. This can only be achieved when there is good governance[2] that allows

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[2] Our understanding of good governance is based on the definition of Mr. Y. K. Sheng (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) (Sheng n.d., 1).

participation in the political and social environment (Ahmed and Ahmed 2002, 5). Whereas youths are often encouraged to participate, they are offered limited chances to do so (Clark 2008). Hence, involvement and participation stimulate youth development and responsibility towards their community. By providing a youth empowerment platform, adolescents will first go through a personal development, before they develop responsibility towards others and finally they will obtain leadership skills. Therefore we will now elaborate on the concepts of participation and transformative leadership. In this part and in our empirical chapters, we will further show how youths can be a bridge between policy and practical action.

Participation and Transformative Leadership

The youth is often left out from national policies, even though they have the right to be involved (United Nations 2010, 42). Adolescences are subject of policies and part of processes of social change. Whereas they have to deal with inequality, poverty and lack of education and employment, they are often not enabled to foster change (Clark 2008). Participation is one of the leading principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right of young people to participate in institutions and decision-making processes that affect their lives is stated in diverse UN agreements (United Nations Youth 2012, 2). In 1985 the UN General Assembly introduced the International Youth Year, promoting participation, development and peace. It was meant to point out the important role of the youth all over the world and their potential to contribute to development. Ten years later the United Nations started the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY). The 58/133 resolution of the Assembly states again the importance of full participation of youths and youth organisations at all levels (United Nations 2010, 42).

Participation is a complex concept and the definitions and perceptions of the concept of participation vary. Therefore it is important to discuss the aspects of participation that are relevant for our research. We will distinguish different forms of participation. Loncle and Moniglia (2008) specifically focus on youth participation, as they describe different forms of participation. The two main types are political participation, and social and civic participation. We will elaborate on these two main types, as we consider them most relevant for our research.

Firstly, institutional participation encompasses participation in decision-making and encouragement of youth leadership. Therefore, youth empowerment is mainly stimulated from the organisational level, by the government and institutions. Loncle and Moniglia use the term political participation, which they define as "…the focus on citizens' engagement in political processes within nation-states and the relationship between citizens and the political system…" (Loncle and Moniglia 2008, 12). However, we will transcend this by looking at the relationship

between young citizens and both governmental and non-governmental institutions. Non-governmental institutions play an important role in youth empowerment. In the case of Bangladesh certain NGOs take up the responsibilities of the state institutions regarding youth involvement. It would be a loss of information if we would exclude these institutions by focussing solely on political participation. Nonetheless, when the concept of political participation is contextually relevant or specifically named by an author, we will consider it part of institutional participation.

Secondly, social participation contains the stimulation of social activism, active citizenship, community-based changes and development of individuals. In social participation youth themselves are the most important factor in establishing youth empowerment (Loncle and Moniglia 2008, 13).

Both institutional and social participation are most effectively addressed by transformative empowerment. Constanza-Chock (2012) points out that a transformative mind-set requires motivation, idealised influence, cooperation and intellectual stimulation. Idealised influence relies on the confidence that one can affect change from a leadership position. The cooperative factor contains the ability to identify the needed change in society and anticipate on this in cooperation with the people that are part of that society. When related to the youth, Costanza-Chock states that young people have the creativity, motivation and flexibility to adapt to the changing needs of society and execute the change with commitment (Costanza-Chock 2012, 6). Baric et al. (2009) talks about transformative empowerment as a way of empowering young people in a way that it enables them to make substantive contributions to their livelihoods and in which the empowerment activities contain structured activities of self-reflection. Additionally, Baric et al. states that:

> *"...Adults are more likely to develop into leaders based on the traits and abilities of the leader; whereas youth leaders emerge in community-based organizations through the process of identifying with, and dedicating themselves to, the community in which they participate"* (Baric et al. 2009, 12).

In this light, we consider that the concepts of transformative youth empowerment and leadership integrate empowerment and reflection on one's role and position in society and the social relations within this society. In this way young people can expand their empowerment to their communities.

By promoting youths' involvement in communities and political spheres and emphasising the development of young people's knowledge, skills, and abilities to be experts on issues of importance to them, it will be possible for the youth to catalyse systemic change in collaboration with their peers and supportive adults (Costanza-Chock 2012, 4-5). It is important to note here that this is an utopian model of the course of events. As stated before, many steps are to be taken and challenges faced before young people can affect change significantly.

Transformative leadership is strongly connected to the concept of youth-led community organizing (YLCO). As stated by Robertson (2009) youth-led community organizing entails the way young people have power to define their own circumstances and the way of interference in policy making and implementation (Robertson 2009, 2). Additionally, Ho, Clarke and Dougherty (2015) have constructed a framework for youth-led social change. This framework shows how youth participation can enforce social change on all topics (e.g. gender-inequality, education, healthcare, etc.) by a variety of methods of youth engagement. Education, volunteering, employment, activism and organisational engagement are considered to be the key methods of youth empowerment.

We have discussed how the concept youth participation and involvement can empower the youth to play a more active role in the society and take upon a transformative role that allows them to advocate for change in a way that is different from the historically embedded political trend. In order to do so, youths need to learn about the content of the issues in their society and become more aware of these processes. Therefore we will continue with elaborating on the role of education in social change.

Education as a tool for Social Change

Education is not the only useful tool that can be used in the pursuit of social change and sustainable development (UNRSD 2011). However, it is a very important one for young people and this is why we pay particular attention to this instrument. Education, like sustainability, is aimed at the long-term improvement of people's lives (Shohel and Howes 2006, 1). It is an integral part of access to political life and participation, because it increases the individual's competence to participate in and construct a socially sustainable life. Education relates sustainability to empowerment and can bring about change by transforming personal thoughts and attitudes that will lead to a more socially sustainable society (Sharma and Monteiro 2016, 72).

There are two main types of education, formal and non-formal education. The formal education paradigm entails the official education system that is implemented by the state

(Shohel and Howes 2006, 2). This focus conflicts with the objectives of sustainable development (Shohel and Howes 2006, 1). Non-formal education, however, encompasses all kinds of practical skills that can be applied in real, learnt through informal educative activities organised by non-state actors, such as independent organisations and NGOs (Shohel and Howes 2006, 1). When the regular, official education system lacks quality, other – non-state – institutions can offer educational activities and opportunities. As a result of its effectiveness, non-formal education can exert pressure on the wider (formal) education system to transform into a more practical and sustainable system (Shohel and Howes 2006, 2).

So far, we have discussed broad concepts and processes of sustainable development, social sustainability and social change. Apart from that, we have elaborated more specifically on how participation can provide youth with experiences and skills that enable them to participate in social change. In this way youth can be a bridge between policy-making and effective implementation through transformative leadership. This is of course of especial relevance in a globalised world in which changes take place at a very fast rate and in which emerging economies often deal with high percentages of youth population. We therefore now turn to our case study of Bangladesh and will consider the above mentioned theories and models for that specific context.

Part II   Context
Imre van Kraalingen

Along with global developments, contemporary Bangladesh deals with processes of social change as well. In this context, Bangladesh is becoming more actively involved with the SDGs, encouraged by the international community. We will elaborate on this further on. Influenced by globalisation, there are developments of westernisation, democratisation, growing capitalism and consumerism on the national level (Khan 2013, 266-268). These developments have influence on the culture and society of Bangladesh. Social change is an ongoing process, and has always taken place in Bangladesh. However, in the context of globalisation and the developments that come along with globalisation, the processes of social change are fastened and strengthened. Social inequalities, unemployment and lack of education increase social activism and grassroots movements. When the government fails to meet the demands of the civil society, it will activate people to take action (Khan 2013, 272-275). During our field work we met two people at ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) who described the situation in Bangladesh in a striking way. One of them Ohmil, is an employee at AAB and the other, Ciaem, is a participant and volunteer. We have found their descriptions congruent with the portrayals of other informants, therefore we considered it of additional value for the construction of the context of our fieldwork environment. As Ohmil put it to words:

> *"There is a lack of infrastructure and social services. The country is dealing with an innumerable amount of social issues, under which: corruption, child marriage, child labour, a failing education system, inequality and unemployment. The government needs to invest in human capital to meet the needs of the Bangladeshi youth and develop their potential. This will make it possible for Bangladesh to benefit from the demographic advantages of the big young population."*

Expanded industrialisation and modernisation lead to changing power relations and acculturation, with cultural integration as inevitable outcome. Ahmed and Ahmed (2002) write about the cultural dimension of Bangladesh:

> *"Bangladesh has a rich foundation of a multi-dimensional culture. Sustainable development is not possible unless it is firmly anchored on national identity and heritage-based cultural dynamics."* (Ahmed and Ahmed 2002, 10).

The processes of social change are culturally embedded in the Bangladeshi society (Ahmed and Ahmed 2002). This is in accordance to the statement of Kochanek (2000, 547), who states that the problem lays in the political history, where political authority was highly dominated by the Bangladeshi elite. Kochanek points out the corruption and lawlessness of the government, and therefore argues against the statement that Bangladesh is an emerging democracy and that the government of Bangladesh is fragile[3] (Kochanek 2000, 454). Today, there is a frail normative adherence that causes unstable social relations and practices (Khan 2013, 273). Poverty is prevalent in Bangladesh and social inequalities remain strong. Hence, there is a lack of education and employment for the Bangladeshi youth, which covers broadly one third of the total population (Rahman 2008, 2-3).

Ciaem explained to us that the government in Bangladesh is dominated by two main political parties: BNP and Awmi League. This division of two elite groups is historically embedded in the Bangladeshi politics and society. He said that these two parties alter one another every 5 years with the national elections. Therefore, the party that has the power thinks about short term developments, because it is only beneficial for the 5 years that they are in charge. Hence, the government lacks the long term goals that are needed for sustainable developments.

