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## **INSTITUTIONAL TAKE-OFF or SNAKES and LADDERS**

***DYNAMICS AND SUSTAINABILITY OF LOCAL-  
LEVEL ORGANISATIONS IN RURAL  
BANGLADESH***

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*Group Cohesion Index*  
*NGO Involvement Index*

## PREFACE

The following study by Aruna Rao and Syed Hashemi represents a slight departure for INTRAC's Occasional Papers Series, in that it sets out to analyse in detail the elements of village-level institutional development. In contrast, much of INTRAC's work has focused upon institutional development of NGO and civil society groups in their wider context as well as the organisational development of the same organisations. We believe that it is important to portray the complete range of issues around institutional development in part as a reminder of the difficulties at a community and individual level which studies from a more general perspective may be in danger of under-estimating. The sub-title of this study - snakes and ladders - gives us a clue to the reality in Bangladeshi villages as portrayed herein, as serious attempts at local institutional development flourish, but are then set back, and recover only later over the period of the study.

It would be wrong to regard this study as being critical of the particular NGOs and their work in Bangladesh which provides the core examples described; rather it is an honest assessment of the local-level factors which constrain and enhance the work of NGOs engaged in programmes of 'empowerment'. The study concludes that over time many local factors must be confronted by an NGO if it is to have longer-term sustainable impact. Reading this paper should be a must not only for NGOs trying to run similar programmes but also for donors. The conclusions of the paper are clearly that donors and others should not expect dramatic changes in communities in unrealistically short time spans. The two-year project may have a bureaucratic value but it clearly has none in trying to understand the pressures and flow of life in resource-poor communities with locally entrenched interests which work against greater equity, greater gender equality and access to public resources for the poor and marginalised.

Furthermore, many of the setbacks experienced by the NGOs reviewed in this study must be seen against the strong pressures at local levels working against the organisations of the rural poor, and the conclusion which emerges that sustainable organisations are in these samples dependent for many years on strong external agents with long-term commitments. One might almost say that for profound structural change to occur we are looking at commitments from NGOs and others to span the generations before we can realistically expect to see new gender and class relationships fully established.

A sub-theme of the study is the tension between NGOs offering short-term economic gains and those devoted to longer-term social change. This debate is in the forefront of thinking in Bangladesh which on the one hand has given the world many models of credit delivery for example, but which on the other hand remains one of the world's poorest countries and one with many traditional power structures effecting poor groups, especially women. The study shows the skill and patience required to deal with local politics and social relations where there are tensions between 'class relations' and 'kinship' which may well be intertwined at a community level, and where traditional leaders may simultaneously play progressive roles in one sphere but remain also very concerned with their own self-interests in the other. In conclusion, the study casts doubts on the impossibilities of transformational change merely through economic (credit etc.) programmes, but also argues that programmes of 'empowerment/ conscientisation/local institutional development' must also include some evidence of concrete gains (economic/land etc.).

If the reader is convinced through this study that local institutional development requires longer-term rather than superficial engagement by NGOs with communities then we feel we will have achieved our aim in this publication.

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## Introduction

The folklore about village groups or organisations formed by external agents such as NGOs for socio-economic and political empowerment is that at a certain point in their life cycle these groups attain sustainability, meaning 'graduation' from the NGO with the ability to continue as corporate units post-NGO withdrawal. After this point it is assumed that such groups require little or no NGO support. Underlying this notion is the assumption that poverty stems from a lack of access to scarce economic resources and that once a channel to such resources has been established it can continually be harnessed. If challenged, many development policy-makers and practitioners would agree that these assumptions are faulty. Nevertheless, the paradigm continues to exert a powerful normative influence in shaping both development policy and practice.

In contrast to this model of institutional development, we begin with the assumption that poverty is created and reproduced through structural inequalities in resource endowments, income distribution and power. Thus, as village-level organisations or groups 'develop', they pit their interests first against the local power structure and then against the state, and in this process, the role of the NGO as political patron and broker becomes more rather than less critical for success. In such a model, group sustainability, defined as the continuing ability of groups to confront the inequities of the power structure beyond the local level, is contingent upon the political brokerage and support of the NGO.<sup>1</sup>

How can we build an image that accurately captures the life cycle of a village organisation in rural Bangladesh? How can we assess whether a group's life history describes a take-off point after a given period of intensive NGO support or a complex and unpredictable process of ups and down more like a snakes and ladders board game? To throw light on these issues, we have developed empirically grounded, process documentation on the development of a small sample of local-level groups and their interrelationship with two social mobilisation NGOs in Bangladesh - Nijera Kori and Gonoshahajjo Sangstha. We look at group formation, cohesion, life cycles, sustainability and both individual and collective gains and losses.

In theory if not in practice, we would expect that social mobilisation NGOs focus more of their efforts on building the capacity of village organisations to gain access to existing public and private economic resources and organise for their rights. While credit NGOs in Bangladesh do this as well, it is possible both that the credit-oriented programme targeting would compete with and perhaps even displace institutional-building goals and that the groups' status as loanees would hinder their ability to grow out from under the NGO umbrella and 'graduate'. Thus, groups formed by social mobilisation would seem to have the greatest potential to build sustainability and therefore we believe they are appropriate starting-points for this kind of an inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Group sustainability is also defined in terms of economic graduation, that is, where NGO-provided economic inputs have created assets substantial enough to generate a continuous stream of income so that members are no longer dependent on NGO support. We do not directly engage with this proposition but on the basis of anecdotal evidence predict that this too does not occur. Where there is a shift to higher levels of assets and income, we expect this occurs because of the NGO's role as economic entrepreneur.

## Nijera Kori and GSS

In the credit-dominated NGO landscape of rural Bangladesh, Nijera Kori and Gonoshahajjo Sangstha are unique. Both are social mobilisation NGOs working to empower the poor through collective actions. Both operate at a national scale and neither provides credit to their landless groups.<sup>2</sup> Nijera Kori is concerned with building the power of landless groups for broader community action. GSS is ultimately interested in promoting the participation of the landless in decision-making structures of the state. The two have a similar field-level outreach: GSS is slightly larger with over 114,000 people organised into 1500 village committees in early 1995 in its social mobilisation programme. At the end of 1993, Nijera Kori had an outreach of 112,208 members, 49% of whom were women organised into close to 5000 groups.

Nijera Kori works to build the self-reliance of groups, strengthen the capacity to demand their rights, fight injustices and make claims on public resources. Nijera Kori staff act as catalysts to group consciousness raising, formation and development. They also train group members in class analysis and the nature of exploitation as well as the more mundane aspects of group management such as keeping accounts. They organise cultural programmes to strengthen class consciousness and hold annual conventions of landless groups. Initially, Nijera Kori provided no services or resources directly to the poor but rather served as a link to existing public and private services and resources. This approach was modified as village organisations got involved in legal cases and began implementing income-generating projects. Now Nijera Kori provides legal aid and some technical assistance to income-generating projects.

GSS' s major goals are poverty alleviation and people' s empowerment leading to their involvement in democratic processes. It began in 1983 with adult education and social mobilisation in the Khulna area; social mobilisation continues as a core programme of GSS. Its other programs - legal aid and education, popular theatre, health education and more recently income-generation projects in collaboration with the World Food Program - are aimed at buttressing the sustainability of the village committees and their federated structures. The largest programme of GSS is its non-formal primary education programme which covers over 60,000 children throughout the country. Its most recent venture is an advocacy centre aimed at building coalitions with like-minded NGOs and other democratic forces to lobby for major legal and administrative reforms. Through its activities, GSS tries to push the boundaries of what constitutes the debate on democratic processes - what is included and what is possible - and for the same reasons it is controversial. Key to the approaches of both GSS and Nijera Kori is the development and sustainability of village groups and organisations.

