

# **The Absence of Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting in Bangladesh**

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## Abstract

This paper aims to broaden the present corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting literature by extending its focus to the absence of CSR reporting within a developing country, an area which, to date, is relatively under researched in comparison to the more widely studied presence of CSR reporting within developed Western countries. In particular this paper concentrates upon the lack of disclosure on three particular eco-justice issues: child labour, equal opportunities and poverty alleviation. We examine why this is the case and thereby illuminate underlying motives behind corporate unwillingness to address these issues. For this purpose, 23 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with senior corporate managers in Bangladesh. The findings suggest that the main reasons for non-disclosure include lack of resources, the profit imperative, lack of legal requirements, lack of knowledge/awareness, poor performance and the fear of bad publicity. Given these findings the paper raises some serious concerns as to why corporations would ever be expected to voluntarily report on eco-justice issues where performance is poor and negative publicity would be generated and profit impaired. Further research is still required to uncover current injustices and to imagine what changes can be made.

*Key words:* Absence; CSR reporting; Eco-justice issues; Bangladesh

## **1. Introduction**

In recent times a business case has been made for corporate social responsibility (CSR) around the world (Carroll & Shabana, 2010; Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Hart, 2010; Pachauri, 2004). At its extreme the business case for CSR can be simply defined as requiring companies to maximise profits through operating legally in competitive markets (see Friedman, 1962). As such the business case for CSR does not challenge the primacy of shareholders and should not reduce profitability (Hanlon, 2008). Carroll (1983, p. 604) recognises “that profitability and obedience to the law are foremost conditions” of CSR, but continues to identify further “ethical and voluntary or philanthropic” (Carroll, 1999, p. 286) dimensions. Banerjee (2007&2008) criticises this CSR discourse as articulating narrow business interests, which marginalises and excludes broader stakeholder interests.

In contrast to the business case an ethical or normative case (Frederiksen, 2010) can also be made for CSR. From this standpoint CSR practice could be perceived to be beneficial to society through a more ethical treatment of its members. Hanlon (2008) argues, however, that even this ‘ethical’ version of CSR is flawed, as it fails to consider issues of interest and power. He asserts that, even in its ethical guise, CSR is “inevitably ideological” (p. 168) and is used to legitimate corporations as “better than the state at delivering progress and the social good” (p. 165). In so doing, he suggests CSR has enabled a new form of capitalism that is moving into areas “previously denied to them, such as the welfare state, the developing world ...” (p. 166). CSR is, according

to Hanlon (2008), therefore a legitimating tool used to counter criticisms of business and to further capitalism's continuing expansion into new markets and spaces.

In a similar vein, Llewellyn (2007) argues that CSR may result in corporations obtaining a more powerful position within society. She suggests that it is naïve to expect corporations to accept greater social responsibilities without them requiring something in return. In accepting responsibilities corporations would incur costs and in return they would claim rights. She continues that if the rights of corporations are extended such that "they are being expected to solve complex social and political problems" (p.146), then in return they would claim political power in addition to their already significant economic power. This will, she argues, "result in the character of companies beginning to dominate both the economic and the political realms" (p. 146).

The increasing corporate involvement in providing, what are traditionally regarded as, public goods and their growing engagement in public policy issues has also been commented upon by Scherer, Palazzo and Matten (2009). They suggest (p. 336) that "some corporations have started to set or redefine" society's moral and legal standards "thereby assuming a politically enlarged responsibility". As a check against the growing political power of corporations Scherer, Palazzo and Baumann (2006, p. 520) suggest the need for "the democratization of corporate activities, through continuous discourse participation and enlarged mechanisms of transparency, monitoring, and reporting".

To date evidence of such ‘democratization’ appears limited. Cooper and Owen (2007) question whether stakeholders are able to enter into discourse or dialogue with corporations and concerns have also been raised (Belal & Roberts, 2011; Belal, 2002; O’Dwyer, 2002; Owen, Swift, & Hunt, 2001; Owen, Swift, Humphrey, & Bowerman, 2000) that current CSR reporting practice has failed to enhance corporate transparency and accountability (Medawar, 1976). Furthermore, empirical research has consistently shown that CSR and its reporting has traditionally focused on, issues of interest to powerful economic stakeholders while neglecting “eco-justice” issues that are of relevance to less powerful social stakeholders<sup>1</sup> (Belal, 2002; O’Dwyer, Unerman, & Bradley, 2005; O’Dwyer, Unerman, & Hession, 2005).

Eco-justice is concerned with intragenerational and intergenerational equity (Bebbington, 2001; Lehman, 2002). This is to say how resources are distributed within the current generation and between this and future generations so that their respective needs are met. It is concerned with the distribution of wealth and decisions that affect this (Gray, Owen, & Adams, 1996). From the field of educational theory, Gruenewald (2003, p.6), drawing on the work of Bowers (2001) writes:

“The ambitious aim of eco-justice is to develop an ethic of social and ecological justice where issues of race, class, gender, language, politics, and economics must be worked out in terms of people’s relationship to their total environments human and non-human.”

Eco-justice includes issues of equality, child labour and poverty alleviation. These and similar issues underpinned the analysis of ‘The Brundtland Report’ (UNWCED, 1987)

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<sup>1</sup> The insufficient precision of the word ‘social’ in CSR has led some, including Carroll (1999), to consider CSR through responses to stakeholder groups rather than to society as a whole.

and were emphasised in the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (UNMDG)<sup>2</sup> and the UN Global Compact (UNGC)<sup>3</sup>. From the practice of CSR reporting the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) in particular requires companies to disclose information with respect to these issues (GRI, 2006). It is conceivable that the corporate reporting of such eco-justice issues could expose inequalities and hence enhance democracy, transparency and accountability of organisational decision making which affects wealth distribution.