Bangladesh is facing many social issues that have to be overcome when striving for social sustainability. Many of our informants pointed out important issues. We will go deeper into them based on the prominent explanations of two participants, Ahel and Sid and two institutional employees, Shema and Mahella. The biggest challenge in the Bangladeshi society is the inequality that is present in every sector. First of all there is inequality in employment opportunities. As Sid described: "*Good job opportunities are scarce and frequently the jobs are given to family members of employees or high-status youths that buy themselves in*". This means that low-status youths rely way more on their own CV and networking to get themselves practical work experience or job opportunities. Often they turn to voluntary work. Secondly, there is inequality in education. We talked with Mahella about this issues. She argued that differences between Madrasah, Bangla-medium and English-medium education lead to discrimination when it comes to access to education and the subjects that are available. In addition she said: "*Gender inequality maintain differences in social opportunities and rights for men and women.*" As we heard more about this in the course of weeks, we found that gender

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[3] We here use the definition of a fragile state as developed by Khan (2013).

inequality is probably the biggest inequality factor in Bangladesh. Mahella continued by telling us that women go less often outside, they are less often accepted at colleges or universities, they face issues when it comes to being acknowledged as intellectual and active actors in society. Besides this, gender inequality also leads to exclusion of transgender people and leaves them without rights or support from either the public or the private sphere. Shema added the issue of child marriage to Mahella's story. Bangladesh is currently on the 4th place globally (Human Rights Watch 2015). Shema explained that it is not common to talk about sexual and reproductive subjects in Bangladesh, neither in education nor within family spheres. She concluded the conversation by stating that the lack of information causes confusion and is a big factor when it comes to early pregnancies and sexual diseases. Young people can play an important role in building a society where an equal and inclusive social environment can sustain, by raising their voice and increase awareness on addressing and improving these social issues.

Thus far, there has been a rising number of young people who participate in societal and community development projects. Dhaka has one of the largest NGO communities that fill gaps that exist as result of the lack of government accountability (Islam and Morgan 2012, 371). When it comes to youth participation, there are a couple of institutions committed to improve the position of youngsters in Bangladesh, for example ActionAid, Bangladesh Youth Empowerment Society (BYES), International Youth Council (IYC) and the United Nations Volunteers (UNV). Hence, young people are slowly becoming more involved with the work of these institutions, but this involves only few youths. Opportunities for Bangladeshi youths in participating in decision-making and implementation of social action programs are connected to personal development and community development. First of all, the youth will have the chance to develop their own skills, mainly through improvement of education, as we elaborated on in the theoretical framework. They will get education which will provide them with understanding of the matters they are interested in (Shohel and Howes 2006). Secondly, they will gain the ability to put these new understandings and experiences into practice and actively strive for change in their community and on national level (Freeburg 2004, 41).

The challenge for youths lays in, as we stated in the theoretical framework, demanding their right to be involved and participate in decision- making processes and to influence decisions that are relevant to their lives (United Nations 2010, 42). The ongoing sustainable development, as discussed in the theoretical framework, can only be achieved if the youth are welcome to be involved and want to be involved. The motivation, dynamism and energy of Bangladeshi youths make assets that are essential for today's and tomorrow's societies and will

be an ongoing process (Voicu 2011). Reinforced by developments and initiatives for youth empowerment in the international community, e.g. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and empowerment programs, more and more organisational bodies realise the need to support youth empowerment (The British Council 2015). Besides, there has been an increasing call for guidance and action from Bangladeshi youths, leading to a rise of social action projects and upcoming attention for youngsters (ActionAid 2014, 3). The UN post-15 agenda, pays attention to sustainable development processes. One of the focus points of the post-15 agenda is involving youth in addressing the problems. Based on this agenda, Bangladesh stated its own post-15 sustainable development goals (SDGs), concerning social inequalities, unemployment, ensuring good governance and education (The British Council 2015, 1, 6).

Young people are a key challenge for governance in Bangladesh. Whereas the country can benefit from this demographic advantage of young human capital, youths are rather seen as ignorant and incapable of mature participation in political, economic or social matters. There is a call for inclusion of young people's views and opinions. Empowerment allows young people to become conscious about their lives and social issues that concern them, this understanding is a result from empowerment activities. Young people are becoming catalysts of social change as their involvement and participation increases.

Driven by international attention for processes of social change, there has been an increasing number of institutions and social identities that try to answer the call for action of young people in Bangladesh. However, so far this only includes a small group of young people. Youths ask for a stronger participatory role and more opportunities to develop themselves and improve social circumstances. We believe an anthropological understanding can contribute to future developments. For this reason we consider our research of crucial importance. Now that we have provided a theoretical and contextual background for social sustainability, social change and youth empowerment, we will turn to the presentation of our empirical data where we will look at our own findings regarding these themes.

Part III   Institutional Participation: Youth Empowerment in Dhaka

Imre van Kraalingen

During my first week in Gulshan, the political and upper-class district of Dhaka, the first organisation I visited was ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB). AAB also came to be the organisation I worked with most during my fieldwork. As an unexperienced anthropological researcher, with little knowledge about the country and culture, I could not have wished for a more comforting welcome. I was received by Shema, a middle-aged woman in wine red traditional Bangladeshi clothing Shema first offered me tea or coffee, then acquainted me with all the colleagues at the fifth floor of the office building of AAB and immediately after gave me a shower of information about the work of AAB regarding my research topic.

> *"Side by side, the international development agenda and international bodies like United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) are emphasising on the youth empowerment and trying to place the young people in the centre of development activities. This is how the chain is changing. The coordination between the stakeholders who do need young people, the universities, the social organisations and the governments, they should come together to ensure well-shaped leadership for the future."*

Shema started by introducing the newly acknowledged role of youth in the general development agenda, she continued by informing me that this was not yet the case in Bangladesh. As she further explained, the extent of exclusion, need of law enforcement, political culture and lack of education in Bangladesh, create a milieu in which there is an unequal division of opportunities, an unequal availability of services and an environment in which youths are not acknowledged as fully fledged participants in the Bangladeshi society. An overall unawareness of lawful rights and social issues made it harder for young people to raise their voices. Therefore, the youths I have spoken to are searching for alternatives to be heard and to be involved, in youth empowerment institutions such as NGOs like AAB and other grassroots movements. As an international NGO, AAB initiated a counterstrategy that offers institutional empowerment and participation and that encourages a leadership role of both the urban and the rural youth. AAB now tries to take youth engagement forward in the process of striving for transformative change.

This chapter will give insight in the way institutions empower youths through institutional participation. As I will argue in this chapter, institutional participation is one way for the youth to get a chance to develop their potential and the capacity to speak up and strive for change. Furthermore, I will discuss youth empowerment strategies, the relation between youth and institutions and I will provide space for youths' voices and show their goals and motives to participate in youth empowerment activities. Finally, I will elaborate on empowerment and youth leadership.

Chapter 1   Constructing Youth Empowerment

Right after my meeting with Shema, I was sent forward to Global Platform (GP), a partner organisation of AAB that was also based in Gulshan. Fortunately, Nathalie and I resided in Gulshan during our fieldwork, which clearly was convenient since this is where most of the foreign embassies and NGOs are as well. At GP I met Yuna, a 28 year old woman who was part of the first generation of youths that took part in youth empowerment programmes of GP and AAB. Yuna is now employed at GP. She explained to me how new the concept of youth empowerment is in Bangladesh.

> *"The process of youth empowerment is only in a beginning phase. Young people feel connected to what is happening in their society, but their potential is only recently acknowledged".*

As Yuna put it, a rising number of NGOs settled in Bangladesh, and in Dhaka especially, attracted by the high amount of social, political and economic problems. These NGOs are driven by the international Human Rights statements and MDGs, which are currently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With the acknowledgement of the United Nations (UN) of the importance of youth participation, NGOs brought along this concept to Bangladesh. In accordance to what Shema told me, Yuna emphasised that youth empowerment is now a well-conceived notion in the international community, but it is not yet accepted by the government of Bangladesh. With support of the international community, diverse organisations are trying to increase the attention for youth empowerment. She further explained that institutions working with youth are mainly NGOs and youth groups or youth-led organisations. Though, there are some individual initiatives as well. For instance, Yuna told me about the Dutch

Ambassador who put a shadow position for youths available to bridge disconnection between the youth and the political sphere. The shadow position entails taking upon an (semi) ambassador role for a couple of days, with guidance of the real ambassador and the embassy team. This is very interesting a way to involve young people.

A couple of days later I attended a youth summit at one of the universities of Dhaka. At the summit I met with Lamye and Khed. Khed is 38 years old and co-founder and manager of one of the youth leadership centres I visited that offers projects and skill development workshops for youths. From an institutional perspective, he presented youth participation and empowerment as making young people aware of the rights and opportunities they should have and making them understand the problems that are present in their communities. Raising the awareness of people about societal issues is an important aspect of youth empowerment. Besides this, institutional participation offers the opportunity to work on personal skill development and get practical experience. In addition, he highlighted that institutions construct youth empowerment by creating a uniting platform where youth can work together, communicate and build bridges to reach social change. Institutional youth empowerment is important, because there is a lack of attention and opportunities for young people in Dhaka, Bangladesh. I found Khed's elucidations corresponding with the perspectives of the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Centre (BYLC), AAB and GP.

Lamye is only 24 and was first a participant, then intern and now one of Khed's colleagues. She comes from a rural village in the North of Bangladesh and came in contact with the leadership centre during a school trip to Dhaka. This is the way she explained youth empowerment to me: *"Youth empowerment enables young people to gain more power over their lives and it allows them to play an active role in their communities."* In this way young people are offered a chance to gain a greater awareness of rights, leadership, communication and deepen their understanding of social issues. In short, youth empowerment is constructed through offering and supporting education, training, employment, self-entrepreneurship and information development.

In my attempts to get an understanding of the local perceptions of youth empowerment I gained a wide range of definitions. The definitions ascribed by institutions would focus on developing critical consciousness and gaining deeper understanding of social issues. A definition I found appealing was given by Jizamul, a 51 year old man who had been manager of a development organisation for many years and now led youth workshops on voluntary basis.

"Youth empowerment entails the direct engagement in transforming conditions that influence society, and can lead to an increase of awareness and the confidence of having power over one's life. Stimulating this critical consciousness of young people gives them understanding of underlying causes of problems and provides them with tools for social action to strive for change."