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<sup>2</sup> In 1990, Nijera Kori introduced a credit component to its programme in two areas in Noakhali. Many group members in those areas were and continue to be involved in court cases brought against them by landed elites and business interests who are threatened by their claims to 'khas' (government) land. The credit helps these people subsist in a context where much of their time is drawn away by these cases from income earning work.

## Research Sites, Sample and Methodology

Together with our NGO partners we identified two study areas per NGO: Gaibandha in North Bengal and Khulna for Nijera Kori and Khulna and Nilphamari for GSS. The second research sites were chosen for two reasons. First, the comparative data would provide a check on our data from the primary site. Second, we would be able to capture the group mobilisation around specific prominent issues: protest against big business interests in shrimp cultivation for Nijera Kori groups and mobilisation for elections for GSS members. This part of our study was aimed at examining the role of groups and federated structures in conjunction with the NGOs in higher order collective actions beyond the community level.

Ideally, to study questions of group development, action, cohesion and sustainability, we would track a series of groups over a life cycle period of about ten years. As a proxy, we have chosen instead to study intensively a small sample of different types of village-level organisations. Our sample includes new and older groups and women's and men's groups: eight Nijera Kori groups (four male and four female) in four villages and six GSS groups (four male and two female) in five villages. Four of the Nijera Kori groups (two male and two female) were formed relatively recently, that is, between 1985 and 1989 while the remaining four (also two male and two female) were formed between 1980 and 1981. In general, the GSS organisations are younger: three of those in our sample were formed between 1989 and 1993 while the older groups (three in all) were formed in 1987-8.

To understand the phenomenon of group conflict leading to breakup, we also identified three disbanded groups of Nijera Kori and retraced their history through interviews of former group members. Our partner NGOs chose the areas of study and suggested the particular groups for in-depth case study analysis. These included groups they considered good performers and average to poor groups. In addition, our analysis of the shrimp movement led by Nijera Kori groups dealt with the collective efforts of approximately twenty-eight village organisations. The 1992 union parishad election campaign in Nilphamari district organised by GSS village organisations, involved GSS groups in five unions. Thus, while our immediate sample consists of seventeen groups for which we developed in-depth case studies and over seventy case histories of individual group members, we have tracked the work of a larger number of groups in two collective efforts.

The fieldwork was carried out over the course of eighteen months from November 1993 to April 1995. During the first year, we intensively studied the eight Nijera Kori and six GSS groups mentioned above and the shrimp and election issues along with the village organisations and federations involved in them. We also conducted in-depth interviews with NGO staff at local, regional and headquarters levels.

Our data was generated through participant observation of formal and informal group meetings and discussions, and in-depth structured and unstructured interviews with group members, non-members and NGO staff. The research has been facilitated by research teams based in the field. For each of our sample villages we have conducted a village census and put together economic household survival information for a sample of base group members. Based on these data we constructed summary economic profiles for group leaders and members. From group history data and group and NGO staff interviews, we put together a summary analysis on group composition, homogeneity,



solidarity, conflict and factionalism. Based on these data, we also constructed group cohesion<sup>3</sup> and NGO involvement<sup>4</sup> indices and plotted these to map group life cycles.

The purpose of this study is not to draw statistically significant conclusions about the work of these NGOs or to evaluate them. Nor, do we claim generalisability of our findings to all local-level groups in Bangladesh and elsewhere. The history of each group tells its own unique story. Nevertheless, these histories provide us with insights on how different groups would perform under different circumstances and on how group formation and group life cycles are dependent on the tensions and alliances formed by social groups. These insights can be used to examine other groups to determine, predict and analyse their development paths.

## **Summary of Key Findings**

Our findings indicate that group development is a complex, non-linear process which is dependent on a variety of contextual and process factors. Group sustainability is highly dependent on the external change agent - the NGO. Group history is shaped by particular village circumstances such as strong local identities or factional groupings. Group dynamics and participation gains vary by leadership types. Here we posit five typologies - entrenched and emerging patrons to representational and egalitarian leadership patterns to satellite leadership models in which influence is to a greater or lesser extent abdicated in favour of another strong group - which influence the development of groups and the distribution of benefits. We found that group cohesion which measures the level of involvement of members and their sense of identity with the village organisation over time, is galvanised by group actions such as 'khas' land take-overs and strategising for local-level elections but it is sustained by economic and social gains and the support of the NGO. Conflict within groups is common and groups break down frequently.

Class solidarity, our findings indicate, is difficult to sustain and often breaks down because of economic heterogeneity in groups, factional and kinship loyalties, state repression, limits in NGO supports and the sheer overwhelming poverty of members which disallows continued participation. Finally, our look at women' s groups shows their eagerness to get involved in collective actions and the resourcefulness of their leaders. Despite their strengths poor women remain dependent on men' s groups or the NGO staff to broker resource access and deal with state mechanisms such as the police and local administration. And despite their triumphs in participating in and in some cases leading poor people's struggles, they still face physical abuse at the hands of their men.

The report focuses on two broad areas of investigation: the institutional dynamics of local-level organisations, and the impact of collective economic, social and political

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<sup>3</sup> The Group Cohesion Index is an approximate measure of the level of group involvement and sense of group identity with a village organisation over a period of time. The level of involvement increases as group actions move from the village to the larger community and from individual to collective gains. The Index does not indicate whether the group activities are group- or NGO-driven. It also does not make a statement about whether the poor form a homogeneous group or whether the groups are egalitarian.

<sup>4</sup> The NGO Involvement Index is an approximate measure of the level of NGO involvement in group formation, activities and development. It is a composite which weighs intensity of effort and regularity of contact and takes into consideration types of involvement in village and beyond village spheres.

actions on group development. In the first section, we examine the factors that influence group formation including the village context (village resource profiles, local group identities, factional formations and local political history) and NGO actions and processes. Then we then analyse the relationship of leadership typologies in shaping group dynamics, the distribution of gains and group sustainability. Next, we examine group cohesion and map group life cycles in relation to NGO involvement with groups. The next section analyses collective actions of groups - economic, social and political - and discusses both their impact on group sustainability and the limits to collective actions. Then, we summarise the gender differences in institutional dynamics, development and sustainability. In this section we profile a GSS women' s group and tell the stories of two women members - one from a Nijera Kori samity and another from a GSS gonoshonghoton. The concluding section summarises the main findings of our study.

## **Institutional Dynamics of Village Organisations**

Group formation is a common strategy employed by rural development organisations in Bangladesh, but no two village-level organisations look alike. Features of group formation, leadership, NGO involvement, conflict management and gains all figure in to shape these organisations. In this section, we identify some of these key features and analyse their effect on development and sustainability of village-level organisations.

### ***Group Formation***

When an NGO enters a village to form groups, it enters a complex landscape in which people are linked and separated by kinship, factions, religious and economic identities and membership in local organisations and informal networks. Just as in each village this set of configurations differs, the initial impetus or motivation of people to form a village organisation does as well. In each context, the NGO actions and group formation process may take on a different shape and encounter different kinds of resistance. Woven together, this history of group formation influences the development of those groups.

### ***Context***

Four aspects of context appear to be especially relevant to formation of groups or village-level organisations: area or village resource profiles; strong local group identities; factional formations; and local political history.

### **Village Resource Profiles**

In resource poor areas (or in the case of groups with very few resources) we find that poor people will seize opportunities to channel resources to them both because of their need and the fact there are so few organisational forms and economic opportunities available. In such circumstances people will take higher social risks to form a village organisation and be highly motivated to keep it going because if they lose that, they lose everything. This is most true for poor women as evidenced by some of the oldest women's village organisations in our sample. They are Nijera Kori groups formed in the early 1980s in Gaibandha in Shaghata thana in north Bengal. By any standard this area is dirt poor: much of the land is char land yielding little, infrastructure is scarce and you have to walk miles on mud paths which turn from dust bowls in the dry season to quicksand with the monsoon, before you see a road. This was one of the first areas in Bangladesh where driven by overwhelming poverty, poor women walked miles from their homes to work on food for work projects in the mid-1970s. The two villages in this area which we studied - Khammarpabantair and Madhypabantair - registered the highest number of chronic deficit households in our sample.

