Community Relations and the Bibyana Gas Field : A Discussion Document

October 2009

Summary

Whilst at a global level Corporate Social Responsibility is common practice amongst many multinational corporations, the programme of work initiated by Chevron in the communities surrounding the Bibyana gas field is the first project of its kind in Bangladesh. Much of this work has made a positive contribution to the communities involved, but – as with all development and community work – there are lessons to be learnt. We believe that CSR (or 'Community Engagement' as it is termed by Chevron) has the potential for poverty alleviation in Bangladesh, and in this spirit offer this short discussion paper in the hope that our reflections, drawn from our research, might be of use for Chevron in the further development of its programmes, both in Bibyana and elsewhere. We also hope that our work might contribute to national debates surrounding natural resource extraction in Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

- 1.1. This report arises from a research project ('Mining, Social Networks and Livelihoods in Bangladesh') jointly funded by the U.K's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department for International Development (DFiD). All research funded by this joint programme is tasked to focus on poverty alleviation, with practical as well as academic outcomes. The Principal Investigator of the project is Professor Katy Gardner (University of Sussex); the research team in Bangladesh is managed by Professor Zahir Ahmed (Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka). Alongside our interest in the role of Chevron in the area, the research has also focussed on a number of issues not directly covered here: the meanings of globalisation at the 'local' level, the role of migration in transforming social relations, the livelihoods and coping strategies of the poor.
- 1.2. Our findings therefore arise from independent research, in which our ethical commitment is to our informants, the people of Bibyana. We have not been funded by Chevron, and are only interested in assisting their objectives in as far as these might alleviate poverty and add to community development in the area.
- 1.3. It should also be noted that the paper that follows is not a summary of our findings, but a discussion document in which we offer various observations, drawn from our research.
- 1.4. The research was carried out in Bibyana for twelve months from February 08-09, with additional interviews carried out in the U.K in May 2009. In Bibyana the research mostly focussed on the villages Korimpur and Kakura. More generally, the project draws upon the twenty years of research experience that Professor Gardner has in Bibiana, having conducted detailed fieldwork in Nadampur since 1987 (key publications are listed at the end of this report).

- 1.5. The research was largely of a qualitative rather than a quantitative nature, involving interviews with key informants, focus group discussions and the collection of case study material from selected households. For example, we followed various households in each village to chart their livelihood strategies over the year. We also looked at land use, and the coping strategies that people used in times of crisis. Whilst a basic survey was carried out in the villages at the outset of the project (some of this data is given in an appendix at the end of this report), the research is thus anthropological in nature, relying on observations and interviews rather than statistical data.
- 1.6. The Bibyana gas field represents one of the most significant natural gas discoveries in Bangladesh in terms of quality and quantity; the field is now one of the largest in the country. Unlike other gas fields in Bangladesh (for example Jalalbad) Bibiana is situated in a lowland, rice producing region and surrounded by four densely populated villages: Kakura, Korimpur, Firizpur and Nadampur¹. Approximately fifty acres of land were acquired by the government in order to build the field, which has been operated by Chevron since 2007. Issues of safety for the surrounding villages, the environmental effects on agriculture and community relations are therefore of particular pertinence.
- 1.7. As part of their policy of Community Engagement, Chevron has made some positive contributions to the communities of Bibyana. Their programme of development activities is a pioneering example of CSR in action in Bangladesh and therefore contains many lessons, both for Chevron and the wider community of development practitioners. Based on this case, we suggest that there is considerable scope for CSR in Bangladesh, contributing to the ongoing work of NGOs in a context where the state fails to provide for the basic needs of many people. To this extent, MNCs in Bangladesh might be seen as providing the potential for poverty alleviation at the local level, but only so long as good practice is followed. Indeed, our findings indicate that Chevron's contribution to community development in Bibyana is still work in progress and there is scope for further investments, especially for the poorest households. At the end of this report we offer recommendations concerning how a greater contribution to poverty alleviation and community development in the area might be made. In particular, we would encourage the development of links with U.K based villagers, whose charitable contributions could be used to build new initiatives, and ultimately, to make these more sustainable.
- 1.8. Over the period of our research in Bibyana (March 2007-2008) Chevron was contributing to the affected communities in a number of ways. Some of this involved the direct provision of resources (for example, slab latrines, improved stoves, building materials etc) whilst other contributions focussed on what might be termed 'community development', for example scholarships, investments into local schools and infra-structure and the FIVDB managed 'Alternative Livelihoods Programme'. In what follows we do not intend to offer a comprehensive review of each of these

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¹ According to figures provided for a baseline survey produced for Unocal by The Centre for Women and Children's Studies, approximately 697 households are resident in these villages.

activities, but rather to set them in the wider context of community relations, livelihoods and poverty alleviation in the area.