This paper aims to broaden the present CSR reporting literature by considering attitudes towards CSR reporting within the context of a developing country and with specific regard to the corporate reluctance to report on eco-justice issues. Exploration of the corporate motivations behind such reluctance provides, we believe, valuable insights into the nature and completeness of CSR reporting (Adams, 2004) and what can be expected of it within current regulatory regimes. This reluctance to report, as evidenced by an absence (Catasús, 2008; Choudhury, 1988) of CSR reporting, within developing countries is relatively under researched (but see Belal, 2001; Imam, 2000; Kuasirikun & Sherer, 2004) in comparison to the more widely studied presence of CSR reporting within developed Western countries. Specifically, previous studies (Belal, 2001; Imam, 2000) indicated that there is a low level of CSR reporting in Bangladesh and this is the field of study for this research. This kind of absence based research is emphasised within the accounting literature in general (Catasús, 2008) and social and

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals> ( accessed, 8th January, 2007 )

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.unglobalcompact.org/AboutTheGC/TheTenPrinciples/index.html> ( accessed, 8th January, 2007 )

environmental accounting literature in particular (Bebbington & Unerman, 2008). The main objective of this paper is to examine the reasons for corporate reluctance to report on CSR issues in general, and eco-justice issues in particular within the context of Bangladesh thereby exposing the corporate motivations behind such reluctance.

The next section of the paper provides the background for the study by outlining the context of Bangladesh with specific regard to the importance of eco-justice issues. The paper then proceeds with a theoretical discussion of CSR reporting, before considering the research procedures adopted in the collection of data. In contrast to many previous CSR reporting studies this research documents the views of managers as gathered through an interview process. The paper, therefore, addresses Gray's (2002) and Parker's (2005) call for such empirical work by presenting and analysing the interview findings. The paper then presents the findings and these are critically discussed in the concluding section.

## **2. The Bangladeshi context**

Belal (2008) presents a study of the CSR disclosures made within the corporate annual reports (related to the year 1999/2000) of 87 Bangladeshi companies<sup>4</sup> using a framework of 20 disclosure categories including the categories of poverty alleviation, equal opportunities and child labour. The findings of this study highlight the extent of CSR reporting under different categories and is summarised in Table 1.

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<sup>4</sup> 79 of them came from top 100 listed companies and 8 are public sector enterprises all of which belong to the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

The above table indicates that while high numbers of companies made disclosures under the categories of human resource development (62%) and recognition of relevant stakeholders (80%), very few or no companies made disclosures under the categories dealing with the eco-justice issues of child labour (0%), equal opportunity (0%) and poverty alleviation (4%). We argue that there is, therefore, absence of disclosures on these issues that have been identified as important both globally and specifically to Bangladesh. Before we discuss these three important issues we first develop a general context of Bangladesh below:

#### General context

Bangladesh is a post colonial country which gained independence from British rule in 1947 along with the rest of India and formed part of Pakistan. It was formerly known as East Pakistan. It separated from the rest of Pakistan in 1971 through a bloody war. The liberation war of Bangladesh was led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who was brutally murdered in 1975 during a military coup. Since then it was under various military rules until 1990 when parliamentary democracy ushered a new era in the history of Bangladesh. However, in the wake of allegations of rampant corruption against the ruling party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), an unelected civilian government backed by the military ruled Bangladesh for two years – 2007 and 2008. In 2009 the largest political party of Bangladesh, Awami League, came to power through an election held in December 2008.



Immediately after independence in 1971 Bangladesh pursued a socialist pattern of economic growth and nationalised all of its mills and factories, but in the late 1970s a process of denationalisation started. The democratic process had some positive impacts such as freedom of print and electronic media, periodic national elections and institutional and regulatory reforms. Since the democratic emergence in the 1990s the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) mainly pursued the principles of open market economy led by private sector initiatives. Such economic strategy is characterised by increased foreign direct investment and flourishing export oriented industrial sectors such as textile and leather. Various domestic companies in these sectors supply goods and services to many large global companies around the world. In addition to that various multinational companies operate in Bangladesh via their subsidiaries. Prominent multinationals include Glaxo, Reckitt Benckiser and British American Tobacco.

The democratic era together with an export led economy has enabled Bangladesh to achieve remarkable economic growth in recent times; however, growth has not benefitted everybody in Bangladesh, as evidenced by the current levels of poverty, which is examined in more details below. Historically Bangladesh has suffered from various socio-political problems such as corruption, worsening environmental condition, and poor human rights particularly in the export led industries and deteriorating law and order condition. Against this back drop a number of pressure groups and non governmental organisations (NGOs) have emerged and they claim to target positive social change in Bangladesh. BRAC and Grameen Bank are working

toward poverty alleviation. A number of environmental groups have emerged, including Bangladesh Environmental Network (BEN), to address the environmental problems. Numerous other groups are working in the areas of gender equality, transparency and good governance. Generally, it is believed that these groups are playing a positive role in Bangladeshi society (Islam, 2000). However, as compared to their counterparts in the West most of these groups have limited power and resources to hold corporations to account for their negative social and environmental impacts (Belal & Owen, 2007). It is argued that the emerging agenda of CSR and its reporting in Bangladesh appears to be driven by ‘outside’ forces. Such forces include pressures from international agencies (e.g. World Bank, International Labour Organisation (ILO) and International Monetary Fund (IMF)) (Rahaman, Lawrence, & Roper, 2004), instructions from the head office of multinationals and pressures from international markets on the local export oriented industries (Belal & Owen, 2007; Islam & Deegan, 2008).

### Poverty alleviation

Despite the economy of Bangladesh growing at an average rate of 6% per annum (Ahmed, 2006) it remains one of the poorest countries in the world with a per capita income of only \$440 a year (WorldBank, 2005). In particular the mass of people in Bangladesh has yet to benefit from the country’s economic growth. Another study reports that “[p]overty is so widespread that 80 percent of the rural people are poor, defined in terms of calorie intake (2,100 cal) and more than half of the population is below the subsistence level (less than 1,800 cal) who cannot meet the basic needs of

life.....” (Khan, 2000, p.879). In absolute terms the poverty problems in Bangladesh are reported to be worsening as evidenced by the increase in the number of people living below the poverty line from 50 million in 1972 to 70 million in 2005 (TheDailyStar, 2006). The issue of poverty alleviation is one that falls first on the national government and so it is not surprising to find that it has been one of the most important items on the Bangladeshi national agenda for some time. In recent times, specific policies have been framed, for example the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper [PRSP], to address this issue. Chowdhury and Bhuiya (2004, p.371), however, suggest that in the case of Bangladesh the government “has not always performed this role to its full potential”. As well as government efforts there has been a significant amount of aid<sup>5</sup> and poverty alleviation work by NGOs, such as BRAC (Chowdhury & Bhuyia, 2004), which have not resolved this problem.