In late 1978, during the lean month of 'Kartik', some female beggars from Khammarpabantair informed Kasmati and her sister-in-law, Rasheda, that three miles away in Halder char, the government was paying women wages for clearing away sand from 10-12 acres of land to make it cultivatable for soy and peanuts. Additional women were needed. 'Why suffer for lack of food', they said, 'if you go and work there you will get one and a half seers of wheat a day.' Kasmati took six women with her and started work on the land. Many women did not go. The work was far away and they feared conversion to Christianity by those unknown project people. But 500 women from

nearby unions including Shaghata did go. In the beginning each woman received her fair share of wheat but as time passed their allotment was decreased until they received no wheat for the last three months of work. To protest this, 500 women went by train to the local member of parliament (MP) in Gaibandha and surrounded his house. To calm them down he gave them 'khichuree' to eat and slaughtered a goat. After the agricultural work was completed the women went to Halder char to collect their wheat. There they met Hazrat Ali, a Nijera Kori worker who was talking to various people about forming village organisations. The Shaghata women asked Kasmati and Rasheda to call Hazrat to their village. For some months, Kasmati put Hazrat Ali up in her own house and these two women together with Hazrat Ali formed women's groups in nearby villages. Their efforts gave birth to the oldest Nijera Kori women's groups in Gaibandha.

The corollary to our first proposition is that in areas with greater resource availability including different types of NGO offerings from which to choose, motivation to form a group will be lower. The Arua women's village organisation is a case in point. The GSS field worker, Siraj first went to Arua village in 1989. When he took his meals at Khairun's mother's house he would talk to Khairun and her cousins about how the poor can stop exploitation by the wealthy by starting a village organisation. He sent Khairun to Khulna for training by GSS on how to run an adult school. The school operated for a few months after which attendance dropped because Khairun could not adequately explain the lessons to the women and Siraj stopped coming to the village. After a lull of three years, a well-off villager's son Samad was hired as a GSS village worker. He reformed the organisation by coaxing his mother, sisters, aunts and cousins to join. He appointed his mother president of the organisation and re-started adult schools. Most of these women were also involved in local NGOs which disbursed loans. After two years, the number of members has fallen off considerably and the organisation is inactive. Some left because they doubted they would get back the subscription money they gave to the cashier. Most lost interest after they discovered that GSS did not provide loans. They told us: 'We are involved in other organisations and we have our household work to take care of. We cannot spare time for the Gonoshongton.'

This case illustrates the general proposition that in an environment of scarce resources, social mobilisation programmes without any immediate provision of economic resources have greater difficulty in attracting membership than do credit programmes. In our sample, the poorer women such as those in Shaghata articulated an interest in pursuing both economic and social justice issues through the village organisation while relatively better-off women (such as the Arua members), who do not work for wages were almost exclusively interested in getting loans from the organisation. However, we believe this difference has more to do with what the NGO did and did not offer in Gaibandha rather than any nuanced class-based difference. Despite unclear economic gains, men, however, may be more willing than women to engage in group activities if they perceive possibilities for gaining public status through social mobilisation efforts.

### **Local Group Identities**

The fault lines that shape identity in a village are numerous but in the case of the Bashata men's village organisation a common group experience (as distinct from traditional identity dimensions of kinship, factions or caste) evolved into the basis of group formation. The strength of this identity plays a major role in the group's sustainability.

For a comprehensive picture of this organisation's origins we need to look to the history of collective- interest formation and coalition-building in the Bashata area beginning in the 1970s. In the days before 1972 this area was dominated by the Mondol family, large landowners for whom most existing factions members worked. The first breakaway coalition was led by Solaiman, the current union parishad chairman, Saydur (a UP member), Jabbar (current president of the Bashata organisation) and others in 1973 who formed an organisation called 'Mitali Sangha' for co-operative income-generation activities. Members saved ten taka a month to develop a revolving fund, registered the organisation and received monetary support from the social welfare department. But over the course of some years, it became clear that there was a difference of opinion over how to utilise samity funds between the president, Solaiman and the others. Solaiman wanted to confine the activities of the organisation to celebrating important occasions and arranging competitions rather than forming economic projects. Dissatisfied with the direction the organisation was taking, Jabbar and others broke away once again and formed an organisation with sixty people called 'Chinnyamul Samity' in Kachhuahat (the nearby bazaar town) specifically for landless and marginal farmers. Members saved five taka a month and within two to three years were able to mortgage in land for cultivation and lease in ponds for fish farming. From the beginning this samity faced the opposition of Arman Mondol, the chairman of a nearby union and head of the Mondol clan who considered the Chinnyamul group a threat to his political influence. The Chinnyamul group actively opposed and repeatedly defeated Mondol's bid for union parishad chairmanship in Shaghata.

Jabbar was one of many families in Bashata area who resettled here because they lost their land, which lay to the east of the village, to river erosion. This identity stigmatised them in the eyes of other villagers. According to them these newcomers bought away land and crowded the village. Local landowners refused to mortgage out land to river erosion families. This identity became a liability to Jabbar when he stood for election as president of Chinnyamul. All the non-river erosion members supported the rival candidate, Nikku, a native of Kachhuahat. Even though Jabbar won the election by one vote fighting off the accusations and threats of Armon Mondol, the opposition from the non-river erosion families took its toll. He wanted to form an organisation where his identity as a river erosion person would not be a liability and through which he could pursue his ideas without opposition. He discussed this idea with his community who gave him their support. Jabbar then approached Nijera Kori about forming a Nijera Kori samity in Bashata village with thirty river erosion members. This samity was formed in late 1985 with forty-five members.

The Bashata samity formation is part of a larger process of building political and economic power. This takes two forms: formation of organisations and fight for local political positions such as union parishad membership. Initially this involves opposition to a very powerful family like the Mondols. This initial fight results in the formation of a new rival organisation or the take-over of an existing organisation by replacing of incumbents with new people. The second feature is that over time, the initial opposition group divides into a variety of faction/kin groups led by strong leaders as the interests of leaders differ and new short-term political formations based on a different set of groups/factions coalesce. The important aspect of both processes is that it is centred around the interests of leaders who mobilise a following and that the organisations are similarly structured in a two-tier system of leaders and followers rather than in a mould of homogeneous interest groups of the poor. In the case of the Bashata men's village organisation it is instructive to remember that Jabbar was approached in 1982 by Dulu (an ex-Chinnyamul Samity member who joined Nijera Kori later as a field-worker) to

form a samity but refused because at that time it did not serve his purpose. In 1985 however, when interests coalesced into a different configuration, the time was right.

### **Factional Formations**

Factions are fluid coalitions that cross kin lines in a conflict or struggle for power. What is the connection between faction formations and motivation to form and continue a group? We find that in areas where successful factional formations provide resources to members, factions override class as a basis of grass-roots organising. In highly volatile (social/political) local contexts where factional infighting is the rule rather than the exception, the village organisation has a lower chance of developing group cohesion and a higher chance of breaking up. In areas where there are complex but clear factional groupings, the village organisation is clearly not the only mechanism available for the leaders/members to pursue their goals. Because it is needed less, it is more susceptible to a pattern of disuse, or abuse. This scenario reflects the experience of the Giridharnagar and Arua men's village organisations of GSS in Keshabpur thana in Jessore district.