Youths, on the other hand, tend to draw attention to 'being heard and listened to' and practical change in their communities. Their definition of youth empowerment contains the ability to speak up on issues affecting them and their communities is an important asset for young people in Bangladesh, as was said to me by a couple of my young informants. From both sides there is attention for skill development and gaining power over one's life. However, young people need to be aware of the rights and opportunities they should have in order to be able to speak up. During a training on the Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) at GP, Amondi, a young participant of 21 years old, said the following: *'We are not aware of our rights, therefore we have no backbone to raise our voice…'* In my opinion, this explained the essence of the importance of Human Rights for social change. Youth empowerment informs young people on the legal rights and human rights, which gives them more ground to confront government authorities with a claim on these rights. In the next part I will elaborate on the HRBA as one of the strategies of implementing youth empowerment, as well as I will discuss other institutional strategies.

Chapter 2   Strategies of Youth Empowerment

During the same HRBA training I attended a workshop of Ceili, one of the trainers at GP. The workshop was held at the office of Global Platform. There were around 22 participants, young men and women with ages roughly between 17 and 24 years old and dressed in the most colourful clothing. The training room looked similar to a classroom: there were several round tables around which the participants were seated. Ceili was standing in front of the participants, next to a whiteboard that was covered with Bangla notes. There were posters hanging on the walls that contained schedules of the training and policy procedures of development projects. Later on I was told this is to help the participants memorise the action plans they learn. Ceili opened his workshop:

"The theory of change starts with a vision, your vision. Ask yourself: what do I want to change? We believe change of societal issues can be achieved through purposeful individual and collective action, led by active agency of young people and supported by campaigning for credible rights".

Enlightening us more about the HRBA, Ceili explained that this approach aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality of education and promote lifelong learning opportunities, achieve gender equality, ensure healthy lives and a healthy living environment, ensure social services and availability of basic facilities (e.g. sanitation, etc.). After a discussion on Human rights, I talked with Ceili and Yman, his assistant trainer and a project manager, about the wide variety of youth empowerment activities. As Ceili put it to words:

"Institutions offer a wide range of youth empowerment activities that can be categorised under common activities such as providing trainings, workshops, (interactive) seminars, group discussions, field trips and encouraging and guiding individual community projects."

They further explained to me that these activities address all kinds of development issues regarding poverty, inequality, human rights, climate change, etc. In this way, young people do not just develop vocational, writing and other practical skills, the learning process raises their awareness and knowledge on social issues and encourages them to think further than the concepts and search for underlying causes.

To obtain a participant perspective on institutional strategies, I met with Djaba and Mohrin, two participants who are early in their 20s and are already participating with AAB for more almost three years. Djaba comes from a small town outside Dhaka and heard about AAB on her local school. She wanted to develop herself and decided to apply for one of the workshops. Mohrin grew up in Dhaka. His mother participated in development work and she motivated him to get involved with an NGO to get more awareness and knowledge of social issues. I spoke with them about the challenges mentioned above. Djaba and Mohrin pointed out another challenge for institutions.

"It is important to keep the youth as central actor of development work and keep them involved in the work of institutions and in the fieldwork. It is easy for organisations to

empower the young people and then let them go their own way. But post-training
guidance is as important as the training itself."

They did admit that organisations have their mandates and standard project models that they cannot randomly deviate from. However, from their perspective every situation and issue should be addressed individually to be able to adapt an effective and efficient program for youths.

During another encounter with Shema, whom I had met early on in my research, I spoke with her about the situation regarding the relation between the government and NGOs.

"Dhaka has one of the biggest NGO communities worldwide. They take upon a big part
of societal responsibilities, where there is a lack of government accountability and good
governance, supporting citizen participation, social security and social equality."

As Shema further stated, NGOs provide a big part of health services, counselling, sanitation and education services, along with water management and micro-finance. Most of the organisations that are focusing on youth and youth empowerment are grassroots organisations. These organisations carry out a wide range of activities, like the making and implementing of policies and projects, providing micro-finances and identifying target groups. *"Institutions provide a uniting platform for young people. These platforms, like AAB, give youth the chance to raise their voice and share their opinions in discussion on social issues".*

As I have spoken to different youth empowerment organisations in the course of the weeks, I learnt that every organisation builds their approach on their particular strategy. However, there are common strategies when it comes to implementing youth empowerment. First of all, institutions provide an uniting platform for young people to participate in. Global Platform and BYLC are two main organisations that developed broad platforms. They use narrative processes to facilitate group discussions for youth groups from different backgrounds. The youths are left to take charge of discussions on several social issues in their community. These platforms allow young people to raise their voice, build on their opinions and share ideas. It also helps them to establish new relationships. Secondly, institutions work on capacity building and skill development of participants. Through a wide range of activities they give young people confidence and abilities to build further on their goals. Thirdly, institutions stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship. I have found that especially UNV, UNDP and BYES are active on this subject. Entrepreneurship is an important aspect, it allows young people to

start their own initiatives and businesses. Regarding the high unemployment rates, this is an essential aspect of creating opportunities for young people. Fourthly, institutions do a lot of networking and campaigning. Through campaigning they hope to support the youth in getting more acknowledgment, attention and response. Young people face problems with getting recognition and the support and advocacy of institutions give them a stronger voice. Finally, the Human Rights Based Approach is an important base strategy. Especially AAB is highly focused on this approach. The HRBA makes young people aware of the rights they have. Knowledge about Human Rights gives them a backbone to address government authorities about access to public and social services. Ceili summarised the approach of youth empowerment institutions as following: *"Institutions build bridges for the youth by capacity building and offering communicative and cooperative platforms to strive for social change"*.

To come back to the subject of the development agenda that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, let us consider the strategy of institutions regarding role of youth in the future agenda. I returned to Shema to hear more about the discussion around the post-15 agenda and the SDGs, looking at the geographical location and demographic statistics of Bangladesh. I met her at a café, because she wanted to leave the office in her lunch break. We ordered *fuchka,* popular local street food, and sat down at a table. Fortunately, this time around I had my recorder, because as always she started off a passionate monologue.

> *"For the new agenda of AAB the role of youth is an important matter. We knew that the big chunk of the population is now youth, not only in Bangladesh, but also worldwide. The development practitioners have found and realised that the youth is the centre of development. Therefore there is a repeated demand from the international community to let the youth be change agents, since they will be leading in the next 15 years. So the development agendas that we have fixed for the next 15 years until 2030 at the end of the SDGs, will state that young people are the most important actors in terms of brining change. That is why we are now investing in intellectual and practical development of the youth, through youth empowerment programmes."*

As my awareness of societal issues grew and I gained more understanding of the way institutions approach youth empowerment, I felt like I needed to understand matters from the perspectives of youth participants. By listening to their stories I would acknowledge their voice and get a more complete picture of youth empowerment.

"My motives and goals are to make people love the world. If they love the world they will actually do something and the outcome will be better. I want to inspire people and raise their awareness on real problems, in that way we can find a solution together"

This was said by Ramesh, during an interview I had with him in a lounge café in Gulshan. Ramesh is a very kind and open young man, but a little shy, mainly because he is very insecure about his English. Normally my interviews were not very structured and I always tried to go with the flow. However, Ramesh preferred to go through my questions one by one. Apart from this, he was very eager to share his stories and not afraid to ask personal questions back. Ramesh lives in a small village close to Tangrail. At an age of 13 he helped building an orphanage in Tangrail and ever since he has been involved in diverse voluntary jobs. He never got a chance to continue studying when he left his local school, until he was invited to join trainings at GP. A team of GP visited the region of Tangrail promoting their projects and he felt immediately triggered. At GP he learnt about Human Rights, gender inequality and other social issues. This motivated him to take his newly derived skills and knowledge home and share it with his community.

"But, I knew I had to change my family first. There is too much stuff, too many problems in most families. It's partly religion. My mother did not have a good situation, but I tried to tell her she deserves to follow her heart and it is not fair if she has to be at home all day. After that I also tried to show my sister what more freedom could mean for her."

The young participants I have spoken to during my fieldwork period generally shared the same goals, motives and ideas about youth empowerment. Most of the young people were very eager to speak to me, because it gave them another opportunity to speak up and share their stories. There are four participants with whom I built up a close relationship: Ayad and Tashima from GP, Hiriram from AAB and Ruchira from BYLC. They translated Bangla to English for me during trainings and workshops and they gave me a lot of in-depth information on youth empowerment. They named three main challenges for young people. First of all, there is a huge gap in employment opportunities. Hence, unemployment is very much present. Young people have a lack of information and knowledge that give access to workplaces. Secondly, Bangladeshi youths face political exclusion. There is no political mobility or involvement in

decision-making processes and the non-compliant nature of the political discourse reduces the chances of youth to play a proactive role in the development discourse. This reflects on the society where there is also little space for youth voices. Thirdly, there is a lack of cooperation between youth groups, caused by a lack of sufficient tools and efficient strategies of supporting institutions. Small youth groups are easy to neglect. Therefore it is important for groups to bundle their power and knowledge. As mentioned before, the lack of education results in an inability to address these challenges. Empowering platforms help young people to build networks and fight their lack of recognition. They learn to lobby, campaign and advocate to challenge their position in society. As argued in the theoretical framework, another challenge for youths is to know their rights in order to be able to claim them. The awareness of social issues in the Bangladeshi society motivates the youth to strive for change. Nathalie will further elaborate more on the goals and motivations of youths. Now that I have discussed the main challenges of youths I will turn to elaborate on the relationship between participants and institutions.

I have encountered that, although the overall relation seems to be good, there is also criticism towards the institutions. Overall, my participants were very grateful and told me the institutions offer them opportunities to grow. The institutions I have visited offer a diverse range of activities and their approach is interactive. This is something the education system lacks. Additionally, through participation institutions merge young people from different backgrounds, this gives them the opportunity to share views and experiences. Nonetheless, there is critique regarding the institutions as well. As I had more in-depth conversations and interviews, I spoke to youths that felt there are gaps in the programs and projects of institutions. Some of them pointed out that they miss a specific aim. More specifically, institutions can focus too much on fulfilling a procedure and as a result stop a project when the procedure ends. They say that is a waste, because there are more people that can benefit from it and they can find volunteers that want to carry on the projects. Another point of critique is that, even though there are practical activities included, the youth is eager to go into the field.