#### Equal opportunities

Bangladesh has both an age and gender skew in its poverty. Poverty levels in Bangladesh are high, but this is even more so for women who “generally receive less household resources for their food, education, health and clothing than men” (Siddique, 1998, p.1096). The situation is not helped by the “extremely patriarchal” nature of Bangladeshi society (Kabir & Mahmud, 2004, p.94). Opportunities for women to work are often restricted to “unpaid family labour or paid work that can be carried out in the home”. According to the Bangladesh Labour Force Survey 2005-06 (BBS, 2008), women accounted for only 24% of the total labour force in Bangladesh. Since the early

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<sup>5</sup> \$38 billion between 1980 and 2000 according to Benson and Clay (2003), as cited in Mclean and Moore (2005).

1980s there has been some change, due to liberalization, and there is now a thriving export oriented garment industry, in which the vast majority of employees are women. The motivation for employing women, however, has been argued to be “the ‘primitive’ exploitation of labour: the extraction of the maximum possible labour at the minimum possible costs” (Kabir & Mahmud, 2004, p.95). Discrimination against women in the workplace is widespread in Bangladesh, particularly in the garments companies (Newsware, 1999; Rashid, 1998). In short, inequality is prevalent in Bangladeshi society despite the unambiguous provision of equal opportunity in the constitution of Bangladesh, which “clearly articulates the equality of men and women in all aspects of public life” (Andaleeb & Wolford, 2004, p.52).

### Child Labour

The use of child labour is an emotional issue of grave concern for Western policymakers and consumers/buyers ( see, for example, Kolk & Tulder, 2002; Ray, 2004). As such there have been a number of international reform initiatives, primarily through the auspices of the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Bank and UNICEF. To some extent such reforms are also reflected in the local labour legislations via amendments made in recent times. In 2001 Bangladesh ratified ILO Convention No. 182 related to the worst forms of child labour; however, it has not yet ratified ILO’s Minimum Wage<sup>6</sup> Convention No. 138. Kolk and Tulder (2002, p.292) report that ILO convention No. 138 (1973) “stipulates a minimum age of 13 years” for “light work which is not to be harmful to [children’s] health or development, and which is not such as to prejudice their attendance at school”. Despite these initiatives the ILO

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<sup>6</sup> Subject to certain exceptions, generally, minimum age for admission to work is 14 years in Bangladesh.

(2006) reports that globally there are an estimated 166 million child labourers between the ages of 5 and 14 and Kolk and Tulder (2002) suggest that in some countries 69% of the child labourers will face some kind of hazard within their working environment, for example, long working hours, use of dangerous machinery or tools, carrying heavy loads, inadequate lighting and space, physical violence and insufficient fire safety. Drawing on figures from the World Bank (WorldBank, 2001), Ray (2004. p.5) notes that “child labour is a particularly serious issue in South Asia (especially Nepal and Bangladesh) and in some countries in East Asia such as Cambodia and Thailand”. In fact the ILO (2008) figures identify Bangladesh as having a 13.4% participation rate in the labour force for children aged 5-14 years. In spite of recent ILO initiatives to eliminate child labour there remain indications of child labour use in garments and tannery companies as evidenced by several media reports, for example, Channel 4 News suggests use of child labour in two of Tesco’s garments suppliers in Bangladesh (Islam, 2006, 10 October).

The practices of employers operating in Bangladesh is governed by a regulatory framework which includes, inter alia, the Factories Act, 1965, Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969, Employment of Labour (Standing Orders) Act, 1965, Payment of Wages Act, 1936 and Workmen Compensation Act, 1923. The framework covers issues such as minimum working hours, a safe and healthy working environment, the right to form trade unions and minimum working age (to ensure no child labour is employed). Many of these legislations are, however, ceremonial (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) and lack enforcement as business organisations routinely flout them (Khan &

Belal, 1999). The Labour Inspectorate of the Ministry of Labour and Welfare is responsible for the implementation of these regulations aimed at the protection of employees' welfare in 50,000 factories in Bangladesh. Within the Labour Inspectorate, however, there are only 20 inspectors and this clearly indicates a lack of resources at this state agency. Furthermore, in recent times this agency has received intense media scrutiny for its ineffectiveness and 'bureaucratic tangles and corruption' (Khan, 2006; Roy, 2006).

Thus, we see that in Bangladesh there has been a failure by both government and NGO programmes to address the eco-justice issues of poverty alleviation, equal opportunities and child labour. Given this failure calls have been made (PWBLF, 2001; Rugman, 2001) for companies to share the responsibility for such issues in the community in which they operate as it is argued that 'a business cannot succeed in a society which fails' (Pachauri, 2004). It would be interesting to see whether or not business will rise up to this challenge which might appear to be fundamentally incompatible with the principal corporate objective of shareholders' wealth maximisation (Friedman, 1970). At the same time it is important to examine motivations behind corporate responses (or lack of responses) to these issues via CSR reporting. The next section considers theoretical explanations about motivations for CSR reporting from the previous research.

### **3. Theoretical Perspectives on CSR and its Reporting**

The exploration of corporate motivations behind CSR reporting is an important

research tradition within the CSR reporting literature (Owen, 2004). Many researchers have used a legitimacy perspective (Deegan, 2002; Deegan, Rankin, & Tobin, 2002), which suggests that organisations require legitimacy to be able to continue to operate, and that organisations use CSR reporting to legitimise their relationship with the society and various stakeholders<sup>7</sup>. The results from empirical studies based upon this legitimacy perspective are mixed. A number of studies (Campbell, 2004; Deegan, et al., 2002) support a legitimacy perspective whilst others have suggested that a legitimacy perspective fails to sufficiently explain levels of corporate social disclosure and non-disclosure (Adams, Coutts, & Harte, 1995; Guthrie & Parker, 1989; O'Dwyer, 2002). Given this failure the latter authors often turn to broader political economy explanations. Jackson (1982, p.74) suggests:

“Political economy is the study of the interplay of power, the goals of power wielders and productive exchange system (Zald, 1970, p.233).”

