

Partnership or PR? Chevron in Bangladesh

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[Katy Gardner](#) [1] 17 April 2012

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Chevron are investing in communities and promoting human rights in Bangladesh, claiming that partnership with communities is not just good business practice, but crucial for social progress. But are these real partnerships - publishing what they pay, supporting anti-corruption measures and being accountable?

What do such corporate 'partnerships' involve? Viewed in the unflattering light of reality rather than the shimmery vista of PR, is there any evidence that relationships with communities could be described as involving the shared goals, co-operation, mutual respect and equality that the term implies? In research in the villages surrounding the Bibiyana Gas Field in Bangladesh, we found few people who would refer to Chevron as partners. Instead, the majority spoke of their fears of corruption, environmental damage and their sense of injustice at the profits made by foreign multinationals exploiting local resources.

The research involved two villages close to the gas field where, after large scale protest against the loss of land as the installation was being constructed, Chevron were now investing in health, education and alternative livelihoods projects as part of their Community Engagement Programme. In their Dhaka offices, the executives involved were keen to talk the talk: the initiatives were to be sustainable, the poor were to be 'helped to help themselves.' As one official put it, "we want to empower people."

It sounds good. But before rushing to congratulate multinational energy corporations for their progressive investments, we need to look closely at the relationships they glibly describe as 'partnerships'. If the ability to hear and be heard is a basic component of a healthy partnership, we saw little in the way of Chevron hearing the concerns of the poor. People told us that although initially there were 'community consultation meetings', once the land acquisition process was complete, community liaison staff retreated behind the high wire fence of the enclave and only the elite leaders had any means of contacting them. There are no grievance procedures and no open meetings. Whilst the company did respond to farmers' complaints of damage to the environment, they acted without consulting the farmers. The main issue was the installation's high banked roads, which prevent water from flowing evenly over rice fields during the wet season. Chevron built culverts in the roads, but these were too small and became blocked with weeds. A year later, no further action had been taken.

Meanwhile, whilst officials talk of 'empowerment' they have no experience of social development and show little awareness of the root causes of poverty: inequality, injustice and a lack of rights. Though the support given to small rural businesses is useful, the programmes are carried out via Village Development Organisations that are composed of self selected leaders from the local

elite, thus strengthening rather than challenging local hierarchies. It was these leaders who were informed of the controlled flaring that was to take place one night. Community Engagement officials imagined that they would spread the message to the wider population. They didn't and the result was mayhem. When people woke to the huge flames, they assumed there had been an accident and panicked, running from their homes in terror.

Even more worrying are issues of transparency. Whilst Chevron has a relatively good reputation for its levels of disclosure 'at home', the company's record with regards to its overseas operations leaves much to be desired. This is all the more disappointing when it has enthusiastically signed up to the core aims of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative. According to a report published by Revenue Watch / Transparency International, Chevron scored 88% for organisational disclosure (compared to the industry average of 65%), but only 8% for country level disclosure (compared to the industry average of 16%).

Within Bangladesh, the details of deals made with the government are secret, as are the company's environmental, social and health impact assessments. Yet speak with ordinary Bangladeshis and they will tell you that government corruption and lack of transparency in deals with the extractive industries are of vital importance to the national interest. This surely, is where multinationals could make a real contribution to social progress: publishing what they pay, supporting the government and other agencies in anti-corruption measures and being accountable to the populations where they work, would be real steps towards supporting human rights and justice, rather than funding NGOs to carry out small scale projects that provide plenty of photo opportunities for the PR machine, but little in the way of *real* partnership.

Country or region: Bangladesh

Topics: Democracy and government

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 About the author

Katy Gardner is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sussex who has been researching development and migration in Bangladesh since the late 1980s. Her book, [Discordant Development: Global Capitalism and the Struggle for Connection in Bangladesh \(Anthropology, Culture and Society\)](#) [9] was published earlier this year by Pluto Press. You can read more about Katy's work at: <http://katygardner.co.uk/> [10]



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