Besides asking the youth about their opinion on the empowerment programs of institutions, I also talked about this with employees. I got intrigued by the words of Shema. She told me her perspective on the qualities of AAB and the things that could be improved according to her. However, she ended her response with explaining how she sees the work approach of AAB as a mutual learning process between the institution and the youth:

> *"ActionAid Bangladesh is very much willing to hear the youth… what they want, how they react on social issues, how they would work in a community or in a public space. This point AAB does address in different ways I would say. Through Global Platform we do capacity building, that's the innovative way of training the young people. Yet, we do encourage and we do make it as a part of the training that the young people will go back home and implement the learnings that they derived. Once the young people have the knowledge, then they share and express their needs and opinions and how they want to learn and work in the field. At that point we can listen to their voices and learn from them as well."*

Thus far, I have explored the concept of youth empowerment and youth empowerment strategies of institutions. I have discussed both institutional perspectives and the perspectives of the young participants to whom I have spoken. I will now move on to explain how young people are empowered to take a pro-active, leading role in striving for change in their communities.

Chapter 4   Empowered to Take the Lead

'If they force women to shut their mouth, it means that they have seen their potential', said Himan, who was also translating for me during this meeting of youth Activista, a local youth group network on which Nathalie will elaborate more. The meeting took place on the floor of a local school building. The floor was covered with mats and for the rest the room was empty. There were three employees from ActionAid, two local project managers and several young Activista's present. I asked Nisha, a girl who was sitting next to me, about the difficulties she faces as youth agent for social change. She answered my question eagerly:

> *"My biggest concern is my family. They don't support me. I am a girl, I should not raise my voice in the public space. But I don't want to surrender to those fixed gender roles. I want the next generation to have better opportunities.*

I nodded my head in agreement and asked her what made her decide to join the Activista.

"I did not grow up in a slum, but I lived close to one. ActionAid ran a project in my community. They made me aware of things that are happening there… really sad things… there is a lot of child labour, sexual abuse and child marriage. Something needs to change. I just want to contribute to this change…"

Nisha is only 17 years old. I have a lot of respect for the motivation and determination of my informants to take the lead in development work without support of their families, while facing many other challenges as well.

Along with the international developments described earlier on by Shema, in Bangladesh there has been a growing realisation that there is need for young people to take upon leadership roles in the development discourse. As the example above shows, young people are willing to fill these positions. During one of my visits at BYLC, I met Daisy. Daisy is 28 years old, a beautiful young woman and employee at BYLC. She is one of the most cheerful people I have met and she has the ability to motivate someone within just one or two sentences. Daisy took part in the trainings of BYLC herself and stayed at the organisation ever since. Daisy elaborated on the role of NGOs in youth leadership empowerment. She said to me that NGOs have been campaigning for involvement of young people in leadership positions which led to increase of attention for young people from the civil society. Yet again, this only concerns a small group of young people so far.

Sid, a trainer of the BBLT, stated that the civil society has to emphasise the importance of securing the young people's genuine participation and ownership in the process of transforming oppressive (political) environments. As Sid said: *"If we want developments to sustain, this cannot be enhanced without focusing on youth".* He argued that change needs to come from the society and that to make developments sustainable, a long term vision needs to be created. Therefore, people need to have commitment towards integrating long term and sustainable initiatives. According to Sid, institutional participation, containing empowerment and leadership projects, is necessary to build on the capacity and mentality of the youth and make them participate in these issues. From the participants' perspectives, the youths to whom I have spoken want to set an example different from the leadership roles they see in the current society. During the institutional empowerment process they gained the confidence that they can play a leading role in building a society where an equal and inclusive social environment can sustain, by raising their voice and increase awareness on addressing and improving these social issues.

One day at GP Ceili said that young people can make *'the real change at the root level of the country'*. During the Young Feminist Leadership Training that day, Farha, a volunteer trainer and old participant, raised a topic on the difficulties and resistance young people face from their community and their family. This is particularly the case for young women, they are influenced by strict gender roles and they have to deal with restrictions on going outside and the activities they perform. To illustrate this, Farha told me about her experiences.

> *"This experience changed my entire life. I'm not changing the world, but I am trying to change it a little bit. I am telling my mother about feminism and I am teaching my young sisters about it too. My father was always pretty conservative, but I am trying to explain to him that I am not doing anything wrong by going outside in the evening or having male friends. Sure, the neighbourhood and family talk about me and confront my parents with it. But I always tell them that I am not lying. I tell them I am who I am and I want to participate in this world. I tell them what I am doing and show them pictures. When I stay out late for work, I think that is okay."*

Farha explained that transforming the minds of her family is already a slow process with a lot of resistance. She told me that she realises that one cannot just change the mind-set of a whole society. *"However, we are taking small steps and I believe they do make a difference. I do think I am leading my family in a process of change. From there, more changes can follow."*

Transformative leadership requires a strong interaction between the leader and the community by listening to and cooperating with them. According to my informants from the BYLC in order for leaders to be transformative they need to have a mind-set that focusses on long-term, sustainable changes based on the cores of social problems. One needs to understand what is needed and anticipate on that in an assertive way. Daisy pointed out that understanding as following:

> *"Transformative leadership is seeing and understanding political and societal structures and the situation of people in that society and understanding the impact of societal and political factors on that situation. Therefore, there is need for an open, objective and reflective approach."*

After the office hours I stayed a bit longer at BYLC. I sat down on the covers that were spread out on the floor and drank ordinary Bangladeshi tea with way too much sugar. I asked Daisy to

tell me more about the Building Bridges through Leadership Training (BBLT). She told me that the youth empowerment trainings of BYLC are mainly focussed on youth leadership. At the end of a training period of BBLT, the participants set-up their own projects, that is where the whole training leads to. These local youth-led projects are the ones that have already made small impacts in the communities. Even though these changes can be minor, they are a start for the bottom-up active agency initiatives. I was curious to know more about these youth projects, but Nathalie will discuss them more broadly.

One day, when I was visiting one of the starting BBLT sessions, I met with Ahel. Ahel is a young man of 21 years old and a student in social geography. He grew up in the sub-urban area of Dhaka. He got in touch with BYLC via a friend of him who also participated in the BBLT. During a discussion on leadership roles, Ahel rejected the idea of some of the participants that they need to hold a political position in order to be a leader. In contrast, Ahel emphasised this to the youth:

> *"You can practice leadership from wherever you are and from whatever position you are in. No matter what you do, you can take upon a leadership role and set an example in advocating for change, whether it is for your family, your friends, your community or for a stranger."*

After I spoke with Ahel, I talked with several youths that are active in youth-led projects and the BBLT, and I learnt more about their opinion on leadership in Bangladesh regarding the higher layers. My participants from BYLC expressed the need for leadership from leaders who understand the local context and listen to young people's voices. Ruchira emphasised that *"current mentalities are exclusive instead of inclusive when it comes to youths".* She told me that youths get few opportunities in the employment sector and in social entrepreneurship, and the education system is not sufficient. As Ruchira continued:

> *"This is why youth empowerment institutions, like BYLC, are important. They play an important role in involving and educating the youths. Through our leadership trainings we hope to give them a reflective mind-set that is different from that of the government."*

She ended our conversation by expressing her faith in the young people: *"We believe the youth can make a change if they learn different ways of performing leadership and make a fundamental contribution to their community".*

In this chapter I have tried to give more insight in the concepts of institutional participation and youth empowerment. In final accounting, institutional youth empowerment is meant to motivate and encourage young people to develop their skills through capacity building programmes and give them a deeper understanding of social issues in society. Through empowerment, young people can take their knowledge and experience back to their community and carry it out to strive for change in social conditions Hence, youth empowerment and leadership training can be bridges to social participation. In this way, as we will see, they get a chance to play an active role in advocating for social change. This will be set forth in the next chapter.

Part IV   Social Participation of Young Bangladeshi

Nathalie van 't Pad

Chapter 5   Sustainable Change in an 'Unknowing City'

In the midst of the chaos of Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, exists a community of young people who are trying to bring about positive change in their city and country. They are working with NGO's in the city and, more importantly, they are working with each other. They are organising protests, informative plays, they are educating other young people and informing communities of their rights. They are doing all this and more and often feel it is not enough. Nevertheless, mostly they remain optimistic, or as Shamim, a twenty year old who works with a local youth organisation, said:

> "*Sometimes I feel helpless, when I see kids in the street begging, or hear my neighbour talk 'corrupt' talk. Then I feel like, I cannot change all that, my friends cannot do that. But then I remember, they have friends too. Many together can do it, I believe it.*"

Shamim and his friends are working towards a more sustainable world. In their struggle they encounter obstacles and ignorance, but they are also inspiring other young people. More and more youth are joining forces and are organising the change they wish to see. During my time in Dhaka, I have joined these youths in their activities. We conversed about their hopes and dreams for themselves, their city, their country and the world. In the following chapters I will discuss what change they are fighting for and how they are going about doing so.

The Scope of Sustainability

During the many conversations with my research participants, I often asked what they were trying to achieve with their work. Answers varied, Laboni, a girl of only fifteen years from one of the poorest neighbourhoods, spoke to me about her initial wish to achieve an absence of child marriage in her community through her work with the local youth group. As she started working for the local youth group as a member and later as the cultural director, she realised she could do more:

" I think it is very important to focus on youth, especially child marriage and school drop outs also. This is important, but now I have realised that youth have a special place also. If youth change, they can change other youths and they can become bosses and change even more other people. Then change becomes something that will stay, it won't just be short-term."