In the accounting literature Tinker (1980) explores the possibility of a move ‘towards a political economy of accounting’, and hence away from “the neo-classical economics of marginalism” (p.147), which would require a consideration of the political and social role of accounting. Echoing and developing this argument Cooper and Sherer (1984, p.218) suggest that political economy of accounting “should recognize power and conflict in society, and consequently should focus on the effects of accounting reports on the distribution of wealth and power in society.” Outside of the accounting literature Bachrach and Baratz (1972) consider the issue of power and posit that power exists

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<sup>7</sup> This legitimacy perspective can be linked to new institutional theory where it is argued that organisations change their activities and practices in order to be considered legitimate. Coercive, mimetic and isomorphic pressures result in organisational behaviour becoming institutionalised. See Matten and Moon (2008) for a consideration of the development of CSR in this light.

where there is a “conflict of interests” (p. 21) and that this can be apparent not only in decision making situations, but also in non-decision making situations:

“that is, the practice of limiting the scope of actual decision-making to “safe” issues by manipulating the dominant community values, myths, and political institutions and procedures. To pass over this is to neglect one whole “face” of power.” (p. 18)

Further, they suggest that this manipulation leads to the development of the “rules of the game ... that operate systematically and consistently to the benefit of certain persons and groups at the expense of others” (p.43-4). They argue that this use of power helps to preserve the “unfair” allocation of resources. Crenson (1971) also addresses non-decision making and contends that certain emerging topics remain as non-issues, as they fail to penetrate the system. He argues that there is a “power of obstruction” (p. 21) whereby powerful actors do not admit issues that “threaten their existence” (p.23). Moreover, he suggests that the “mere reputation for power” (p.177) can “deter action on certain sensitive or politically unprofitable issues” (p.178) and restrict the scope of issues about which decisions are made. Lukes (2005) identifies a third dimension of power whereby “the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place” (p. 27). Lukes argues, therefore, that power is also exercised where there is a “*latent conflict*” (p. 28) between those with power and the “*real interests* of those they exclude” (p. 28). This third dimension is the “supreme exercise of power” as it entails controlling the thoughts of others and may be achieved “through the mass media and through the process of socialization” (p. 27). These conceptions of power will be returned to in the final discussion and conclusions section of this paper.



Spence, Husillos & Correa-Ruiz (2010), in a contemporary critique of social and environmental accounting studies, argued that social and environmental accounting researchers generally failed to address the wider issues of politics and power in society. Similarly, Tinker, Lehman, & Neimark (1991) critique the social and environmental accounting literature arguing that it fails to consider the conflicts and structural inequalities present in modern societies and does not adequately consider issues of justice and systemic social ills. More recent research has responded to these concerns and incorporated insights from political economy of accounting when exploring the reasons for the presence and absence of CSR reporting (Adams & Harte, 1998; Adams, et al., 1995; Guthrie & Parker, 1989; Unerman, 2003). In each of these studies an absence of CSR reporting, or non-disclosure, was argued to result from the influence of powerful groups in society, including management and financial stakeholders, deliberately silencing, suppressing and confusing the issues in order to ensure the status quo. Therefore the absence of CSR reporting is a conscious decision made for reasons of self-interest (Guthrie & Parker, 1990). Similarly, although not drawing directly on political economy of accounting, Chwastiak and Young (2003) forcefully argue that the "dominant discourses" silence "injustices" in order to "allow us to ignore more easily the distasteful and objectionable aspects of the systems in which we live" (p.534-5). Political economy of accounting has also been used to argue that where voluntary CSR reporting does occur it is motivated by a desire to influence possible future regulation (Adams, et al., 1995; Guthrie & Parker, 1990). In these circumstances voluntary disclosures may delay or completely avoid the need for, potentially more stringent, mandatory disclosures.

Within the CSR reporting literature a number of studies explicitly comment upon reasons for its absence and a number of factors are identified as important in determining such absences. The importance of cultural attitudes within a country was specifically reported as a reason for non-disclosure by Adams (2004). Gao, Heravi, & Xiao (2005) consider the very low levels of CSR reporting within Hong Kong and note that companies there faced little pressure from community pressure groups; moreover, the government fails adequately to enforce existing social and environmental legislation. Kuasirikin and Sherer (2004) appear to contradict the importance of these social and political factors when they note that, despite increasing social and environmental legislation, increased public awareness and worsening social and environmental conditions, levels of CSR reporting within Thailand have not improved. They argue, however, that in reality a failure to enforce legislation, a lack of effectiveness by Thai social and environmental pressure groups, and an absence of mandatory social and environmental disclosures, explains this continued absence. The importance of an absence of regulatory requirements is also noted by Adams et al (1995) and is suggested as the primary reason for a lack of CSR reporting in a Jordanian study (Naser & Baker, 1999).

Two further reasons for non-disclosure within the context of a developing country, as suggested by Teoh and Thong (1984), were a desire to keep the annual report brief and a degree of secrecy about the company's activities. Finally, there is a strong message from much of the empirical research that CSR reporting is dominated by the disclosure

of good or positive news (see for example, Deegan & Rankin, 1996; Harte & Owen, 1991) and, therefore, there is an absence of reporting of bad news. From this we could surmise that where there is a lack of good news there will be a subsequent lack of CSR reporting.

This section has provided a review of both the theoretical and empirical literature on reasons for the absence of CSR reporting and it appears that political economy of accounting has much to offer (Gray, et al., 1996, p. 48). A political economy of accounting specifically considers that the suppression of certain information and the silencing of certain voices is an important weapon in the armoury of powerful groups within society. Most of the previous studies of CSR reporting have undertaken empirical investigations of levels of social disclosures within annual reports and how this is related to the presence or absence of a number of factors. In contrast a smaller number of studies have addressed motivations for the presence/absence of CSR within annual reports through seeking the views of managers. It is this method that has been adopted here from the context of a developing country and this is considered in more detail in the following section.