2. Background

- 2.1 Community relations and the social / economic impact of the gas field need to be understood within the specific context of social and economic relations in Bibyana as well as the history of the gas field. Understanding this background will help in the planning of the future Economic and Social Impact Assessments which Chevron is planning to roll out over 2009-2010.
- 2.2. When Chevron took over operations in Bibyana in 2007, community relations were very poor. In 2005 local people had resisted the building of the site by its original operator, Occidental, by holding protests and blockades of the road. Some land owners were threatened with police action unless their land was surrendered. Whilst many people were passionately against their land being acquired and the field being built, rumours also circulated that it would lead to rapid economic growth and economic opportunities for local people. There was (and still is) a widespread perception that since the gas is a local resource, the inhabitants of the surrounding villages should also profit from it. According to the accounts of local people, this was exacerbated by the promises made by officials working for Unocal that many jobs would be created and there would be widespread benefits for all the communities surrounding the plant. Yet whilst the original construction of the plant employed several hundred local people, since its inauguration employment opportunities have been very low. Those jobs that are available tend to be controlled by labour contractors, who usually favour those who are already part of their social networks. All this has exacerbated a widespread sense of grievance against the gas plant, as well as a sense of 'entitlement' to benefits. Other reasons for negative reactions to the plant, will be discussed later in this report.
- 2.3. The communities surrounding the Bibyna gas field have several distinct features. The first is that with the exception of Kakura all are 'Londoni' villages, meaning that many of their members have relocated to the U.K. Whilst a small minority have little to do with their 'homeland', the majority of 'Londonis' remain actively involved in their villages where they usually still own property. It was these non-resident villagers who owned most of the land acquired by the gas field. 'Londoni' villages are economically heterogeneous, with a striking divide between those who own land and other property and those who don't². They have also become partly dependent upon remittances, either from the U.K, the Gulf or other foreign countries. Gardner's previous research shows that local economic hierarchies are dependent upon whether or not families have a member abroad. This means that the richest and most powerful people are either in the U.K for all or much of the time, or are usually closely related to those that are (Gardner, 1995; 2009). In contrast, the poorest households do not have members abroad. For example, in Kakura, the poorest village in Bibyana, only one household has a member in the U.K.
- 2.4. Many people in the area are largely dependent upon remittances from the U.K, either directly or indirectly through the charitable support given by British based relatives. Indeed, there is a widespread expectation that when these relatives (or anyone from abroad) come to the area, they should provide material help for the local

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² As a 'good enough' indicator of poverty, we looked at how many times a day a household ate a meal. Our findings show that the landless households were often eating only once or twice.

poor. Indeed, as Professor Gardner's previous work has shown, this 'help' is a vital safety net for the poor, in a context where the state does not provide for their basic needs. Such help is channelled through patron client relationships, in which the poor can only survive if they develop relationships with wealthier patrons (Gardner and Ahmed, 2006). For example, in order to get medicine, the ultra poor must ask for help from their patrons, be these relatives, employers or neighbours.