Fariha is a member of Activista, a youth group network that is connected to, but independent of ActionAid Bangladesh. I will elaborate on the activities and characteristics of youth platforms in the next chapter. Fariha also works for a youth organisation that focusses on education. The twenty year old told me about her goals in a more abstract way then Laboni, viewing them more as dreams, like many other informants. She described her aims as *"… making sure youths voices are heard, not silenced. Because we have something to say and it is about how we can make this world more sustainable."* Even though their focus often differed, many of my informants responded to my question with an answer involving the notion of sustainability. Most first got started in the process of change when they got involved with NGO's and other institutions in one way or another. These experiences and the people they met, inspired them to do more, to stay involved. Some of them chose to set up their own projects, or join other youths in theirs. Over the course of my research, I got to know a young man that had recently started his own organisation, Nazir became an important informant. As a twenty-two year old without any official schooling after the age of fifteen, and with almost no resources to fall back on, he was able to set up an organisation that educates children and their parents on the importance of schooling and that teaches minorities about their rights. When I first met him, he told me how he first got the idea to start this organisation:

"Two years ago I did a training at British Council here in Dhaka together with a friend, a volunteer. The training was about the importance of community and discussion. It was about how important it is to think about local solutions, and to discuss innovative ways to solve problems in the community. I liked this, but I also thought about my own situation. Because I had to leave school, I never learnt to speak up for myself. I had to learn that I should be heard at this training and thought about the other young people in my neighbourhood, they never went to this training. Who will teach them? So I am doing this now."

He also elaborated on why he thought it should be youth educating other youth, and not institutions:

> "*They* [the institutions] *tell me I have the right to be heard. They tell me I am the future. So I believe them, and I act on my own. I do not need them, that is what they tell me, so I choose not to work with them anymore.*"

This sentiment was repeated by other informants. To them, a project, initiative or organisation completely initiated and run by young people is a sign of ultimate empowerment. Not all participants active within youth organisations were this conscious about their choice to be independent. This is especially the case for youth that join these organisation at a later stage. One of these young people I met, Disha, works for a local youth organisation in Korail, the biggest slum of Dhaka. She first got started because she felt inspired by Jahid, the guy running the organisation.

> "*I talked to [Jahid] first for school. I had to interview him for the school newspaper, just a little talk, because he went to my school. When I came home after this, I was so happy. I told my mother: I also want to do that.*"

Most of my informants got started inspired or persuaded by peers. Some of them start their own projects at some point in the future and to them it is a natural choice for these to be independent. For the ones, like Nazir, that do not have any previous experience with youth organisations, reasons to set up independent organisations vary. Some really do not have a clear reason, apart from the fact that they did not need any help, because they had their own network and resources. Often, the relationship between youth organisations and other organisations is about necessity, they are a means to an end. Because of this, some youth organisations will become independent later, when they have the requisites to do so.

There are a number of trends to be found in my informants notion of sustainability and social sustainability. They view the different aspects of sustainability as one, interconnected whole that forms the process of sustainability. This was nicely expressed by a twenty-one year old named Atif, who I met at a protest against honour killings – sparked by the death of a young girl that week – he noted: "*… everything I want for the world is connected.*" When informants talk about sustainability, they refer to it in the broadest sense of the word. All three dimensions, environmental, economic and social, go hand in hand.

When I met up with Atif after our intial meeting, he told me about his work for a youth organisation that organises interactive plays dealing with social issues. They perform these throughout the city, often in marginalised communities. Atif considers himself to be lucky, because he was born relatively well-off, which means he can study at university. Many are not that lucky and Atif believes it to be his responsibility to help these others, because: "*… we all have to share this country, it is not fair that some have to drive rickshaws day and night. I need to help them, I feel responsible.*" This responsibility participants feel for their country is a common theme in their perception of sustainability. They view sustainability as the logical answer to the responsibility we all share for this planet and its inhabitants. This also manifests itself in the terms my informants use when talking about it. When discussing sustainability, they almost exclusively talked about 'us' and 'we', emphasising their perceived 'sharedness' of this task. I have opted to mirror this discourse throughout some parts of this chapter, to convey the way my informants spoke about these issues.

The goal of my informants is to promote sustainability as a way of living. Fariha described it as something that "*… involves all of our daily lives. Everything we do influences the world around us, we need awareness of that.*" Sustainability thus, is about how we interact with our surroundings. My informants believe that to achieve a truly sustainable world, we need to change our mind-sets to sustainable ones. When attending a training on feminism by ActionAid, I spoke to a group of young people from all over Bangladesh. Their ages ranged from sixteen to twenty, but all of them where from marginalised or poor backgrounds. When discussing the importance of sustainability as a group, they came to the conclusion that sustainability is a mind-set seeing as "*… it is the only way because of the long term effects on the world.*"

One day, Nazir and I discussed the topic of my research. During this conversation he expressed his doubts about what I meant with socially sustainable change. I saw a perfect opportunity and asked him what he thought it to be. He was silent for a moment and then explained:

"*I am not sure, I know what I mean when I say I want the world to be more sustainable. We need to care for everything and everyone on the planet. I never really saw something only social about it. Ofcourse it is social, the work I do is social as well. But that is not what it is about, it is about the entire picture, everything.*"

Because they don't see three separate dimensions, it is difficult for participants to articulate what they think social sustainability entails. After some discussion, many informants were able to name multiple things they considered social about sustainability. A young woman named Barsha, who owns a socially conscious clothing fabrication business, responded the following way:

> "*I think the key is probably that everyone should be equal. That goes for chances in school and finding a job. But also access to certain services. Too much is privately organised, so it becomes about money. That is not fair, it needs to change.*"

Akash, a young man I met during BYLC's leadership training and with whom I spend some time during the later community projects, also identified the importance of equality:

> "*The biggest problem is that many people do not get a chance to be heard. Differences in Bangladesh are so big, that many people will not be able to ask for anything. I think we should respect all voices and learn to love that everyone is different, then everyone can be the same.*"

Socially embedded issues that were mentioned by my informants varied, but were often based on problems they perceived on a daily basis. When we look at the concepts that my informants consider as socially sustainable, a common theme arises, namely one of equality. A socially sustainable society is completely equal. Many of my research participants witness inequality. Confronted with differences, youth are also triggered to think about social sustainability through justice. Reflected in both the sentiments expressed above by Barsha and Akash is a notion of fairness. In order for a society to be equal, it needs to also be just. This importance of justice was not always directly evident in the discourse of my informants. But some, like Sayeed did single it out:

> "*Bangladesh is missing justice. When some people have more opportunities and more connections than others, that is not fair. When only some get to explain their opinions and influence the government, that is not fair.*"

Sayeed is an entrepreneur who set up a tech-company that aims to help rural Bangladeshi to get access to technology. He identified the absence of justice from Bangladeshi society to be an

important drive to become a social entrepreneur. Barsha noted the importance of justice in a different context, she related it to her own personal struggle as a woman entrepreneur:

> *"Justice means everybody counts the same in the eyes of the rest. Justice should be there for criminals, but also for women. There is no justice when women cannot even get a loan at the bank."*

Even when many of my informants did not directly name justice as an important aspect of social sustainability, they did relate the notion of fairness to the idea of equality. They view a society or community as just when everyone has the same chances to be heard. They feel strongly that many marginalised groups and communities exist within society and that they are not able to influence substantial change. For a society to be equal and just, these people need to have a voice, like all members of that society should. By changing minds at a local level, young people are not just trying to spread their ideas, they are also trying to empower local and marginalised communities to engage in social issues. In the next part of this chapter, I will elaborate on these perceived social issues, as well as the improvements my informants envision.

'Changing Our World': Problems and Solutions in Bangladesh

Confrontation with injustice and inequality inspires, and in some cases enrages, my informants to become involved in the fight for change. Poverty and low status equate to limited access to for example education and healthcare. Gender bias is something Bangladeshi women are faced with in their everyday lives. High unemployment levels are not just an economic problem, but also a social one. Youth unemployment is high, and youth experience a disconnect between their education and the job market. Besides this, access to proper education is not evenly distributed due to the commercialisation of education. There is a major divide between the people with English speaking, the Bangla speaking and the Madrassa background within society and this is reflected in the education system. When a social researcher that studies education in Bangladesh explained this situation to me, he posed that the Bengali education system is this way, because "*... Bangla society is missing diversity, inclusiveness and tolerance.*" Diversity should be embraced, to bridge the divides within society. But before change can be made, people need to be aware of the problems and people need to care about solving them.

During a visit to the office of Nazir's youth organisation, I spoke to two youth involved with it. Nazia is a twenty year old who was raised in an upper class family with access to the best education. When she met Nazir at an assembly at her university, she became aware of her

desire to bridge the gap between rich and poor. Tahmid was raised in a very traditional family. His father is a rickshaw driver and therefore the family never had much resources. Tahmid's upbringing caused him to dislike the upper class, but as he got involved in volunteering work, he came to know a more diverse range of people. The two of them told me how happy they are to have realised this need for diversity and connection across cultural and social divides. Nazir expressed a similar desire to enlighten people, by describing how Bangladeshi society seems numb to its inequalities:

> " *Most of the men and women who have to deal with these problems, did not cause the these things to come about. But by now, the challenges are rooted in the society in a way that we have become numb to them. We don't even look up when we are faced with injustice.*"

As young people that do care, my informants feel they need to make other people look up in the face of inequality. They feel they are the right persons to do so, probably "… *because young people are very idealistic*", as Nazir put it. They feel older generations have lost this idealism that is a characteristic of youth and have thus accepted things as they are.