#### **4. Research Method**

This paper is part of a large project which examines the corporate attitudes and managerial perceptions concerning the current state of CSR reporting in Bangladesh, and its future prospects. The research was carried out via in depth semi-structured interviews in 23 companies. One part of the interviews was devoted to developing a critical understanding of the reasons for non-disclosure on various eco-justice issues

and it is these issues that are being reported in this paper. The other parts of the interviews dealt with various issues relating to managerial perceptions of the need for and role of stakeholder consultation in CSR reporting, the relevance of prominent social accounting standards and the key factors driving the CSR reporting agenda in Bangladesh. The results thereof have been reported elsewhere.

Initially potential interviewees from the top 100 companies listed on the Dhaka Stock Exchange were contacted by letter asking for annual reports and also soliciting interviews. After several telephone follow ups this process generated 21 responses for interviews. In addition to that two interviewees were selected from the state owned public enterprises as they claimed that enhancing social welfare was one of their main objectives (Hegde, Bloom, & Fuglister, 1997). By following these procedures 23 interviews were obtained from companies across ten industrial sectors representing a wide variety of industrial sectors present in Bangladesh (See Table 2). Thus, the key criteria for interviewee selection included their willingness to participate in the study, representation of wide variety of industrial sectors and their listing status. We believe that such a diverse selection of interviewees provide a rich perspective of CSR reporting in Bangladesh from different sectors. Table 2 summarises the CSR reporting profile of the individual interviewee's companies and all 23 of these 23 companies do disclose some CSR information within their annual reports. We can see, however, that none of these 23 companies reported anything in terms of child labour (disclosure category 5) and equal opportunities (disclosure category 7). In terms of poverty alleviation (disclosure category 10) only one company provided some disclosure.

## INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

The key informants are company secretaries with two exceptions (interviewees 2 and 7) where other relevant senior managers were interviewed. Most of the company secretaries are members of the professional accounting institutes in Bangladesh. One of the authors' professional affiliations with the accounting institutes of Bangladesh helped to gain access to them. Previous researchers have used company secretaries as the key informants (Jackson, Milne, & Owen, 2000). They were selected as interviewees for several reasons. Firstly, being senior managers they act as influential gatekeepers of the company and possess power and influence in the strategic management and direction of the company which might have implications for CSR reporting. Secondly, within the Bangladeshi context they are the most knowledgeable person in the company with regard to corporate reporting. Finally, they are closely involved in providing corporate information to the outside world, including the production and compilation of annual reports which generally contains various CSR disclosures.

The interviews were conducted at the interviewees' place of business during the period of December 2001 and March 2002. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to more than 120 minutes. The interviews started with a brief introduction and explanation about the project. A promise of anonymity was given to all interviewees. An interview protocol was used as a rough guide which, *inter alia*, included questions about the absence of CSR reporting in Bangladesh. All interviews except one was recorded and transcribed. Where the interview could not be recorded detailed notes were taken and

later on the notes were confirmed by the interviewee.

Following an iterative process suggested by O'Dwyer (2004) interview transcripts and notes were then summarised and analysed thematically (Miles & Huberman, 1994) together with personal reflections by the authors. For the purpose of data analysis the interview transcripts were read several times. At the first stage, transcripts were read by the interviewer researcher together with listening to the audio recordings. This helped to get a general overview and 'feel' of the data. In the second stage, transcripts were re-read with an eye on emerging patterns/issues which were classified using open codes. The same codes were used for similar issues in different interviews and new codes were used when a new issue emerged from the data. This process generated 15 open codes altogether representing various issues related to the absence of CSR reporting in Bangladesh. In the third and final stage, parts of the transcripts related to each code were read again searching for key themes which shares several open codes. This code collapsing process generated five key themes which reflect reasons for the absence of CSR reporting in Bangladesh. The five key themes are reported in the following section together with illustrative quotes from the transcripts to substantiate different points made.

## **5. Understanding the absence of CSR and its reporting in Bangladesh**

In this section we explore the absence of CSR reporting from the context of Bangladesh. In particular, we describe the reasons for non-disclosures provided by our interviewees.

### *Lack of Resources*

Belal and Owen (2007) argue that it is more likely that companies in developing countries will be put under pressure (by the international market forces, international agencies and the head office in the case of multinational subsidiaries operating in developing countries) to comply with the requirements of international social accounting standards/codes. They expressed concern that such externally driven compliance strategy is unlikely to achieve the desired outcome on the grounds, essentially, that it would involve additional costs. It is feared that supply chain companies will be compelled to bear these additional costs. Several interviewees appear to be concerned about this. Some of them expressed the view that CSR reporting might be more appropriate for larger companies with more resources. For example, one interviewee says,

Larger companies are more likely to do it because they have got the resources. As a small company we do not have many resources to undertake additional disclosures which involve additional costs. Scarcity of resources is one of our main limitations. (Interviewee 20)

However, even the larger companies are very mindful of additional costs required by CSR reporting. Elaborating on the reasons for non-disclosure one interviewee alluded to the issue of additional cost burden.

The company is socially active and these issues may be disclosed in future. But we have to bear in mind that this [CSR reporting] does require additional cost involvement which is always a constraint. (Interviewee 6)

Further to funding constraints another interviewee pointed out the limitation of time available to provide additional voluntary disclosures:

You know our annual reports need to be prepared within 120 days of the balance sheet date. We

can not disclose all these voluntary items within this limited time and resources. (Interviewee 11)

Therefore our interviewees suggest that CSR reporting would require companies in developing countries to commit additional scarce resources in terms of both time and money.

### *The profit imperative*

A number of interviewees indicated a concern that CSR and its reporting would be considered to be a departure from shareholders' wealth maximisation objective. In line with the extreme 'business case' for CSR (Friedman, 1970) it was argued that a company's main objective should be to make profits and there was little scope for diverting resources to non-essential activities.