- 2.5. It is this cultural / historical context, we suggest, that has partly led to the high level of expectations that local people have of Chevron: since the company is rich, and foreign, they believe, they should act as local patrons and provide material support for the poor. These expectations and sense of entitlement are greatly increased by the fact that the gas plant occupies local land.
- 2.6. Land is a hugely important social, political and an economic resource in all the affected communities. Although there may only be one name on the title deeds, many people are often sustained by a single plot. Whilst most land in Bibyana is owned by 'Londoni' households, or their close kin, the majority is sharecropped out to poorer relatives and neighbours. Although it is therefore not an important source of income for many U.K based Londonis, land is therefore vital for the livelihoods of large numbers of local people, who work as sharecroppers, or are seasonally employed in harvesting and processing activities. For Londonis, the ability to sustain local relatives and neighbours through sharecropping out land is a source of pride and helps them feel connected to 'home'. It is also seen as a resource to be passed down the generations. Its symbolic and emotional value cannot be underestimated. Its loss has therefore led to extreme distress, especially for those landowners who lost the majority of their ancestral plots. This has been an unavoidable aspect of the construction of the plant, and, we suspect, no end of financial compensation could make amends.
- 2.7. Local livelihoods are not normally based on one single resource or employment, but a 'portfolio' of activities which varies over the agricultural season. The main resource on which these activities are based in Bibyana is land, but small businesses and wage labour are also important. It should be noted that the livelihoods of landless households are highly precarious; many depend to a large degree on the support of wealthier kin and neighbours, who supply credit and other forms of support in times of crisis (see Gardner and Ahmed, 2008). As our research, plus that of others has shown, access to credit is vital for the survival of the very poor, in order to bridge the gaps in seasonal employment, or in times of crisis (such as illness) ³.
- 2.8. In contrast to the other villages in Bibyana, Kakura is largely comprised of chronically poor households⁴. Historically, this village was settled by landless labourers employed by people in Nadampur; as Professor Gardner's work has shown, it has always been extremely poor, and has never had the links to the U.K enjoyed by the other communities in Bibiana. The livelihoods of most inhabitants are dependent on local networks of employment and support, either through working as labourers or servants for richer households in nearby villages or through the informal economy (e.g rickshaw driving, begging, engaging in micro-businesses). As our research shows,

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³ See Seeley et al 2005

⁴ We define this as households who own no land or productive resources.

like other very poor households in Bangladesh, economic insecurity is extreme and chronic (see also Seeley, 2005). Before the gas field most households in Kakura would have been dependent upon local land for at least one element of their livelihood, either via sharecropping, using it to graze cattle, gathering firewood or rice grains, or being employed to work on it as labourers. The gas field has had largely negative consequences on the inhabitants of Kakura since their already insecure livelihoods were dependent upon the land based local economy and unlike many households in the other villages they do not have access to remittances from the U.K and other foreign countries.

- 2.9. The basic needs of the majority of the inhabitants of Kakura are not met. They do not have access to a power supply, running water, and do not have a school in the village. They also do not have access to medicines, and (as we explain below) do not tend to use the Smiling Sun clinic. Our research shows that during 2007-2008 many of the inhabitants only ate rice twice, or sometimes once, a day. This was due to the 'price hike' in food staples which took place in Bangladesh during this period. Whilst some good work has been done via FIVDB's Alternative Livelihoods Programme in Kakura, we therefore suggest that more could be done to reach its inhabitants.
- 2.10. Extreme poverty is also found in Korimpur, although not quite on such a large scale as in Kakura. The ultra poor in Korimpur are also more likely to rely on the support of wealthier neighbours in Korimpur, with whom some have long lasting relations of patronage.
- 2.11. Some basic quantitative data on levels of poverty in Kakura and Korimpur is given in Appendix 2 of this report.
- 2.12. In sum, Chevron are working in a complex social and economic environment, where expectations of foreigners are extremely high and there is widespread grievance over the loss of land. Local reactions to the gas plant and to the community development work initiated by the company have to be understood in this context.