In Giridharnagar village there are three factional groupings: the Gazi faction led by Rashid Gazi; the Sardar faction led by Samad Sardar and Hamid Sardar and another Sardar faction led by Hossain Sardar. These faction leaders are prominent in the village organisation. At the time of the study, Rashid Gazi was president of the village organisation, and Hamid was secretary. Hossain Sardar was a prominent member. To a large extent this reflects the dominance of the factions in village life but also reflects the perception of both the NGO staff and villagers about who is most eligible for leadership of the village organisation. Leaders have to spend time on the organisation's business and may have to go to distant places at short notice. A poor person goes without food if he or she does not work for the day. Thus, those who can afford the time for the organisation are the better-off. In the case of Giridharnagar, an additional twist is involved. GSS first entered this village in 1986 and started a school in late 1987 which lasted but a month under heavy opposition from wealthy landowners who called them 'naxals'. When a the new field-worker Siraj, came to the village in July 1989, he made sure that these prominent faction leaders were part of the village organisation because they were related to the wealthy families and could deflect such criticism. There are significant economic differences between leaders and members of the village organisation.

The factions are coalitions in struggles over resource control and status. The Samad and Hamid Sardar group supports Rashid Gazi against Hossain Sardar. Hossain Sardar and Rashid Gazi are former business associates. Hossain Sardar alleges that Rashid Gazi embezzled the capital from their former business while Rashid claims that a money-lender stole it. Rashid settled his dues with Kabir chairman (who was also involved in this business venture) from the adjacent village of Arua but has not done so with Hossain Sardar despite several 'shalishes' having called for this in the village. Hossain Sardar joined in order to use the organisation to support his bid to regain his shop which he earlier sold to a Hindu man in the village. Rashid was against this and in the ensuing fight Hossain Sardar left the organisation taking his followers with him. This long-standing fight almost ripped apart the village organisation.

In another conflict, the Samad Sardar faction supports Rashid Gazi in his land dispute against the Sajjad Gazi group (a smaller Gazi group which lives on Rashid Gazi's land) while the Hossain Sardar faction supports Sajjad Gazi. The history of this dispute is that one member of the group, Daud Gazi, wanted to marry one of Rashid's cousins and gave

her some betel leaves so that she would fall in love with him. The girl died of cancer (the doctor said she had a lump in her throat) and Rashid blamed Daud for feeding her betel leaves. Rashid tried to evict Daud and the others but the village 'shalish' decreed that no one could be evicted from their homestead. This feud is still brewing.

### **Local Political History**

The Jessore-Khulna region is highly politicised in that it has for a long time been the stamping-ground for left parties which later were driven underground. GSS chose this area to work in first because its ideology, form of organising and its language (modelled as they were after left party organising) were known and acceptable to the people in the area and it could recruit ex-left party cadres for its organising work. People simply accepted GSS as another radical organisation. In these early years GSS acted like a political party organising against rich landlords' and the state too viewed GSS this way. Because of this history some men who later became GSS village organisations leaders such as Rashid Gazi (president of Giridharnagar men' s organisation) and Altaf Biswas (secretary of Arua village organisation) had apprenticed earlier with left parties. So while entry into this political landscape was easy for GSS it provoked the same kind of opposition from wealthy landlords. Ironically, it simultaneously faces difficulties forging alliances with left parties who view it as an encroacher on their turf.

### **Felt Need or Imposed Agenda?**

Implicit in the discussion above is whether the formation of a village organisation is a response to a felt need as in the case of the Bashata men' s organisation or an imposed agenda. Many NGOs have an explicit or implicit agenda to expand. Part of the message transmitted to village leaders in GSS organised training is to form more groups. This is also the mandate of field-level workers of Nijera Kori. The danger of this numbers game is that groups are sometimes formed solely to bolster the statistics. Where the impetus to form a village organisation is imposed rather than a felt need, the likelihood of it becoming dysfunctional (as in the case of the Arua women's village organisation), a female adjunct to a men' s group (Bashata women' s group to Bashata men' s group) or a male satellite to a more powerful men' s samity (Khammardhonaroha men' s organisation to Bashata men' s organisation) is high.

Such groups can become stagnant and operate solely on the egging of the NGO staffer. The Khammardhonaroha women' s samity, for example, where leadership is dominated by better-off women who are close kin of the men' s samity leaders in the same village, the group acts like an extended patriarchal family set-up. Women leaders take instructions from their male kin and use the village organisation primarily as a source of small loans for themselves. Their menfolk use them to get access to larger loans from the same fund. But in other cases, the practice of group routines can give birth to the formation of a group identity. Thus, the Bashata women' s samity led by Parul, the wife of the male organisation's leader for example, initiates actions such as protesting incidents of wife-beating (independently of the men' s samity) and collaborates with the men' s group in their economic ventures.

### **NGO Actions/Process**

Added to complex contextual factors which shape group formation and development are the NGO processes themselves, specifically the actions of the NGO field-workers. We should not assume that these actions together form a smooth process. In fact, staff come

and go, members come and go, and new members can come in and change the entire character of the group. NGO processes can be demanding and result in dropout of potential members. For instance, GSS requires the formation of adult schools and completion of the curriculum prior to the formation of village organisations. This is a lengthy process requiring time and effort, but members derive no economic benefit. For poorer members who need to migrate out of their home areas for work or spend evenings making small home-made products such as baskets and mats for sale, the time required for participating in these schools and later in the village organisation can be too costly. On the other hand, this needs to be weighed against the benefits derived from membership especially in times of crisis. In Bashata, after the 1988 floods, Nijera Kori engendered considerable good will through its extensive relief effort and the ensuing aid to agricultural production. But to the extent that the NGO is a channel for outside resources it is also one that is open to abuse. In Arua for example, the GSS worker in cahoots with the local union parishad chairman made what were perceived by members as closed decisions on who would receive relief housing materials. Very few poor people in Arua received any relief and the adult school members were so furious that they stopped attending the schools. Finally, another factor in this stop-and-go process or group formation is rapid NGO staff transfers. Particularly at early stages of group formation, this has a negative impact on building groups. In all instances, the persistence and follow-up of staff in getting the organisation started and operating varies. If staff are absent for long periods - at extreme cases up to two or three years - or are transferred and replaced after working with a group for an extended time, the momentum slows and many steps have to be taken again to restart.

## *2. Leadership Typologies*

Common sense buttressed by research findings suggests that leadership is a critical factor in group dynamics and the development and sustainability of village organisations. But what shapes does leadership take? And how does its particular face affect group dynamics and sustainability?

We have generated a set of five leadership types which we believe covers the spectrum of leadership typologies for village organisations. These are: entrenched patrons; emerging patrons; representational leadership; egalitarian leadership; and satellites. Below we discuss the features of each and their effect on group dynamics and cohesion. In particular, we looked at how leadership relates to homogeneity of interests within the group, internal group decision-making, autonomy from the NGO, and distribution of participation gains (see Table).

### **Entrenched Patron**

We define entrenched patrons as leaders of existing political formations, most commonly factions at the village level, who capture leadership of the newly formed village organisation. Such capture is likely in areas where strong factions already exist and possible where what constitutes 'the poor' is a far more loose definition than that employed by credit NGOs. We associate entrenched patrons with a 'capturing gains ethic', that is, they seize any economic benefits that are garnered through the organisation for themselves rather than for distribution among members. These include: appointment by political cronies to union parishad project positions which provide access to illegally siphoned-off project funds from Food For Work projects and the like; arbitration roles in the community wherein they engineer agreements on the condition



that they receive a share of the settlement monies; and control over the savings of the village organisation (including personally holding the money rather than depositing it in a bank, deciding who gets loans from samity funds, using organisational funds for personal business and consumption etc.). In such organisations, there are significant economic differences among leaders and members with members typically being faction followers related to leaders. In Giridharnagar village for example, where factions define local political struggles, most of the leaders are owner cultivators. All leaders own cattle, and some such as Rashid, the president of the village organisation, own a shallow tube well and a rice business.