If I disclose on welfare activities even the small shareholders might ask me why you are spending our money on welfare activities. That's why we don't disclose these things through the annual report. (Interviewee 13)

A similar line of argument was made by another interviewee:

..... As an agro-based company we carry out some development activities for the poor peoples of rural Bangladesh. But due to resource limitations this is insignificant. After all we are a commercial organisation not a charity. That is why we are reluctant to disclose these issues. (Interviewee 16)

In response to a question related to poverty alleviation of the communities surrounding their operations several interviewees argued that it is a problem to be addressed by the government:

We are a profit making company doing business ethically and without depriving the local communities. We believe poverty in Bangladesh is a massive macro economic problem which needs to be tackled by the state. As a commercial organisation we have limitation of resources. (Interviewee 3)



If we make more profits we pay more tax which state can use for poverty alleviation purposes. We provide some rural development loans to the poor peoples without any collateral which are more likely to be defaulted. We do not want to disclose this because of the fear of backlash from our profit seeking shareholders who will hold us responsible for the loss related to defaulted loans. (Interviewee14)

We are a commercial organisation with the objective of making profits. This objective does not require us to deal with these issues. We believe these are responsibilities of the state. (Interviewee 15)

Another interviewee addressed the issue of poverty alleviation and expressed their inability to tackle this issue due to resource constraints:

We see the responsibility [towards poverty alleviation] in this way – if an individual member of the society, an employee, is better off then the rest of the country will be. At the same time we do realise that to do well in the long term there has to be upliftment of the peoples around us. That consciousness is there. As a company we do not have funds for this. But we've got one or two things in this regard. We provide scholarships for employees' children. Our staff wages are quite high. (Interviewee 4)

Some interviewees argued that there are inherent problems in disclosing certain things, such as donations and contributions to other charitable work, because it leaves one open to more and more people lining up demanding donations from the company for their charity/community projects. These requests might be undesirable on the part of cost conscious companies and they may have to justify their decisions to the shareholders in terms of impact on the bottom line profit:

We are not disclosing because we do not want to invite trouble. There are inherent dangers in it. We don't want unsolicited invitations to participate in voluntary projects. In order to participate in these projects you need financial commitment. It must have a positive impact on the profit. (Interviewee 4)

So for these interviewees a business case, in terms of positive impact on profit, has to be made to consider CSR reporting appropriate.

### *Lack of Legal Requirements*

Like many other countries of the world CSR reporting is not a mandatory requirement

in Bangladesh. A number of interviewees expressed the view that the main reason for not disclosing these significant issues is the absence of legal requirements. The prevailing managerial attitude is: we will only comply if we are legally bound to do so. The following quotations are illustrative of this attitude.

There is no regulatory requirement for social disclosures in Bangladesh. Why should I talk more? (Interviewee 5)

In fact we do not report with much seriousness. The minimum disclosure we make is due to the legal compulsion so we do not make complete disclosures. We feel that compliance with minimum legal requirements constitutes enough disclosure. (Interviewee 19)

[Our company] always oppose any sort of engagement of child labour. We are providing an excellent working environment to our employees. We do contribute towards poverty alleviation by providing employment. On ethical matters we're very strong in discipline. ....We don't disclose these [eco-justice] issues because the law does not require it. (Interviewee 6)

The above quotations illuminate corporate unwillingness to engage (Martin & Hadley, 2008) with CSR reporting in general and the reporting of eco-justice issues in particular. It appears that absence of mandatory requirement for CSR provided them with sufficient justification for non-disclosure.

#### *Lack of Awareness/Knowledge*

Given the fact that the phenomenon of CSR reporting is comparatively new to the companies in developing countries many of them may not be familiar with its processes and requirements. Most of the interviewees shared this view. They contended that some of the reasons for non-disclosure might be attributed to lack of awareness and knowledge amongst corporate managers regarding CSR reporting in general and disclosure on eco-justice issues in particular.

There was some lack of awareness. Our previous management adopted a policy of as little disclosure as possible but under the new management we are changing now. We would include

more and more non-financial issues in future to make ourselves more transparent and accountable. Even two years back this attitude was not there. (Interviewee 14)

Every company has a social responsibility, which needs to be communicated through social disclosures. In our country awareness in this regard has not been created as yet. (Interviewee 10)

To be honest we do not have much idea about how to develop this sort of thing but we are moving slowly. You will see the difference between this year's report and that of ten years back. More disclosures are coming up. Eventually it will come. (Interviewee 12)

Related to the prevailing unawareness of the CSR issues some interviewees alluded to the lack of developed corporate culture. One fairly typical comment illustrates this point:

Moreover, corporate culture is yet to develop here. Most of the companies here are still family owned. Until and unless corporate culture is fully developed you wouldn't see much social disclosure. (Interviewee 9)

Another issue surrounding the unawareness of CSR reporting is the lack of demand for disclosures. Several interviewees highlighted this lack of demand for voluntary disclosures. For example one interviewee commented:

The company does not feel the necessity of these disclosures as there is no demand for disclosure of these issues. (Interviewee 7)

### *Poor Performance and Fear of Bad Publicity*

Two more factors, which conflict with the lack of awareness suggested above, for not disclosing relate to the fact that companies were not actually undertaking enough social activities and that additional disclosure could bring adverse publicity, particularly if the disclosures are not positive. For example, defending the silence on the issue of equal opportunity one interviewee says,

We don't do that because it is not an issue for us. We don't have any written equal opportunity policy. But in our job advert we do say that we're an equal opportunity employer. We wouldn't disclose it because we've got significantly low number of female employees. It has to be shown

in a more practical way. Otherwise it'll give a distorted picture. (Interviewee 4)

Several companies refrained from disclosure because of a fear of bad publicity:

.....on certain areas, for example, child labour and right to collective bargaining, we are not good performers. So we don't want to disclose this negative aspect because of the fear of bad publicity at home and abroad [foreign buyers]. (Interviewee 20)

I don't want to disclose anything beyond statutory minimum requirements. I think that's enough. Why should I go for extra disclosures that might create bad and adverse publicity? (Interviewee 13)

In one case the fear of bad publicity was probably exacerbated due to criticism by the media and environment protection agencies of the environmental pollution it has created. The company preferred to remain silent on this issue, fearing further criticism.