3. Community Relations

- 3.1. Chevron's External Affairs Director has dedicated much effort to developing links with local leaders and the planning of community development activities. We believe that in the future these efforts could be further supported by Chevron at several levels, not only for its Bangladesh programmes, but also internationally, so that the complex issues surrounding social development could be understood in more detail. For example, the company could employ a Social Development specialist who could support officials in the planning of their CSR programmes; training could also be provided for these officials (there are a range of short courses available internationally).
- 3.2. Our research indicates that more could be done to broaden participation of poorer households and those from minority communities in Chevron's Community Engagement activities. Local people told our research team that the community liaison officers employed by Chevron very rarely (if ever) visited them. The poorest households that we worked with (which included many Hindu households in Korimpur) also told us that they did not feel they had a channel of communication with Chevron. This could be remedied by employing personnel who work *within* the affected villages, to consult with local people and communicate to them the benefits offered by the Community Engagement Programme. We believe this could be of great benefit to community relations in the area and could, potentially offset future resistance against the plant.
- 3.3. The community development activities of Chevron are administered through the Village Development Organisations (VDOs), which organise the benefits of the FIVDB Alternative Livelihoods Programme, plus other community development benefits (for example scholarships). Whilst the V.D.O members are dedicated to their work, it should be noted that, like most communities, the needs and interests of the inhabitants of the villages of Bibyana are heterogeneous. In the future it would therefore be helpful for membership of the V.D.O.s to be widened so that all sections of the population are represented, including those from landless and Hindu households, as well as women. Several local people suggested that elections and secret voting for V.D.O members would help widen participation.
- 3.4. According to international standards of good practice (for example as laid out by the International Association for Impact Assessment⁵) MNCs working within local communities should institute appropriate grievance procedures and channels of communication between the company and local people. During the period of our research in Bibyana, however, there were no grievance procedures in place, or official channels through which local people (other than local leaders) could contact Chevron staff. We understand that the company is preparing to launch such procedures; if so, its existence should be widely publicised and the processes explained to local people.
- 3.5. FIVDB are generally viewed very positively in the area and have been effective in improving community relations, whilst carving out their own distinct identity. We support Chevron's initiative to work via N.G.O.s in this way. More investments could be made in this direction.

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⁵ info@iaia.org

4. Land Compensation

- 4.1. As contractors for the Government of Bangladesh (who own the land used for the gas field) Chevron are not in direct control of land acquisition processes. It is however clear from our research that given the highly complex national and local political contexts, the company has done its best to negotiate fair compensation to local landowners. We also appreciate that Chevron have worked to ensure that compensation payments were made in good time. The company have also recognised that these payments only compensate the owners rather than the users of the land and for that reason have instituted the 'Alternative Livelihoods Programme', which is run by FIVDB, which is aimed at benefitting previous sharecroppers and labourers.
- 4.2. Despite these efforts, compensation has remained a problematic issue for many people in the area, who have had to go through the local land office to receive their payments. Indeed, none of the landowners who we spoke to in Bangladesh or the U.K were satisfied with the compensation they had received. This was partly due to the prices set for the land, which was perceived to be too low, but also due to the general perception of land as an invaluable resource that is passed down over generations, with multiple uses and deeply embedded cultural meanings. As explained in the opening sections of this report, land is perceived locally as irreplaceable for whilst a compensation payment is finite, it can provide a livelihood for many people for many generations.
- 4.3. Some landowners reported to the research team that they had to pay bribes to land registry officials in order to access their compensation. One reason for this is that land is often not 'officially' registered, but passed informally from one individual to another over the generations, involving oral rather than written contracts. Over the course of the research, we heard from many people that it was common practice for the local land office to take 20% of the compensation money for the 'costs' involved. Whilst Chevron is clearly not in a position to control local land offices, in the development of future programmes in Bangladesh in which land compensation is involved, local level corruption should be considered in negotiating fair deals for land owners.
- 4.4. In the U.K, some landowners told us that land which they legally owned was claimed by local people who were using it.
- 4.5. One way in which landowners might feel better recompensed would be to institute a profit sharing scheme, in which a proportion of profits from the gas field is paid directly to the community and / or individual owners. This could be part of the contract drawn up between Petrobangla and the operating company. A second way would be for agreements to be made concerning the eventual return of the land to owners once the gas supply has run out. This would involve dismantling the gas field and returning the land to agricultural use, if possible.

5. Health and Safety

- 5.1. The inhabitants of Bibyana are extremely concerned about the safety of the gas field. These fears were exacerbated by the flaring that took place in the first year of the plant's operation when due to inadequate warning systems large scale panic ensued.
- 5.2. More efforts could be taken to communicate safety information to the population. For example, pamphlets (aimed at a non-literate audience) might be distributed door to door or community liaison officers employed to visit each household and explain safety issues. If flaring is to take place, villagers should be given appropriate warning and explanation. These simple measures would greatly improve community relations.
- 5.3. Chevron have donated slab latrines to many of the households in Bibyana, making a direct impact on sanitation and hence health and well being in the area.
- 5.3. The Smiling Sun clinics, satellite clinics and ambulances donated by Chevron are an important resource and contribute to the general well being of the area. However, our interviews and observations show that the ultra poor of the surrounding communities do not use these facilities, since the clinic offers only diagnostic services and they cannot afford to pay for the medicines prescribed. We were also told that the fare of a CNG scooter to the hospital in Sylhet Town was cheaper than the ambulance. We make suggestions for how the costs of medicines for the local poor might be covered in the future at the end of this report, which chime with Chevron's plans for a 'Bibyana Trust Fund.'
- 5.4. We gather from our discussions with the Community Engagement team that health cards have been issued for the ultra poor in the communities surrounding the gas field which entitle them to free medicine. We have not done systematic, quantitative research on the local usage of the clinics; however in our discussions with the poorest people in Kakura and Korimpur, the prohibitive costs of medicines were frequently mentioned. This would imply that the ultra poor have not been fully reached by the programme, or that it is not working effectively.