Leaders such as Hamid the secretary, use the village organisation in order to pursue a personal agenda. Hamid aimed to use the strength of the village organisation in a shalish to expose his wealthy uncle and regain the land taken by him. In this matter, he consulted his maternal uncle, Tuku Gazi, who is the president of the Arua village organisation. Together they can call on over 200 relatives for support. Hamid used his place as secretary of the village organisation and his understanding of land documents to aggrandise his position. One of Hamid's distant relatives donated a pond of four decimals to the Mashuir family. Hamid uses this pond although he knows that Mashuir owns it. But in order to prevent Mashuir from demanding the pond back, Hamid proposed to assist Mashuir in a long-standing land dispute he was involved in with his uncle. Although both parties have wanted to settle for a long time, Hamid prevents this by pointing out various discrepancies in the documents. To this day, this dispute has not been settled and as a result, Mashuir has not focused on the issue of Hamid's use of his pond. Hamid states that 'no one can make out that I am standing in the way of reaching any solutions. Now I am waiting for the land survey to take place. I shall get the pond written in my name at the time of the land survey when Mashuir will be kept busy in activities to resolve his property dispute with his uncle.'

### **Emerging Patron**

Emerging patrons are leaders of groups who use the village organisation as a base to access resources and parlay it into economic and status gains both for themselves and group members. Emerging patrons are not necessarily economically better-off than group members (although in one of our cases, this is so), but in both our emerging patron scenarios, the leaders were related to powerful and wealthy families with whom they generally maintain good relations. Moreover, they have a strong drive for economic betterment and the political or organisational skills to move forward. Over time, the differences between emerging patrons and members increases substantially to the point where they are in a position to grant economic favours (such as loans) and provide patronage and support in disputes. Despite these differences, members consider emerging patrons as their own.

We associate emerging patrons with a 'collective gains ethic' in that while they may keep the best of the economic rewards of group membership for themselves, they are careful to distribute a portion to members. Their leadership is a drawing card for access to resources for the group as a whole. Most important, they are perceived as fair. This, however, does not preclude some from exacting fees for arbitration services (this is considered normal practice), nor controlling group savings in much the same way as entrenched patrons. The patron model of leadership (both entrenched and emerging) does not describe any of the female samities in our sample but this may have more to do with the structure of opportunities and resources control than any innate gender differences.

In the Bashata men' s village organisation, which is representative of the emerging patron leadership type, over time there emerged a clear difference between leaders and members. Two-thirds of the leaders fall into the surplus category either as owner cultivators or businessmen, own productive assets, access large productive loans (between Tk 5000 to Tk 8000) and sell produce to big dealers. Most leaders have a secondary school education. In contrast, over half the members face seasonal food deficits, most work as day labourers, loan sizes are small and are mainly for consumption and some borrow from leaders. With members, distress sales are common and those who break even do so by engaging in multiple occupations. Most are illiterate. Through a series of arbitrations, Jabbar, the president, increased his own standing in the community and enhanced the reputation of the village organisation. For example, in 1988 a wealthy man in the village was caught having an affair with a poor woman. Previously he had been fined for this same transgression by the union parishad. This time, Jabbar intervened bringing with him forty members of the village organisation. He insisted that the fine be used by the union parishad to set up a primary school in the nearby market town rather than be given to the poor women. The members strongly supported his decision. The chairman of the union parishad took the money and showed the receipts of the construction materials bought for the school to the village organisation members. In another dispute, a rich man tried to take over land belonging to a Hindu widow. When this was presented to a shalish, the man was given permission to take over some land but Jabbar forced the union parishad to call another shalish. Under Jabbar' s leadership, the village organisation members threatened to launch a protest movement against the chairman if he did not overturn his decision. In this way Jabbar ensured that the decision was overturned by the chairman and the land restored to the rightful owner. Jabbar has a clean record and a good reputation; people trust him. He is diligent, has learned about how to run fish farming projects and wisely invests the village organisation funds in economic ventures which he follows carefully. In some cases, members receive wages through their work on these projects, as night guards for example; in all cases, the money earned goes to the organisation's fund which Jabbar controls.

The leadership of Madhyapabantair men' s village organisation, also Nijera Kori group, can also be described as an emerging patron type. Unlike Jabbar, Jassim, the president of Madhyapabantair, is not a successful business entrepreneur. He is not personally well off. He is a labour 'sardar' (leader) with an ability to maintain good relations with a variety of people - rich and poor. He was appointed president of the village organisation in 1981, and in 1983 won a post on the union parishad. He capitalised on his ability to speak well and developed a good relationship with the chairman. He arbitrated a number of disputes (for which he took some money) and began a rice trading business. Unlike Jabbar, Jassim was not seeking a base from which to pursue his own advancement. His aims were more modest. He was looking for work and a way to earn an income. As a member of the union parishad, he was able to direct some resources to village organisation members - VGD cards to village women, day work for men on Food for Work projects etc. - which he did fairly, not asking for bribes. He also maintains the village organisation's fund. Because of his ability to channel resources to organisation members, he is able to influence them. Though roughly half of the members are his relatives, in comparison they have even fewer resources. Most are destitute, having to migrate out for work twice a year. The organisation started with about twenty-six members and grew to sixty when relief materials were distributed by Nijera Kori after the 1988 floods. Currently about half the members are inactive.

## Representational

Although leaders whom we call 'representational' may differ significantly from members in terms of economic and/or educational status, organisational experience such as left party experience, and speaking and negotiation skills (and in this way be similar to patrons), unlike patrons, their leadership does not result in personal economic gains. They are driven by an ideological commitment to the poor. Their motives are not economic gain but collective resource control by the poor, both economic and political. This means that they typically organise around issues such as the take-over of 'khas' land and for political representation in local decision-making bodies such as the union parishad. The Barandi men's village organisation of GSS and the Bashata women's organisation of Nijera Kori fall into this category of leadership.

Barandi is a big village of over 500 households in Paira union (Abhoynagar thana, Jessore district). GSS began work in this area in 1984. The first attempt of Salam, the GSS field worker to send a few villagers for 'teachers training' to start a school was not fruitful. The school lasted for only a short time. The second time around in 1985, Salam sent people like Bhaktiar from Barandi, and Shibupada from Dumurdanga to Khulna for training. This proved more successful. Bhaktiar is educated, worked as a 'madrasa' teacher, was a member of a left underground party and is currently a trade union activist. Shibupada and the others were educated as well and also shared a left party affiliation. They started schools in their villages and clarified the role of the village organisation to villagers who heard from the wealthy that this is a 'naxal' group. They actively publicised the benefits of forming village organisations as a first step toward developing a political movement. Initially, these leaders along with GSS staff formed one committee representing people from a set of adjacent villages including Barandi and Paira. But in 1988, the leaders decided to form separate organisations in each village to increase their strength. One of the big debates that the organisation undertook was on the issue of poor people's rights to khas' land. In this area as in many others, most of the land is owned by a few families who confiscated it from the poor as compensation for non-repayment of loans. River erosion took the rest. In Barandi, the poor traditionally exercised the right to fish in the Tika river but this was stopped by some wealthy groups who claimed that they had leased the river and surrounding land from the government. On investigation, Bhaktiar discovered that they had no lease for this river area which was 'khas' and therefore available for the poor. Under Bhaktiar's leadership the Barandi village organisation and some others put up a well organised protest which was publicised in the local and regional papers forcing the District Commissioner to declare the right of the poor to the Tika river area. Because of the success of this action, membership rose dramatically. To influence local-level decision-making, Bhaktiar and the other leaders decided that they should propose a candidate for the 1992 union parishad elections. But this experience caused deep rifts within the organisation because different groups supported different candidates. One group wanted to propose the wife of a Muslim leader of the organisation while Bhaktiar supported Amol, a well-educated and well-off Hindu member. Though Amol won the village organisation's endorsement, he lost the election because their support could not be sustained.