The lack of attention for diversity and inequality is not the only problem youth identify. Many informants see corruption as the root of most important issues and are of the opinion that the eradication of corruption would go a long way in the struggle for a more equal and just society. Unequal power relations and social inequality are sustained through a corrupt system. This complicates the relationship of my participants with their struggle for social change. Because on the one hand they realise that structural change is best achieved through political channels, but they are also very disillusioned with the political system of Bangladesh. I spoke about political ambitions with many and all felt they would never enter politics. This is why many of the young people become involved with NGO's and other institutions. My informants, the most of whom do not choose this last option, believe change can still be achieved through hard work. Saiful, a young man working with children from the poorest neighbourhoods, providing them with free education, expressed these believes well:

> "*Corruption is not going to disappear tomorrow and not next year, maybe not even in my lifetime. That does not mean we cannot fight it. I think we should provide moral education, teach children what is right. School can really form people and if we focus on this sort of teaching, we can form new social rules.*"

Educational reforms are also posed as an important step towards social sustainability by informants. The school system should be geared towards practical skills instead of results. By providing moral education, these youth think corruption and criminality might be more easily combatted. Most importantly, the educational system should be equally inclusive of and accessible for all, which can be achieved through a more open system and a curriculum that does not suit some students more than others.

Another issue, youth unemployment effects most informants directly. Although many are still in school, the high figure of youth unemployment already effects their lives. Certain studies, in particular social studies, are avoided because of poor perspectives. For the ones that are not in school, jobs are scarce, and the jobs that are available often do not offer much of a future. Many youth have opted to start small businesses instead, but feel the government and banks do not support them. Still, a great deal of my informants have shown great resilience. They have become social entrepreneurs that are not only able provide for their own livelihoods, but also help others with their businesses.

In the search for solutions to these problems, my research population view themselves as the appropriate candidates. They see themselves as uniquely positioned to be able to both see the problems in the society, as well as have the drive to take action. For many, their main motivation comes from a sense of responsibility, for their communities and their country.

> *"I decided to get involved to represent the communities and help them make change. They do not have that voice, but I do."* – Fariha

> *"Ever since I did this work, I stopped feeling sorry for the poor. Not because I don't feel their suffering. But my help is not a gift, it is my responsibility."* – Nazia

> *"When Bangladesh was born not so long ago, many people gave their lives for a free country. It is our responsibility to fight for freedom as well."* – Laboni

As previously discussed, sustainability strongly relates to the responsibility my informants feel we all share in caring for this planet and its inhabitants. In that sense, it is a global issue that concerns all. Many of the problems earth is dealing with, are caused by global factors and relationships. Research participants strongly believe that if they and likeminded people convince people in their surroundings, effects can spread throughout the world. But,

sustainability starts at the local level. Local communities are where young people live their everyday lives and where they can influence people most, sustainability starts here. Their focus on local change is also due to the strong connection youth feel with their community. Nazir often described his neighbourhood as his family, when I asked him why he thinks of his community this way, he explained to me that "*… everyone here takes care of each other, we are a team.*" My informants are empowering their communities to find solutions to the issues they are facing, from the community, in service of the community. To raise awareness, they are not just spreading the message, they engage people in the process, so as to actually change minds. The themes of community, representation of the voiceless and my informants' view of sustainability as both all-encompassing and driven by responsibility were the subject of many of our conversations. These ideas are expressed in the activities that my informants engage in. This range of activities is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 6   Social Participation: Activities and Initiatives of the Bangladeshi Youth

The goals, motivations and approach of my informants are clear now, the initiatives to achieve these goals are diverse. While some choose to join international organisations, others decide to start something with no relation to other institutions. They can start their own organisations focussed on specific issues, they can start up or join platforms that serve as a spring boards for all kinds of initiatives, they can even start their own socially sustainable business. This chapter will explore the different youth initiatives in Dhaka.

The types of organisations that my informants engage in, can be broadly structured into three categories. As mentioned, these are youth organisations focused on specific issues, youth platforms and social entrepreneurship. Youth organisations are often very similar to charities or can resemble, albeit on a smaller scale, (inter)national institutions. They mostly focus on one or a few specific issues and are mostly geared to one or a few local communities. Youth that run these organisations are very involved with the communities and try to work towards solutions with the local people for local problems. This can lead to projects focused on, for example health, poverty, employment and rights education. Sometimes these organisations are affiliated with bigger institutions, mostly for financial assistance. This is especially true for smaller youth organisations. Some of the bigger youth organisations are completely self-reliant, but most have ties to bigger organisations. This does not mean that youth organisations never decide their own agenda's, but it does mean that they are often reliant on some form of support.

In some cases the organisations were created as a youth department of a bigger organisation, after which they became independent organisations. Youth involved in their own organisations are very passionate and invest a lot of time and energy in them. As will be discussed later, obstacles are myriad. These youth have gone outside of the existing structure of NGO's and other organisations and are trying to achieve change independently.

The second way for young people to organise themselves is through platforms, these are often associated with more formal institutions. For example, ActionAid Bangladesh has its own network called Activista. This youth platform is fully self-functioning and independent, like other youth networks. The network serves to connect young people in their ideas and resources. These platforms have less of a clear organisational structure than other youth organisations. The network consists of many youths throughout the country, who are often involved in their own organisations as well. The network is a way for them to connect, often with help from the official volunteers in the form of advice and support. Youth within this network are free to connect and inspire each other, causing many different projects involving all kinds of activities to spring from their interaction.

The last way in which youth independently strive for social change in their society is through social entrepreneurship. I met multiple young social entrepreneurs during my research and formed a good relationship with both Barsha and Sayeed, as well as with Farhat. He is twenty-four years old and has been involved with social entrepreneurship ever since he was a participant in the BBLT in 2011. Travelling the world, he wanted to create a business model that could help connect people and foreign products in a more sustainable way.

> "*I always felt lucky because I was born into what some would definitely call privilege, but that only motivated me to do something with my life. I want to take care of others and I want to take care of the world. That is why I started* [my business]*, as a way for me to use my privilege.*"

As many of the social entrepreneurs I encountered were from relatively privileged backgrounds, something that probably relates to the fact you need resources and connections to set up your own business in Bangladesh, this sentiment got reflected by others. They often had chances to leave Bangladesh and find better jobs than they would be likely to get there. Nevertheless, many of them choose to stay or return because they feel they owe it to their society. Barsha also expressed a sense of guilt for choosing self-employment over what she called 'the insecurity of

a noble profession' (in her case, being a journalist), something which she overcame by becoming a social entrepreneur:

> "*At first, I felt guilty that I decided to try my own business. I felt that I was betraying my country by leaving my studies, but then I had this idea to do some good with my products. Now, I feel proud of my work.*"

Many youth, through innovation and social responsibility, are using their businesses to create change. For most informants social entrepreneurship is about much more than just their livelihoods, by stimulating the change they would like to see in the world, they feel they are adding to society. It also provides them with a feeling of power, showing them they can influence the world with their ideas.

While working for the organisations, companies and initiatives that they have set up, the Bangladeshi youth face several obstacles. Firstly, in many circles their opinions are still discarded because of their age. Clearly reflected in: "*Why should we listen to you, you are still a kid yourself?*", a question Laboni told me she gets asked frequently by members of her community. Funds are another major obstacle for youth organisations. Financial problems are not uncommon, youth organisations are often small and struggle to get recognition from institutions that could help finance them. Youth running their own organisation or business often struggle to acquire funds and also remain independent. In order for them to receive funding from major organisations, government – if they even consider this – or companies, they often need to answer for their activities, motives and goals. Some do not mind doing so, as long as they can set their own agenda's. But there are others, like Nazir, who feel this undermines their empowerment. Female youth face extra challenges in their fight for socially sustainable change, simply because of the gender inequality that shapes much of Dhaka's public and private spheres. Women and girls are excluded in different ways, there is pressure from their families and communities not to be too active outside of the home, they are halted in their business ventures because banks often will not consider (business) loans for women and they feel that they are just not taken. Girls are not the only ones who feel pressured into – or out of – certain behaviour though. Young people in general face harsh scrutiny from their surroundings when they decide to employ their talents, time and efforts for sustainable change. Sayeed encountered this when he told his family he wanted to use his technical skills to help others, instead of pursuing a well-paid job in de technological industry:

"At first my dad was very angry especially, he did not want me to take such a risk with my future. But I did not want to listen, I wanted to prove to him that I could do this. And I also wanted to show him things can be done in a different way."

Most Bangladeshi parents much rather see their children work for a big brand and have a stable and respectable job. Reputation guides most of the social processes in Bangladesh and volunteering or other work for change is not seen as a respectable career choice. To start one's own business is seen as risky. But like Sayeed, many also see this pressure as a way to prove to their surrounding how rewarding a different path can be. They want to show that there are different ways to be successful and hope that in this way, they can change some more minds.

In spite of these issues, my research participants keep going, educating themselves and trying to get more and more peers involved. They connect with other, like minded youth to form a bigger, stronger front. Something that can be seen in the way youth networks act as a connection between different young people, making them a bigger and more resourceful organisational front. Besides the ways that my informants have chosen to organise themselves in this struggle for change, it is instrumental to see what projects are produced in this way. There is no clear distinction between the different types of youth organisation and the initiatives that result from them. However, during my research I have found a general divide between all activities within the social participation of youth that strive for sustainable change. This divide will be discussed in the last part of this chapter.

The Activity Divide: Action and Advocacy

All activities carried out by my research participants can be categorised into two types. Firstly aid, or action projects are initiatives that are geared towards care, mostly of the most marginalised, poor and vulnerable people. They include actions providing people with clothing and blankets in times of need. Even being the first respondents to a major fire in the neighbourhood, but also the relief that is needed in the aftermath. Besides this direct aid, the youth want to be advocates of change. They demonstrate for women's rights, they campaign for better education and they debate child marriage with the parents and communities of possible victims. Aid work is geared towards providing direct and concrete help, and campaigning is geared towards the changing of minds.

I have experienced my participant to be especially vocal about the need for advocacy, which Nazir calls "*... the only option for lasting change.*" Fighting for change is not just about practically changing things, it is about discussing and spreading sustainable views. Whether

youth are encouraging the local community to get involved in the solutions to their problems, or they are trying to convince these communities to see things differently, they are advocating change. My informants spend much of their time and energy on advocating change. One of the most important parts of advocacy for them is to engage in conversation with all involved parties, educating and engaging are key words. This way, communities come together to find potential solutions to community problems. During my participation in the youth leadership training at BYLC I got to know eighteen year old Zarat, who discussed with me her view on youth leadership with regards to this process. She realises, like many others, the limitations that young people still encounter when trying to engage in society. But she feels that through teaching them to express themselves: "… *people in the community become more open to our ideas.*" Furthermore, she noticed that when the community got the sense that these young people were actually helping, they also become more respectful.

