

The AIBS Junior fellowship allowed me to complete fieldwork for my dissertation, entitled “The Education Stipend Project in Bangladesh: Is it truly pro-poor?” which critically examines the history and administration of the Secondary Education Stipend Project (SESP) in Bangladesh. This project is as a nationwide conditional cash transfer (CCT) education stipend program targeted at female and poor students in rural Bangladesh. While this program has received considerable acclaim from academic and policy circles, the literature has lacked a thorough assessment of its history, administration, and outcomes. Following ten months of ethnographic field work in Bangladesh, I used the AIBS Junior Fellowship to interrogate the history and administration of the stipend project within one of its most influential stakeholders: Sweco Consultants in Copenhagen, Denmark.

Since the early years of the stipend program, Sweco (formerly Grontmij) has been the program’s primary implementation and evaluation consultant. While at Sweco, I conducted participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and extensive document and discourse analysis. This provided the final piece of data necessary to complete my multi-sited institutional ethnography of the SESP in Bangladesh.

With the data I collected at Sweco, I was able to carefully trace and document the history of the program. In my analysis, I held this history alongside a directed intervention into the complex development history of Bangladesh, demonstrating how particular processes and conjunctures produced openings into which development expertise, technical assistance, and international financing intervened. Key changes in the history of the stipend program’s administration aligned with particular moments in Bangladesh development history, revealing the complicated and unequal power dynamics inherent within both past and present international development practices. These findings interrogate the past and ongoing complicated relationships between Bangladesh and the global development community, and highlight the need for development interventions to be more reflexive, place-based, and contextual.

Specifically, I argue that several aspects of the program’s operations are ill-suited to the complicated social and political fabric in rural Bangladesh, and that a few key changes to the program’s administration could open more democratic and productive possibilities for Bangladeshis. My findings indicate that these specific administration techniques have been decided upon by stakeholders based outside of Bangladesh, notably in Copenhagen, and in Washington D.C. My research indicates that reworking the decision-making processes around the administration of this project could have profound impact upon project outcomes. Specifically, by privileging the voices of a range of Bangladeshi constituents, the intervention could be reworked to better serve the target populations in this particular context.

Further, my research demonstrates that even beyond the more tangible structures of power and decision-making, international development discourses have been responsible for changes in the trajectory of this project in consequential ways. This finding emphasizes the need to reconsider the notion of preconceived best practices in development for Bangladesh, and globally, as I demonstrate the inherent flaws in approaching diverse contexts with pre-designed technologies.

With this, my research emphasizes the need to critically examine development interventions from the position of various stakeholders, both in and outside the country in which the intervention is taking place. In so doing, scholars and practitioners can better understand the complicated ways that development projects are carried forward, and can therefore become better positioned to support development needs and promote more democratic, place-based, and productive ways forward.

This research would not have been possible without the support of the AIBS Junior Fellowship. Thank you so much for your generous support.