Another representational leadership type is illustrated by the Bashata women's organisation led by Parul, the wife of the men's organisation president Jabbar and Parul formed this group responding to Nijera Kori's interest in expanding in the area. Jabbar insisted that the members come from poor households and mostly from river erosion families to ensure his influence over the group. About a third of the members are relatives of Parul and Jabbar and more than half have relatives in the male village

organisation. Though Parul herself is better-off and educated, over three-quarters of the members are illiterate and one-third are inactive. Parul makes most day-to-day management decisions in consultation with the members, but on economic project matters she follows Jabbar' s advice. She also keeps the group' s savings. Though different from members in many ways, Parul has their interests at the centre of the group' s actions and in this way has forged an independent identity with the potential of overriding 'male interests'. One incident poignantly illustrates this struggle. After a conflict over the sale of fish in the men' samity, Jabbar forced out the dissenting faction. They in turn demanded that their wives leave the women' s group. All thesamity members discussed this and the women in question decided to remain. Only when their husbands beat them and physically dragged them out did they terminate their membership in the samity. In economic matters, the group tended simply to invest the amount stipulated by the men' s group in the men' s economic ventures. But recently, after heavy lobbying by members Parul agreed to the women' s group launching its own fish farming project separate from that of the men' s so that they could better control their finances.

### **Egalitarian**

In the egalitarian model of leadership, there is little if any differentiation between leaders and members. Leaders as well as members are very poor and all are generally illiterate. Such examples are found in highly resource poor areas where opportunities for work and other organisational resources (such as NGO activity) are also scarce. In general, these leaders are distinguished from members only in so far as they are greater risk-takers. For instance, they may break purdah norms by seeking wage work outside their homes because they are widows or single women and must fend for themselves. They dare to invite male NGO organisers to help them because they have no other means to access resources (this is true of the Madhyapabantair and Khammarpabantair women' s organisations). In such cases, the leaders' and members' interests coincide; both are looking for means to earn money and feed themselves. They are not driven by complex political objectives. Four of the village organisations in our sample fall into this leadership category: three old Nijera Kori groups in Gaibandha and a relatively new women' s GSS organisation in the village ofArpara.

The Arpara women' s organisation began as a health group inGSS' s health programme in 1991. There is no men' s village organisation inArpara and this has saved them to some extent from male manipulation. Two years ago it was formed into a village organisation, at which time it began collecting subscriptions. The men and women in the village used to say that 'this is a Christian method'; 'they will run off with your money'. The GSS field workers spoke to Kulsum' s husband and the other men of the village about GSS and the aims of the village organisation. After listening to all the squabbling, Kulsum (the current vice-president of the village organisation) told the GSS worker to form an association with her relatives. After that, women from other neighbourhoods joined. It now has thirty-two members, all are very poor but the leaders have some education and are able to keep accounts. Because most members are illiterate, they often raise questions about the accounts casting suspicions over the cashier. With the intervention of an active female worker they have been able to work through these problems and organise a tree planting committee. Though the NGO rules stipulate that guarding of the saplings must be done by a few women at a time on a rotational basis, the women share the work so that all have an opportunity to earn money.

### **Satellite**

Satellite leadership depends on another adjacent group for deciding its main courses of action. There are gradations in this dependency. At one end is a village organisation such as the Arua men' s village organisation which has close links to another men' s organisation in a nearby village (Giridharnagar) but maintains its own identity. In the case of these two men' s groups, the relationship may be explained by the spillover effects of strong faction formations in the dominant village interwoven with kinship ties. In such cases, the satellite generally supports the other' s calls for action and copies the other' s economic projects but does not hand over decision-making to the stronger organisation. Arua too has provided a base for the emergence of leadership. Tuku Gazi the Arua group' s president for example, rose from the lowly status of a 'labourdar' in 1989 when the group was formed to the presidency of the GSS union committee in mid-1994.

At the other end in our sample, is the relationship between a female group and a male group in the same village. The influence of a male group over a women' s group in the same village is common. Women members are often the wives, sisters or daughters of the men such as in Arua. In some satellite women' s groups, leaders abdicate decision-making in favour of their male kin as in the case of the Khammardhonaroha women' s organisation and the men use the women' s organisation as a source of loans. More than half the members do not attend group meetings. In other cases, despite wanting to be independent of men, women are forced to rely on male support and intervention when having to deal with local institutions to which they have little access (such as village patrons, union parishad members, local government administrators) particularly to develop and successfully run economic projects. In Madhyapabantair, the women' s village organisation, in desperate need of employment and income, routinely seeks the assistance and favour of Jassim, the leader of the male group in the same village. Through his contacts with the local administration and union parishad, which he cultivated over the years as a member of the union parishad, he is able to obtain access to resources such as leases for ponds for fish farming.

### **Leadership Typologies and Group Dynamics**

Each leadership typology is associated with a particular set of group dynamics which influences group cohesion. Group cohesion is in turn highly dependent on group actions and specifically the economic gains resulting from those actions. In groups where leadership is characterised by either entrenched or emerging patrons, participatory decision-making within the group is low and autonomy of the group from the NGO in relation to day-to-day management of group affairs and social action within the confines of the village community is high. When issues cross community borders, the brokerage role of the NGO becomes critical. Management of conflict within the group is characterised less by negotiation and more as a zero-sum game led by the leaders which often results in expelling the deviants. In cases where two or three factions share leadership, because all sides can garner some support, this can split apart the village organisation. In groups with entrenched patrons group cohesion is low because leaders are pursuing exclusively their own economic ends (a capturing gains ethic). Groups with emerging patrons fare much better because economic gains are shared. Group cohesion is enhanced when such groups undertake and continue low-risk actions that build their economic base such as annually renting out a pond to develop a fish project or mortgaging in land to grow paddy, thereby increasing the size of the pie. Without economic successes, this model could not sustain since patrons must have favours to grant to continue to elicit obedience.

Groups with representational leadership in our sample are characterised by fairly egalitarian decision-making although leaders initiate actions and have the last word (in none of our groups was decision-making completely egalitarian). Such groups are often two steps ahead of the NGO worker and work autonomously of the NGO. In most groups, decision-making is within the hands of leaders and at any given time, about half the members are inactive. For all groups economic gains resulting from group projects builds cohesion. But for groups that engage in riskier activities that challenge entrenched interests such as wrenching control over khas land which has been occupied and used by a wealthy farmer, failure can cause considerably more damage than failure in more traditional economic activities like running a fish project in a rented pond. The backlash can cause a group to shut down.

Unlike representational groups, leaders in egalitarian groups bring no special resource to the group. Thus their dependency on the outside resource agent (in this case the NGO) is high. It is one of the few and perhaps only means of leveraging resources for the group. This takes on added weight over time if the group members do not improve their economic status. Unfortunately, staff of social mobilisation NGOs are poorly equipped to provide the necessary technical assistance for economic projects. Their credit and income-generation counterparts are more successful at this. While decision-making within the group is fairly egalitarian, because of its relatively high dependency on the NGO and on groups such as the male group in the same village, the NGO staff and male group leaders play a large role in decision-making. With this goes a higher level of vulnerability to exploitation by outsiders. For women' s groups in particular this includes both male group leaders and male NGO workers. To put it another way, such groups, especially women' s groups, are most in need of sustained and supportive leadership in their interests by the NGO worker.

People' s motivations to form and join village organisations vary by income gradations and opportunity cost. So for example, relatively poorer members (chronic deficit families) may seek protection and patronage (in matters such as arbitration and cases of abuse by the wealthy) while better-off members may seek political power. Members may look at the samity as a means of getting access to cash through informal loans from samity funds and employment through samity-initiated economic projects while the better-off may seek control over economic resources such as land. All seek respect and status gains through the samity. But a large part of people' s motivation to form and continue a group is to access external resources. This has significant implications to the question of group sustainability. If the channel to external resources no longer exists, the group is unlikely to persist. The only ones that are likely to continue are those which were formed in the first place with a broader agenda and those that benefit members. In our sample, this would apply to one group only - the Basahata men' samity.