> "*As a leader in my community, I am not a boss. It just means that people respect my opinion enough to trust it. That can only happen if I listen to them, and they learn to listen to each other.*"

This particular interpretation of leadership guides my informants. For them, to be a leader is to take responsibility, not to look at others for answers. Leadership is also about inclusiveness and diversity. This means it is not something to be exercised alone, it is about togetherness. By building relationships my informants position themselves as leaders in their communities and amongst their peers. They do this in a way that sets itself apart from other ideas of what leadership might entail. In this way, this transformative leadership is an essential element of their activities in service of socially sustainable change.

Part V   Conclusions: 'Building a Better Bangladesh'

Imre van Kraalingen and Nathalie van 't Pad

Dhaka is a city of opposites. Its streets are dusty and polluted by the enormous amount of cars that get stuck in traffic jams for hours, but they are also filled with the most colourful rickshaws and street food stands. There is a firm contrast between the high flats with rooftop restaurants and shops and the slum areas that surround them. Whereas men are freely hanging around and walking through the city, you see almost now women in the public sphere. At the side of the roads there are open drainages, and electricity cables hanging loosely above the sidewalks. While many get around in the dented, overcrowded and dangerous busses, the upper-class families are driven by private chauffeurs in expensive cars. The inequality in the exterior of Dhaka reflects on the internal social issues. Inequality relates to many social fields, gender inequality restricts the lives of women, an unequal access to social services remains. These inequalities are the root cause for many of the social problems in Bangladesh, as previously discussed. Because of these social issues, an inclusive and just social environment cannot sustain. Consequently, to attain a socially sustainable society, these issues have to be addressed. Here, we will discuss the results of our research in this city of opposites. We will also discuss our empirical findings in relation to the literature as discussed in the theoretical framework. Finally, we will construct an answer to our main research question: *How do youths and institutions working with youths construct youth empowerment through institutional participation and how is social change carried out in the community through social participation in Dhaka, Bangladesh?*

During our research we have found that the discourse of sustainability among our participants shows great overlap with the theoretical notions that exist of the concept. The terms that are named by academics are often emphasised by these young people, sometimes with different names, but sharing the same essence. They call upon shared responsibilities of the international community to make the world more sustainable. Sustainability is also seen as a greatly intertwined and interconnected whole. It is an overlapping concept that is hard to pick apart according to our informants, and in their struggle they tackle it as an integrated problem. This is where their perception differs from the academic debate surrounding sustainability. Our informants do not view social, economic and environmental sustainability as separate. Rather, they view sustainability as a way of living, encompassing all these aspects. This does not mean however, that different projects do not have different focusses and that our participants do not realise that there are multiple dimensions within the concept of sustainability. While their actual

work is mainly focused on environmental and social sustainability, there are also projects like micro-financing and tax-justice campaigns. Of which the last especially has gained some traction in their discourse. The types of projects that informants have named as dealing with the social dimension of sustainability involve education, corruption, gender rights, minorities rights, worker's rights and many more.

We have found that social sustainability corresponds with two important concepts according to the participants in the research: equality and justice. If you recall, we have previously defined social sustainability along the lines of three concepts. We perceive social sustainability as the developmental process towards a healthy community, where social cohesion (Dempsey et al. 2009, 293-294), social equity (Dempsey et al. 2009, 292; Partridge 2005, 7-8), and equal access to social capital (Koning 2001, 10-11) are assured to meet the needs of its current and future members. There are multiple aspects of this definition crucial for our understanding of the concept. First of all, it is perceived as a process and not a fixed state. Also, we place an emphasis on the importance of community. The three other major qualities of social sustainability are social cohesion, social equity and social capital.

The word struggle was often evoked in conversations about sustainability and what it is exactly. These young people we spoke to realise that sustainability can only be more present in a society, but is will never be a fixed state of the world. It is something that requires work and effort, that all need to put in. This starts at the community level, which our informants deem as essential to the succeeding of sustainable development. This importance of community is also reflected in the concepts of social cohesion and social capital in the definition. Social cohesion is all about the rootedness of sustainability in the community through the bonds that exist within that community, something that participants of our research have emphasised as the importance of community as well and which was reflected in their activities. Social capital relates to communities because it is about communities ability to participate in change and sustainability. It is about their agency in the process of sustainability. In this sense, it also relates to the two previously mentioned pillars of equality and justice. Social capital is about equal chances within and between communities, which the notion of equality of our informants is about as well. The pillar of justice is very similar to social equity's attributes, it is about social justness and fairness to ensure equality. Thus, when we compare the academic discourse on social sustainability to the discourse of our research participants, it becomes clear that the essence of what social sustainability entails, remains. However, our informants do not divide social sustainability in three core concepts, rather they see it as the importance of the two notions of equality and

justice. Even though these terms are reflected in social equity, cohesion and capital, they are not in complete accordance to each other.

In order to reach for social sustainability as perceived in this thesis, we have found that the ongoing processes of social change in Bangladesh need to have a long-term vision that strives for a healthy community. According to our informants, the visions of leading actors in Bangladesh are currently short term, due to alternation of the two main political parties. They believe that a there is need for a transformed mind-set to embed this long-term vision in the Bangladeshi society. Through transformations in the social foundation of the society, processes of thought and behaviour of people can be altered.

The young people that we have spoken to are willing to contribute to social change in their community, however the social, economic and political context does not allow them to develop their underutilised potential fully. Therefore, they turn to institutions and other non-state organisations that offer alternatives to build on their capacities. We have found the theories on institutional and social participation, as discussed in the theoretical framework, to not to be fully applicable to the situation of participation in Dhaka. Therefore, we considered it of more value to our research to focus on institutional participation concerning non-governmental organisations. Instead of the citizens' engagement in the political sphere. Although young people are lawfully allowed to participate in the social, political and economic sphere, our informants have showed this to be neglected. Hence, participation is mainly found in activities coordinated by non-state actors, such as NGOs and youth-led organisations. In this light, NGOs and other institutions provide institutional participation through which they encourage youth empowerment. Youth-led organisations and youth groups cover the aspect of social participation on the community level. The difference we have experienced in the notion of institutional participation, causes us to engage with the concept of youth participation in a different way. In viewing participation, we believe the emphasis on the political scope of participation should be lessened if the context calls for this. Grassroots participation and involvement with for example NGOs are steadily increasing and therefore should be given a more explicit place in the debate surrounding youth participation.

In addition to the academic perception of youth empowerment as the encouragement of youth involvement and youth participation in different areas of society, we would perceive youth empowerment in a more profound way. Based on local perspectives, we understand youth empowerment as the direct engagement in transforming conditions that influence society. From this understanding, we believe that youth empowerment aims to increase awareness on social issues and increase the confidence of having power over one's life. Whereas the intellectual

empowerment stimulates critical consciousness of young people that allows them to gain a deeper understanding of underlying causes of social issues, the applied side of youth empowerment intends to develop their practical skills. In this way, youth empowerment builds on the ability of youths to strive for social change.

As our research was divided along the lines of the two different parts of youth participation, institutional and social, we are able to shed some light on how both processes are placed in the discourse of sustainable social change. We have found that they share many of the same focusses in their work. Both emphasise the importance of skill development in the process of youth empowerment, as well as sustainable change. Much attention is geared towards the raising of awareness of problems and rights. Here, special emphasis is placed on the importance of communities and a community approach to change. To do so, actors in both forms of participation engage in similar types of activities. In both cases, we have found that the activities of campaigning, advocacy and networking are stressed as essential ways to bring about social change. Furthermore, while there are many similarities between the activities and ideas of young people involved with the institutional and social participation parts of youth empowerment, there are also some differences between the two. Though they are not as plentiful as the resemblances, they do indicate an important difference in the way each approach both youth empowerment and sustainable social change. Whereas institutions want to build better relations with government authorities, young people rather campaign for reforms in the education system. Where institutions would like to see youth participation in politics, many Bangladeshi youth view national government as an unfit way to achieve their objectives. Young people to whom we have spoken also expressed that they miss integration of practical fieldwork in their empowerment projects. They emphasised that the trainings, programs and other empowerment activities are very useful. However, they would like to start implementing their developed skills in bigger projects instead of small practical exercises. The organisations should provide them with both the know-how and the confidence and independence for them to become important actors outside the institutional sphere. They learn to engage in social participation instead, which is the goal of youth empowerment. The change young people envision can be realised with the tools they have gathered during the process of empowerment. These tools help them raise awareness and change mind-sets and life-styles, which they perceive to be the way towards the sustainable world they imagine. Education plays an important role in the process of empowerment. The formal education system is experienced as insufficient. Therefore young people turn to alternative educative programmes, such as the ones offered by NGOs. This non-formal education allows youths to develop their potential and obtain practical experience. Our

informants pointed out to us that they perceive education reforms as essential for the spread of sustainable social change.

In this thesis, we have argued that institutional participation and social participation can be seen as two complementary concepts that, in their own separate ways, empower young people to take upon a transformative leadership role in striving for sustainable change in their communities. Institutional participation provides young people with the required awareness, knowledge and skills to make a substantial contribution to the process of social change. Youth can set this forth in social participation, by employing their developed skills on a grassroots level. Social participation does not necessarily follow institutional participation. Independent youth initiatives do also address the empowerment of young people to strengthen their role in society. Essential in the entire process is the concept of transformative leadership, as discussed in the theoretical framework, because this is what makes it possible for youths to bridge policy making and practical action in a meaningful way. There is a tendency for present leaders in Bangladesh, to have a short-term vision without taking local needs into account. Our informants want to break with this mind-set. Youth leaders emerge in community-based organisations, with a reflective and dedicated mind-set. Through institutional and social participation they obtain practical skills and gain insight in social problems, which will enable them to anticipate on the needs of their communities and strive for changes that will sustain. This is what our informants consider to be transformative leadership and in this way they connect active engagement with significant changes in the society.