We're already under tremendous pressure (closure, penalty, etc.) from the Department of Environment (DoE) and don't want to add fuel to the fire by disclosing our weaknesses. (Interviewee 18)

Here we see evidence that in some cases there is a conscious decision to suppress information due to the negative nature of the underlying performance.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusions**

According to our interviewees, the main reasons for non-disclosure include lack of resources, the profit imperative, lack of legal requirements, lack of knowledge/awareness, poor performance and fear of bad publicity. In this section of the paper we discuss the merit of these reasons further. Firstly, we were told by our interviewees that their companies, based and operating within a developing country, cannot afford the resources for CSR reporting. This immediately gives an indication as to how the 'rules of the game' fail to prioritise these issues in contrast to those of profit,

which we discuss in more detail later.

The absence of CSR reporting due to a lack of regulation could be explained with reference to the argument that disclosure is often made in response to the demand from state agencies in the form of formal regulation (Boden, 1999; Jackobs & Kemp, 2002) as well as from non-governmental, or social institutions, in the form of informal regulation<sup>8</sup>, such as social pressures, sanctions and boycott (Tilt, 1994). While environmental reporting in some developed countries like Spain (Larrinaga, Llena, Moneva, Carrasco, & Correa, 2002) results from mandatory requirements, CSR reporting in the UK for example is, by contrast, a response to demand from social constituents. In Bangladesh neither formal nor informal regulation presently requires companies to disclose. Formal regulation could legally require companies operating within Bangladesh to publish CSR reports generally and more specifically to disclose on relevant eco-justice issues such as child labour, poverty alleviation and equal opportunities. In the absence of effective legal enforcement mechanisms, however, it is doubtful to what extent formal regulation will be helpful in this regard (Khan & Belal, 1999). Therefore such formal regulation would, we believe, require international support and resources if it is to be made to work in a ‘developing’ country such as Bangladesh and this appears unlikely at the present time. On the other hand, we must consider whether emerging pressure groups in Bangladesh could become sufficiently organised and powerful within Bangladesh to force companies into disclosure. As referred to earlier some studies have shown that such pressures can lead to an increase in disclosure, but against this we must remember that the vast majority of non-

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<sup>8</sup> This is referred to as ‘civil regulation’ by Parkinson (2003).

mandatory disclosure is of a positive nature. Hence, from experience to date, we suspect that it is unlikely such informal regulation would be sufficient to overcome the poor performance and fear of bad publicity motivation for silence. Thus, the absence of CSR reporting can be, at least partly, explained by the absence of key state and social institutions, a finding that also accords with several previous studies (Adams, et al., 1995; Gao, et al., 2005; Kuasirikun & Sherer, 2004; Naser & Baker, 1999).

The absence of CSR reporting due to a lack of knowledge/awareness and resources may be particularly relevant in the context of developing countries. It is true that corporate managers in developing countries need necessary training to achieve the required skills and knowledge to be able to embark on CSR reporting activities, which would require commitment of additional resources that might be lacking, particularly in domestic companies, as suggested by some interviewees. These factors have not been emphasised in the prior literature but could provide additional explanation for the absence of CSR reporting in developing countries. No doubt there is a need for capacity building in developing countries for them to develop necessary expertise in CSR reporting (Belal & Owen, 2007). At the same time we would argue there is also a need to have fundamental change in the corporate mindset to be able to view CSR reporting as a mechanism for discharging accountability and promoting transparency in business practices (Medawar, 1976) rather than using it as a reputation building tool (Owen, et al., 2001; Owen, et al., 2000).

The above discussion and analysis shows that lack of regulation, lack of awareness and

lack of resources go some way to explain absence of CSR reporting in general. A more disturbing explanation, however, lies in poor performance and a reluctance to disclose negative news which might lead to adverse publicity and the identified need for profits. Our study provides evidence that companies are unlikely to disclose negative information voluntarily, but also see some instances where positive CSR activities were not disclosed for fear of a negative shareholder response. We now return to political economy of accounting to consider whether this can help us further explain this absence of reporting. One study that successfully used political economy of accounting to explain corporate equal opportunities (non-) disclosure was that of Adams et al (1995). The study indicated that, by refusing to disclose more, companies effectively control the disclosure agenda and information flow. They only disclose favourable news. As Adams et al. (1995) note,

Accounting reports may selectively fail to communicate information where this is not consistent with business self-interest. Thus non-disclosure is seen as an effective means of intervention and confusion. (P.103)

For example, we noted that in the Bangladeshi context the Labour Inspectorate of the Ministry of Labour and Welfare is under resourced and accused of ineffectiveness, bureaucracy and even corruption. The implication here is that despite employment legislation being in place in Bangladesh there will be a number of companies that do not comply with the provisions of this legislation relating to child labour and other employee related matters. If companies were to disclose such non-compliance they might well alienate their employees and attract public criticism. Also if they were to disclose such failures then it would make the work of factory inspectors easier and might mobilise public opinion to challenge their illegal behaviour, perhaps closing

them down as marginal operations that were not viable without flouting legislation. Thus, by not disclosing companies can potentially avoid adverse publicity and other restrictions on their activities. This raises a question about corporate commitment to the principles of transparency and accountability (Medawar, 1976). We argue that the eco-justice issues highlighted in this paper require urgent attention, but in developing countries like Bangladesh they appear fundamentally incompatible with the business objectives of shareholders' wealth maximisation. In line with political economy of accounting we maintain that silence on these issues is designed to serve corporate interests and benefit powerful stakeholder groups such as management and shareholders (Guthrie & Parker, 1990).