### *Group Cohesion and Life Cycles*

Our findings indicate that the persistence of factions and other strong identity formations undermine class-based solidarity. While this is not surprising (see for example Wood 1994<sup>5</sup> and Jansen 1987<sup>6</sup>) it is important to highlight in the context of a discourse which

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<sup>5</sup> Geoff Wood, *Bangladesh: Whose Ideas, Whose Interests*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Erik Jansen, *Rural Bangladesh: Competition for Scarce Resources*, University Press Limited, Dhaka,

implicitly accepts the idea of the sustainability of groups as corporate units over an indefinite period even after NGO withdrawal. What occurs instead is a short-term, issue-specific organisation for action and cohesion. If the actions are successful, group cohesion temporarily rises; if not, members become inactive until such time as another action brings them together (this in turn is more likely if the previous actions were successful). If this does not happen, groups can fall apart. In other words, actions galvanise cohesion. Successful actions maintain cohesion over a longer period of time (generally not exceeding a few months) but not for an infinite period. Our findings on intra-group cohesion also hold true for inter-group cohesion as illustrated by regional movements that have caught the national eye such as the anti-shrimp movement in Khulna led by Nijera Kori and the 1992 Union Parishad election in Nilphamari led by GSS. In the former, the movement has been successful but most of the village organisations represented in the Polder 22 Committee are currently inactive. Momentum on this issue is being maintained at the highest level not by groups but by NGO leaders. In the latter, the group cohesion and resolve dropped considerably in the face of the brutal post-election retaliation by the administration and local elites.

Thus, in summary, group cohesion is galvanised by group actions and a show of political strength but in the long run it is sustained by economic success. Group cohesion building is not an additive process but rather one that is added to or depleted depending on the success of group actions. Group cohesion ascends and descends over a group's life cycle. This is clearly illustrated by the graphs in the appendix.

The graphs plot group cohesion for each village organisation in our sample over its life cycle to date on the basis of the cohesion index we have constructed.<sup>7</sup> The index is a composite which weighs the level of group involvement and quantum of achievement or group gains. It also moves from the sphere of the village to beyond the village. It extends from 0 indicating either no group or the total disintegration of an existing group to a mid-point of 5 indicating the collaboration of different groups for collective action beyond the village level to a high of 10 indicating the take-over of political control at the sub-national level by the poor.

What are the high points and low points for men's and women's groups? What differences do we observe between Nijera Kori and GSS groups? The highest point (7.5) of group cohesion for Nijera Kori men's groups was registered by the Bashata village organisation at two points in its life cycle. In 1992 Bashata led the campaign to elect Saidur, Jabbar's nominee, to the post of union parishad chairman. Working through the thana and union committees, and organising youth groups and members of local NGOs, the Bashata village organisation closely guided by Nijera staff saw this campaign to a fruitful end. The poor voted as a bloc and as a result their prestige and influence in community decision-making bodies increased. Leaders of village organisations, especially Jabbar, consolidated their positions as heads of political factions. Again in 1994 the group led a campaign for adequate compensation to the poor for land confiscated by the government to build a railway line. This samity is doing well economically and on an upward trend in its development. In 1986 the Madhyapabantar women's village organisation of Nijera Kori was involved in a joint samity movement to

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Bangladesh, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix for an explanation of the construction of indices.

take over khas land in Guridaha village. This successful action galvanised the group and group cohesion increased significantly (6.5).

Acting on the suggestion of Altaf, the 'upazila' chairman, the Nijera Kori worker, Dulu, asked the leaders of the village organisations to prepare lists of the landless people and to identify khas land in and around their villages. These leaders identified fifteen decimals of khas land in Guridaha village. Those occupying the land had applied to the government to lease it and had bribed the upazila land administrator for this. The upazila chairman attempted to discuss with them the need of the landless to gain access to the land but they paid him no heed. The wealthy people in Guridaha village supported them and most had voted for another candidate for the post of chairman. Because of this there existed a silent conflict between the wealthy and Altaf. The chairman advised Dulu to co-ordinate the village organisation members to squat on the land. This he calculated would make it easier for him to allot the land to the poor. During this time there were seventeen women' s and twelve men' Nijera Kori village organisations in Guridaha union. Nijera Kori workers would attend their weekly meetings and exhort them to squat on the land. Many destitute people thought 'the poor people will never be able to take hold of the khas land. The occupants would rather kill the "bhumiheens" than let go of the land.' The female Nijera Kori workers asked the women members to stand beside their men and fight together. 'You will not get hold of the khas land if you keep sitting in your house' they would say. The members of one samity would attend the meetings of the others and make statements of support representing their groups.

Through this process a good deal of unity developed among the groups. They held a union rally and then a thana rally and about 700 men and women from all the samities marched to take over the land. The occupants urged the police to arrest them, but this was thwarted by the upazila chairman. The occupants fled but returned with some policemen. The poor said that if they were going to arrest anyone then they had better arrest all 700 of them. At this point, the upazilla chairman went to the thana and delivered a strong speech in favour of the bhumiheens. As a result, the police could not arrest anyone. Later, the occupants filed a case against the bhumiheens, and Nijera Kori provided the groups with legal aid. The court decided in favour of the bhumiheens. The documents of the former occupants of the land proved to be false. The Madhyapabantair dropped from this high point in 1986 to a low of one in 1994.

At the time of the field-work this group was inactive and represented the lowest point for any of the Nijera Kori women' s groups. In the neighbouring village, Khammarpabantair, the men' s village organisation fell to the lowest point registered by a men' sNijera Kori group in 1991 when all the Hindu members resigned over a disagreement of samity actions. After the 1988 floods Nijera Kori helped organise agricultural production by village organisation members by assisting them in obtaining land leases and supplying them with seeds, fertiliser and pesticides. Initially it also gave wages in the form of two kilograms of rice for daily work to members who worked on rotation. The following year, the group cultivated paddy and stored it in one member' s house. Later the group found that half a maund of paddy was missing. This sparked off a dispute among members. The Hindus who claimed that the Muslim members did not save regularly were no longer willing to work with the Muslims. They had originally not wanted to engage in agriculture preferring instead to do business such as selling betel leaves which was closer to their traditional occupation. Moreover, they were reluctant to be involved in protest actions. They wanted to maintain good relations with the wealthy and powerful members of the village whose good will they needed to continue their livelihoods. So in 1991, the Hindu men who constituted about half the members walked



out of the samity taking their savings with them. Nijera Kori was unable to smooth over this conflict. Simultaneously, their wives left the women' s group in the village.

In the case of GSS village organisations both the highest and lowest point for a men' s group is illustrated by the story of the Barandi village organisation. In 1991, Barandi undertook the fight for poor people' s rights to fish in thā'ika river and turned this into a campaign issue in the union parishad elections in 1992. The movement was highly publicised through meetings and gatherings in all nearby villages and in the newspapers. Its success accounted for the huge popularity of the shonghotons and membership increased dramatically. From this high point, the Barandi men' s village organisation died a sudden death in late 1992. After the election fiasco in which the shonghoton candidate was defeated, a variety of small money squabbles erupted among members. The president, Razzak, took money from the organisation' s fund and never returned it despite member' s pleas. He then spread foul rumours against the group. Bhaktiar tried to solve the problems but could not and so decided to dissolve the organisation. At the same time, the organisation came under attack from the local Sarbahara Party, a left underground group. They, in cahoots with the wealthy people of the village, looted the fish cultivated by the village organisation men in Sri nadi (Sri river). What followed was a period of chaos and violence. The Sarbahara people demanded tolls from the villagers, murdered an Awami League member whose family in turn called in the police. The police arrested many Sarbahara followers. The village organisation members stopped attending meetings fearing they would be mistaken for Sarbahara party people and arrested. GSS workers fled the scene and the police set up camp in the area. Over six months later, in early 1993, GSS revived the organisation but this time with a completely new set of members and for the primary purpose of engaging in income-generating activities.