The many parallels between the notions and actions of participants in either parts of the youth empowerment process, raise a question of the relationship between the two parts. It seems quite obvious that, because many of them have been previously trained in the institutional sphere, young people involved in the social participation process have been influenced by the discourse that they encountered there. But can this relationship be defined so easily and is it really that linear? Surely, the institutions with youth will also be influenced by the participants of their programmes? This is definitely one of the goals of these organisations. Moreover, the youth organisations that formed independently have also expressed their interests to be quite similar to those involved in institutional participation. It is what they have experienced in their own surroundings as well. It seems more likely that the relationship between the notions of both parts of empowerment is more complex and reciprocal than might seem at first. Further research is needed to address this connection more clearly.

Even though the youths in some cases manage to raise awareness on social issues and might be able to change attitudes and behaviours in their communities, it gets more difficult to

make a difference when addressing political and infrastructural barriers. This is perhaps the most significant challenge our informants face in their work, though definitely not the only one. These obstacles are usually caused by their age, for their age carries connotations in society. Young people are viewed as unexperienced, but also as unqualified to participate in many organisational and official processes. This is even more true for our female informants, who often face enormous scrutiny when they try to participate in the public sphere in such a way. NGO's and youth organisations are a great help to make these young people realise their rights and their power, and youth are taking charge of these problems by confronting people and organisations they view as obstacles, showing the skills they have acquired.

At the start of this research, we set out to learn how youth and institutions working with youth construct youth empowerment through institutionalised and social participation and how this is placed in the discourse of sustainable change. The situation that we encountered in Dhaka, led us to form an understanding of youth empowerment and its connection to socially sustainable change as a particular process. This process can be found in figure 1. The figure shows the way in which many of our informants were not able to find a place within government organisation to make their voice heard, or to participate in any kind of empowerment project. Youth empowerment is a process that starts when young people want to engage in society, but cannot do so through the official government channels. Therefore, they become involved with NGO's and institutions that provide them with the tools to become more socially engaged. The new influence – in the form of transformative leadership – they carry in their environments helps them to make change sustainable, rooted in communities and in the minds of people
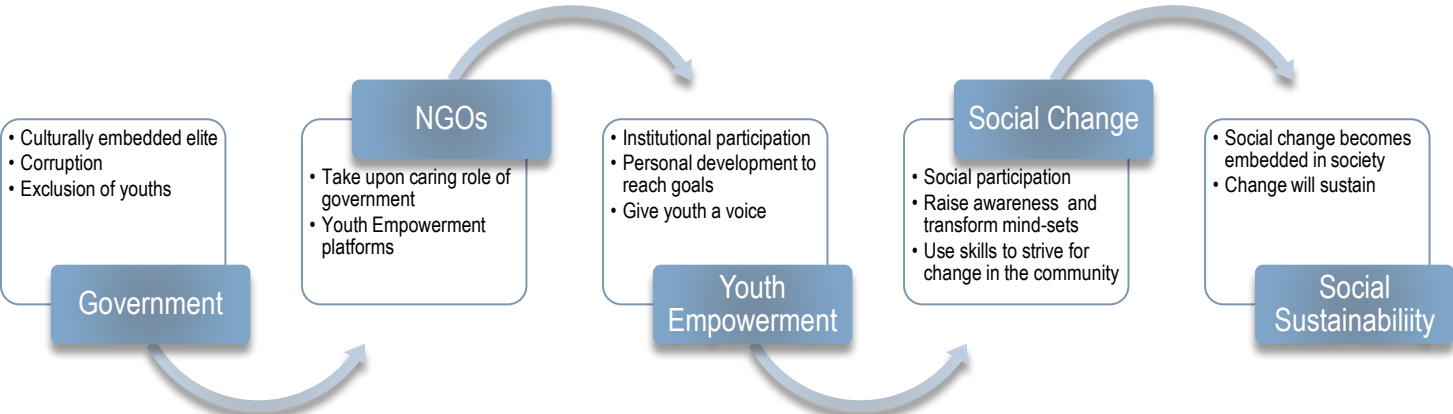

Figure 1The process of youth empowerment and sustainable social change in Dhaka, Bangladesh

In the past few anthropological research has been done in Bangladesh, especially regarding youth empowerment. Additionally, also in the international development discourse youth empowerment has received little attention, whereas there has been paramount responsiveness when it comes to sustainability. In this thesis we have tried to provide an anthropological assessment of youth empowerment and sustainable social change, using a case study of the Bangladeshi youth in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We do not claim that whatever statement that was made is generalizable on a larger scale or to a different social, cultural or political context. In order to make more complete and valid claims, we would advise further research on the issues surrounding youth empowerment, especially in relation to both institutional and social participation. As well as further research into the influence of the political sphere and its influence and role in the process of youth empowerment. It would be interesting to compare multiple studies in the context of Bangladesh, but it would be fascinating to compare different situations and locations with regards to these issues.

In conclusion, without youth empowerment institutions and their programmes, it is hard to imagine the freedom of youths to raise their voice and have a say in what affects their life and livelihoods. Yet, it is important to note that the supposed extent of exclusion, lack of (qualitative) education, lack of political efficacy, inequality as well as limitations from the family and community itself, prevents youths from becoming acknowledged participants in the society. Youth empowerment encourages and enables young people to develop their skills through capacity building programs and gives them a deeper understanding of the social issues in society. Based on our believe that young people can be a leading factor in striving for sustainable social change, we believe they should get a chance to act as active agents in the Bangladeshi society and be a contributing factor in building a fair, participatory, inclusive and just society, where young people can take part in the decision-making and have a say in what affects their lives and the lives of future generations.

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Appendix

Appendix I   Summary
Imre van Kraalingen and Nathalie van 't Pad

We resided in Dhaka for three months to do fieldwork research on Youth Empowerment and Sustainable Social Change. The aim of our research was to provide a deeper understanding of how empowerment of youths can contribute to striving for sustainable social change within the Bangladeshi society. So as to contribute to both the academic as well the developmental discourse.

The concept of sustainability has already been prominent in the developmental discourse for a longer amount of time, but the subject has become a regular topic in academic debate over the last decades as well. Until recently this debate was mostly focused on the environmental and economic aspects of sustainability, only just have academics started discussing the social dimension of sustainability in more detail. We perceive social sustainability as the developmental process towards a healthy community, where social cohesion, social equity and equal access to social capital are assured to meet the needs of its current and future members. The young people that we have spoken to are more than willing to take part in this process and they have the potential to do so. However, they do not have (access to) sufficient educational tools to develop this potential.

The youth covers approximately one third of the Bangladeshi population and whereas Bangladesh could benefit greatly from this demographic advantage, the youth is still mainly being marginalised. Today, the civil society in Dhaka is facing issues of inequality, exclusion, low employment rates, a lack of (qualitative) education, pollution, a lack of social services, gender issues, child labour, child marriage and more. An overall unawareness of lawful rights and social issues make it harder for young people to raise their voices. Thus, youths are searching for alternatives to be heard and to be involved. Youth empowerment is one way for the youths to get a chance to gain the capacity to speak up and strive for change. In our research we have find that they do this through two main types of participation. Firstly, institutional participation refers to the way in which youths are involved with institutional empowerment. Institutional participation offers uniting platforms where youths can develop their skills. Secondly, there are youth-led organisations that strive for social change through social participation in their communities. Social participation encompasses active interaction between youths and their communities.

We have encountered many similarities between the academic discourse discussed in our theoretical framework and the discourse we witnessed amongst our research population. When it comes to social sustainability and social change, both discourses show great pre-occupation with the importance of a community based approach, equality and justice. Also, both define the concept as a process rather than a fixed state of a society. While our research population has turned out to use different categories for these notions and to be especially pre-occupied with the importance of equality for socially sustainable change. The academic discourse of youth empowerment sees it as the encouragement of youth involvement and youth participation in different areas of society. However, our perception of it based on the research aims to be more reflective of the entirety of the scope of youth empowerment. We now understand youth empowerment as the direct engagement in transforming conditions that influence society. In this sense, youth empowerment aims to increase awareness on social issues and increase the confidence of having power over one's life. Whereas the intellectual empowerment stimulates critical consciousness of young people that allows them to gain a deeper understanding of underlying causes of social issues, the applied side of youth empowerment intends to develop their practical skills. In this way, youth empowerment builds on the ability of youths to strive for social change.

We have found that youth empowerment in Dhaka can be seen as a process that start when young people want to engage in society but cannot do so through the official government channels, therefore they become involved with NGO's and institutions that provide them with the tools to become more socially engaged. These tools are then used by the youth to set up a myriad of initiatives surrounding both the provision of direct aid, as well as activities of campaigning and advocacy. These activities have as a goal to change minds and transform Bangladeshi society into a more socially sustainable one. Within this process, connection between the institutional and the social part of participation are strong. We have found many parallels between both the discourse in institutional participation and social participation. Both show a strong focus on the importance of change embedded in the community. Both also resemble each other when it comes to a focus on entrepreneurship, campaigning and networking, as well as the importance of skill-development. But some gaps remain between the two different parts of the process. Focus on politics or political influence has proved more important to institutions than to youth, who rather focus on educational reforms. Youth have also experienced a lack of connection between trainings on ways of thinking (theory) and actual actions in society (practice).

We have also found that in the process of empowerment, many young people are shaped into a specific form of leadership, namely transformative leadership. In this role, they encourage communities to communicate and work towards inclusive solutions for specific problems. Youth often do not realise or recognize this role as being a leader, but this does not mean they do not fulfil it. They are taking charge of social processes.

In conclusion, youth empowerment aims to encourage Bangladeshi youths to build on their capacity, develop their awareness on social issues and enable them to take part in the process of social change. Young people are using these opportunities provided by new tools to engage in society and in the struggle for social change. In this way, they even become leaders in their communities. Through institutional and social participation, youths are enabled to be active actors in the process of sustainable social change and strive for a fair, participatory, inclusive and just society, where young people can take part in the decision-making and have a say in what influences their lives.