6. Environmental Issues

- 6.1. Farmers reported to the research team that since the establishment of the gas field the quality of soil has changed; the need for extra fertilisers was a recurrent theme in our case studies of livelihood strategies and land use. A major cause of the decline in soil fertility is reported to be the high banked road which links the North and South Pads and which effectively blocks the flow of water across agricultural land during the rainy season, rendering the land less suitable for paddy cultivation.
- 6.2. A number of culverts have been made in the road to enable water to flow from one side to another. The ones we examined in December 2008 were blocked. Local farmers told us they had not been consulted on the design of the culverts, which were too small for an adequate flow of water.

6.3. The road has also hindered livestock from moving freely across land, causing considerable problems for farmers attempting to move their cattle. A bridge or ramp could be built at intervals on the road which would reduce this problem.

7. Livelihoods, Employment and Education

- 7.1. As noted in the introductory pages of this report, the gas field has had a major impact on the livelihoods of households engaging in agricultural activities on the land taken by the field. These tend to be poorer households, who subsisted on sharecropping this land, who were seasonally employed as labourers on it, or who used straw from the harvest to feed their cattle or for fuel. The FIVDB Alternative Livelihoods Programme has gone some way in providing alternative livelihoods for those affected, but needs greater resourcing if it is to make a greater impact.
- 7.2. The research team did not undertake a comprehensive review of FIVDB programmes, which include livestock rearing, training in activities such as sewing and poultry farming, literacy and credit programmes. We did note however that in particular, the Savings programme seems to be working well, although on a relatively small scale; the need for more capital was mentioned by the members of some VDOs. Many people 'shop around' for the best loans, or gain credit through a variety of means (from NGOs, money lenders, relatives etc). Because recipients often live close to the poverty line, these loans are often used to pay for day to day expenses rather than investing in micro-enterprises. Local people told us that they prefer the FIVDB programme because the rates of interest (at 5%) is relatively lower than those offered by the other NGOs working in the area, Grameen and ASA (11-20%). The training offered with the loan was also mentioned as a benefit, as was the flexible conditions under which loans can be repaid. It should be noted that due to the nature of this programme (in which relatively large sums of money are loaned) the beneficiaries are middle income households and not the ultra poor.
- 7.3. An effective way in which Chevron could invest in local livelihoods is to provide more employment at the gas field for local people. Whilst the research team appreciates that the gas field is not labour intensive and that those jobs that are available are for skilled labour, many of these jobs could be performed by local people if appropriate training was provided. However our research shows that most of the skilled labour hired in works associated with the gas field in 2008-09 was drawn from areas outside of Bibyana, via contractors who bring workers from areas such as Sri Mongal, Surnamganj and so on. For example, chefs working inside the field are from outside the area despite the inhabitants of Bibyana having a particular expertise in catering (via 'Indian' restaurants in the UK). More generally, technical training could be provided to local people in order that they can be employed in the gas field, or in other natural gas plants in Bangladesh. A training scheme could be set up to this effect, aimed at the younger generation, many of whom are unemployed.
- 7.4. Where local people are employed, our findings show that they are usually not hired directly by Chevron but via contractors. Interviews with these workers showed that they were not given the employment rights of workers hired directly by Chevron. For example, we found that they had no contracts with the contractors, had no rights to sick pay, and could be dismissed at any time.
- 7.5. The programme of scholarships offered by Chevron is salutary. However, it should be noted that these scholarships are not generally available to the poorest families, since the criteria for obtaining a scholarship is a pupil's rank in school examinations, which the poorest children are not able to compete for since their

families cannot pay for private tuition and so on. In order to widen participation in their education programme, Chevron might therefore consider offering scholarships based on the income of pupils' households.