We have noted earlier in this paper that there has been a failure by both government and NGO programmes to address the eco-justice issues of poverty alleviation, equal opportunities and child labour in Bangladesh. There have, therefore, been calls made (PWBLF, 2001; Rugman, 2001) for companies to share the responsibility for such issues in the communities in which they operate. Such calls hope that corporations will act responsibly and provide transparent accounts of their actions. This research, however, indicates that at present the behaviour of, at least, some corporations is not consistent with this hope. Poor performance and a lack of transparency appear prevalent. Should we be surprised? Western civil society may appear outraged by child labour and unequal treatment of women, but Western consumers' desire and purchase cheap products and furthermore Western investors expect maximum returns for their 'hard-earned' investments. Even companies that have been exposed for poor practice do not appear to suffer for long in terms of attracting consumers or investors. These



powerful economic stakeholders may well pay lip service to eco-justice issues, but the economic imperative is clear. We are particularly concerned about the systemic nature of the problem here which encourages uncritical acceptance of unbridled growth/profit as a measurement of success/progress (Catasús, 2008; Chwastiak & Young, 2003; Litvin, 2003). Therefore to expect some voluntary corporate response to these problems is unrealistic given the needs of their powerful economic stakeholders. As we saw earlier one face of power (Bachrach & Baratz, 1972) is the ability to develop and enforce the “rules of the game” and for these Bangladeshi companies the rule of profit seems dominant. Further, the submission of these companies to the “rules of the game” is unsurprising given the ‘severe deprivations’ that may follow any divergence from them.

Let us consider further the plight of a family living in poverty in Bangladesh where an important wage earner is a child. Firstly, in the current circumstances does the family have any option other than requiring their child to work? Lukes (2005), citing Nussbaum (2000, p.43) suggests that a person who has no viable options cannot be said to “really endorse the lives they lead”, but this could also be the case if the choices available are ‘loaded’. In this case individual action by the family is likely to be purely detrimental to their own financial position. Perhaps, instead, the government could outlaw child labour and successfully enforce this. Again in these circumstances such a family will simply be economically worse off and suffer more in terms of poverty. Perhaps, as a corollary to these developments, the Bangladeshi Government could manage to compensate the family for the child’s lost earnings (through a benefits system financed through taxation?) or enforce higher wages to be paid to adult workers.

The result here will be higher costs to corporations, which therefore become less competitive in the global market place. The response of shareholder wealth maximising companies is obvious - move on to a different low cost environment where there is less cost and interference from legislation. Multinational corporations apply “economic criteria” to “choose among various legal systems” (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007, p. 1101). As Harvey (2000) writes, one of capital’s powerful weapons is the ability to “move production processes across space (much of it, of course, to so-called developing countries where working-class organization is weakest)”. Furthermore, he argues that capitalism is continually using ‘spatial fixes’ (p. 54) to help solve, at least in the short term, the many crises of capitalism. In this scenario the loss of this business would disadvantage further the Bangladeshi economy and a country that is already one of the poorest in the world would simply be made worse off. Such is the nature of the globalised capitalist system in which these corporations operate. In the words of Harvey (2000, p. 81) this globalization:

“renders whole populations selectively vulnerable to the violence of down-sizing, unemployment, collapse of services, degradation in living standards, and loss of resources and environmental qualities... It does all this at the same time as it concentrates wealth and power and further political-economic opportunities in a few selective locations and within a few restricted strata of the population.”

The systematic imperative for profits requires companies to operate in certain ways that continue to gather wealth and power within a select minority of the global population. The possibility of individual companies and/or governments to change the system appears unlikely and Harvey (2000, p. 234) argues that “real political change arises out of simultaneous and loosely coordinated shifts in both thinking and action across several scales”. This paper contributes to the CSR reporting literature by identifying

and discussing the absence of CSR reporting from a developing country context. In doing so it identifies some key reasons for the absence of CSR reporting in general and some eco-justice issues in particular which are of concern to the wider public. Drawing on political economy of accounting and power we argue that this absence is due to structural inequalities and the uneven power relations in modern society. We are also mindful of the concerns raised by Hanlon (2008) and Llewellyn (2007) that CSR itself could actually further increase the rights and powers of these organisations. In light of our work we call for further research to uncover the silencing of injustice and also to gain, in the words of Harvey (2000) the “courage of our minds” (p. 255) “to think strategically and tactically about what to change and where, about how to change what and with what tools.” (p. 233)

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Number	Disclosure categories	Total (N=87)
1	SA Standards	9(12)
2	Mission/Vision Statements	21(24)
3	Separate policy for social, ethical and environmental matters	6(8)
4	Board level responsibility/committee to deal with these issues	0(0)
5	Child Labour	0(0)
6	Health and Safety of Employees	3(3)
7	Equal opportunities towards women/broader gender issues	0(0)
8	Industrial Relations	16(18)
9	Human Resource Development	45(62)
10	Poverty alleviation	3(4)
11	Rural and agricultural development	4(5)
12	Corruption	1(1)
13	Other socio-economic issues	39(45)
14	Observation of various national ceremonies	4(5)
15	Value Added Statement	26(30)
16	Contribution to National Exchequer	25(29)
17	Technological factors	27(31)
18	Attitude towards environmental matters	16(18)
19	Recognition of relevant stakeholders	70(80)
20	Welfare activities	8(9)

(Figures in parenthesis indicate percentage of disclosers in each category)

[Source: Adapted from Belal (2008)]

Interviewee	Sectors	Disclosure Categories																			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
1	Engineering	√								√			√	√				√		√	
2	Food & allied			√						√		√		√					√	√	
3	Pharmaceuticals & Chemicals		√				√		√	√				√		√	√	√		√	
4	Fuel & Power						√		√	√								√		√	
5	Pharmaceuticals & Chemicals									√							√	√			√
6	Leather								√	√				√			√		√	√	
7	Misc.		√						√	√						√			√	√	
8	Bank			√						√	√							√		√	
9	Cement	√								√						√		√	√	√	
10	Cement									√					√		√	√		√	
11	Pharmaceuticals & Chemicals	√		√						√					√		√	√	√	√	√
12	Leather								√							√			√	√	
13	Textile		√																	√	
14	Bank									√					√				√		
15	Engineering									√					√		√	√			√
16	Food	√	√							√		√		√							√
17	Pharmaceuticals & Chemicals									√						√	√		√	√	√
18	Pharmaceuticals & Chemicals															√	√			√	√
19	Textile								√											√	
20	Textile																			√	
21	Jute														√					√	
22	Pharmaceuticals & Chemicals																			√	
23	Engineering														√		√				