7.6. In planning future educational programmes and developing policies for reaching the ultra poor, the Community Engagement Team may wish to take the advice of Mr Habib Rahman, who has been working in the NGO sector on functional literacy programmes for many years, and who has been in close contact with the Bibyana area since the 1970s.

8. Building Sustainability

- 8.1. As mentioned at the beginning of this report, many 'Londonis' (ie villagers resident in the U.K) are actively involved in charitable works / community development in their villages. Previous research in the Bibiana region also shows that many of the local poor are dependent upon the charitable support of Londonis (Gardner and Ahmed, 2006). For example, in the U.K. we met residents of Firizpur, who were paying for the education of several very poor children in their village.
- 8.2. There is huge potential here for co-ordinated community development activities in the region which could aid Chevron's plans for sustainable development. Plans for a 'Bibiana Trust', in which Chevron match donations made by 'Londonis' into community development projects, are, we believe, excellent, and would be a positive step towards sustainable development in the area. In order to make this effective, however, efforts should be made to widen participation in the V.D.Os working in different villages and to reach 'Londonis' in the U.K, many of whom have little idea about the initiatives that Chevron have taken in community development.
- 8.3. The research project involves funds from ESRC/Dfid to develop a network for 'users' of the findings. One way this could be put to good use is to hold a workshop in the U.K with the 'Londoni' community in order to discuss how the Bibyana Trust might be developed.

9. Suggestions

- 9.1. More could be done to reach the poorest people in Bibyana, for example by offering scholarships to children from these households, by providing funds for medicines, and increasing the reach of the Alternative Livelihoods Programme.
- 9.2. To strengthen their Community Engagement work in Bibyana, Chevron might consider employing community liaison officers whose job it is to specifically communicate with people in the affected villages, especially the poorest households. In addition, to build upon their existing experience and in planning future CSR initiatives, the company might consider providing training for their officials in social development.
- 9.3. More effort could be dedicated to widening participation in V.D.Os.
- 9.4. Appropriate grievance procedures could be instituted.
- 9.5. More effort could be made by Chevron to communicate safety information to the population. Pamphlets (aimed at a non-literate audience) might be distributed, door to door, or community liaison officers employed to visit each household and explain safety issues. If flaring is to take place, villagers should be given appropriate warning and explanation. These simple measures would greatly improve community relations.
- 9.6. A bridge or ramp could be built at intervals on the road which would allow cattle to move freely across fields. Local farmers should be consulted about where these should be located.
- 9.7. More culverts could be installed in the North to South pad road which would allow water to spread more freely over fields. Local farmers should be consulted on the placement and design of these.
- 9.8. The most significant way in which Chevron could invest in local livelihoods is to provide employment at the gas field for local people, and / or to invest in technical training for young people from the adjacent area to work in the energy sector of Bangladesh.

Appendix 1

Basic Survey Data on Korimpur and Kakura.

i. The following data is drawn from a baseline survey we carried out in Korimpur and gives some indications of levels of relative poverty found in both villages.

Kakura

Percentage of landless households: 83.1%

Percentage living in concrete house: 6.9%

Percentage of inhabitants illiterate: 38%

Monthly household income:

In BDT	Frequency	Percentage
500-2500	15	11.53
2501-4500	51	39.23
4501-6500	39	30.0
6501-8500	8	6.15
8501-10500	9	6.92
10501-12500	8	6.15
12501+	8	6.15
Total	130	100.0

Korimpur

Percentage of landless households: 76.8%

Percentage living in concrete houses: 26.8%

Percentage of inhabitants illiterate: 28.6%

Monthly household income:

	Frequency	Percentage
500-2500	24	21.42
2501-4500	28	25.0
4501-6500	33	29.46
6501-8500	9	8.0

	1	.89
12501+	6	5.35
Total	112	100

PROFESSOR KATY GARDNER

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- * 'Transnational households and ritual: an overview.' 2002 In *ibid* pp179-191 (co-authored with Ralph Grillo)
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- * Special edition of Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies: *'Through Children's Eyes: Transnational Migration Reconsidered.'* co-edited with Kanwal Mand; (publication due 2011).
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