In an adjacent village, the GSS women' s organisation in Arpara reached its high point in 1994 through organising a protest against the cutting down of tree saplings (part of a GSS forestry project) by wealthy villagers and gheraoing the union parishad and District Commissioner' s office to demand justice. The lowest point of a GSS women' s group occurred with the Arua. It was quietly abolished by the men' s group and restarted in a different para with the men' s relatives so that they could gain access to wheat given as wages through an afforestation project.

The life histories of groups indicate that men' s groups - both Nijera Kori and GSS - at particular points in time have achieved higher levels of cohesion than their female counterparts. This is likely because the issues which have galvanised high group cohesion are public protest issues that fall more easily into the domain of male activities. NGO workers in the field reinforce this pattern because they view men as the lead agents in such processes and therefore direct more of their attention to them. More of the Nijera Kori women' s groups (in comparison with the women' s GSS groups), however, have been engaged in such public protests. This is primarily explained by their composition - many of these groups comprise wage-workers who continually face problems in securing their due wages. In contrast, most of the GSS women' s groups were formed in the early 1990s when it began collaborating with organisations such as the World Food Program on income-generating projects. Neither Nijera Kori nor GSS groups have escaped near or total breakdown. Some of these disintegrated groups are being revived and others revamped to pursue income-generating projects. In no case have groups of the poor reached the highest level of cohesion: take over of political control or resource allocation decision-making at the sub-national level.

## *Group Cohesion and NGO Involvement*

A clear and significant finding from our study is that group cohesion is highly dependent upon and positively correlated to the involvement of the NGO. Our term 'NGO involvement' is a composite index which weighs intensity of NGO effort and regularity of contact with the groups and also takes into consideration the types of involvement in activity within and beyond the village. Thus, it ranges from a low of no involvement or complete NGO withdrawal to a mid-point indicating active conduct of conscientisation and training sessions, provision of logistical support for group actions, developing strategies for social actions and economic ventures and conflict management. At its highest level it indicates complete NGO control in all group-related decision-making. In no case did this occur.

While over time groups graduate from NGO staff involvement in the management day-to-day group affairs, the critical role played by the NGO in social mobilisation holds true across leadership types and group age. Their involvement is essential in planning and executing projects that cross village boundaries and require brokering resources and advocacy with public and private systems at local, regional and national levels such as government administration, the courts and the police.

This role of the NGO is well illustrated by the fight for railway compensation in Gaibandha. This action took place in 1994 and involved over 400 people, twelve of whom were Nijera Kori group members, and involves a total compensation of Tk.43 lakh (\$107,500). The normal government procedure in such cases is that an official from the land acquisitions office visits the affected villages and, with the help of the chairman and other influentials, identifies the people to be compensated. These people must open a bank account into which the cheque from the land office, which has to be picked up upon notification, is to be deposited. This procedure was not followed. One scheming entrepreneur named Bacchu, bribed the land officers, and probably also the District and Additional District Commissioners, to allow him to 'fix' the compensation. He went from village to village to convince the people that since it was very difficult to obtain money from the government they should give him power of attorney to deal with the government on their behalf; he would get them a good deal. People initially agreed but suspicions were aroused when rumours began to circulate about some people getting more than others for the same size of land. Deluar, the vice-president of the Bashata men' s group, was due to be compensated and he too heard these rumours. He demanded from Bacchu information on the amount due to each person but Bacchu refused to reveal anything. Then Deluar went to the land office and demanded that they show him the official papers indicating the procedure to be followed and the amount due. He learned that he along with many others was due Tk. 1 lakh while Bacchu was offering Tk. 25,000.

Deluar discussed this matter in the Basahata village organisation meeting. Jabbar and Deluar asked the Nijera Kori staff to advise them. The Nijera Kori staff attended their meeting and advised Deluar not to accept the money offered by Bacchu and to convince the others of this as well. Then Deluar and Jabbar visited the homes of many of the affected people in the area and persuaded them not to accept money from Bacchu. Later Nijera Kori staff organised a meeting inviting all the affected people. At this meeting, upon the suggestion of Nijera Kori staff, the group decided to write a memo to the DC (this was drafted by NK staff) demanding that the problem be solved within a specified time frame. The DC took no action. Again the poor sought the advice of Nijera Kori. In

response NK staff launched a protest movement. They printed and distributed posters and leaflets publicising the issue, contacted political parties based in Gaibandha town for help, met and informed journalists of the issue and set a day for the protest. On 23 October, 1994, the appointed day, NK staff rented ten trucks to transport village organisation members (mostly men), political party workers and themselves to the DC' s office at a cost of about Tk. 13,000. Over 1500 people gheraoed the DC' s office. He appeared, addressed the crowd and promised to take swift action. The next day, an inquiry was initiated and Bacchu arrested. In due course, because this issue caught the attention of people much higher up, the DC was made OSD and transferred, five land office staff were suspended and the land officer arrested. Despite Nijera Kori' s substantial efforts, as of May 1995, the inquiry is ongoing and no one has yet received compensation.

If NGO involvement is highly correlated with group cohesion, what explains the divergences in the two graphs. In cases of NGO mediation of internal group conflicts, NGO involvement is high while group cohesion drops considerably. For example, over the period 1994-5, the Giridgarnagar men' s villageorganisation underwent a huge internal conflict as the fight between Rashid Gazi and Hossain Sardar spilled over into the group. At this time, group cohesion dipped to 1 on our index but NGO involvement was much higher.

The opposite scenario - low NGO involvement coupled with high group involvement - occurs in a variety of other circumstances. In village-level matters such as organising a shalish to discuss illicit affairs or wife-beating for example, the groups are active but the NGO often plays little or no role. With some representational groups, such as the Barandi group, where leaders are educated and know how to organise protests, the NGO field staff are often bypassed. NGO workers tend to pay less attention to women' s groups in organising social actions as discussed above. For economic projects requiring investment of family resources, the women tend to rely more on their relatives in the male samity. Satellite groups, by definition, are more dependent on strong samity close by than on the NGO. Because the NGO staff also recognise it is a satellite, they will discuss strategy and make decisions in consultation with the stronger group. The satellite is expected to and does follow.

### *Conflicts and Breakdown*

The key learning about groups and conflict is that the latter is a regular occurrence, and does not take much for a group to break down. Within groups, there are many types of conflict and disagreement. Distrust over money matters, even small amounts of subscription funds, is common. Members of the Arpara women' s group were highly suspicious that the cashier was stealing their money and were appeased only after they received a full accounting by the cashier and a long talk from Manjuwara, the GSS field-worker, about the need to keep rumours and bad gossip from poisoning the relationships within the samity.

Leaders, particularly entrenched patrons, who control samity funds often refuse to lend money to members even in times of need because they fear that it will not be repaid. The same leaders, however, are quite willing to lend money to dishonest, better-off people irrespective of assurances of repayment. Quader, the leader of the Khammardhonaroha men' s village organisation, refused a group of poor members a paddy loan but freely distributed the paddy among his better-off cronies and kept some for himself. In cases

such as this the transaction is a private one using members' funds, and the IOU can be cashed in later for social and political support. When poor members are refused small loans, they sometimes protest by dropping out. Larger business quarrels can also spill over into the organisation as in the case of the dispute between Rashid Gazi and Hossain Sardar in Giridharnagar. Quarrels concerning samity business ventures are also common. In Bashata, a group left the samity because they were not consulted by Jabbar on the timing of the sale and price of fish raised in the groups' fish project. Small conflicts in joint cultivation projects abound. There are always disagreements over the time and money invested in the project when it comes time for apportioning compensation. Most groups resist such collective ventures but for ideological and practical reasons they are promoted by social mobilisation NGOs as in the case of Nijera Kori in the post-flood agricultural production projects. Finally, there is out-and-out swindling of group funds. As illustrated in the case of the Jamuna Mukhi village organisation below, this resulted in a breakdown of the group.

Disputes with outsiders are large and small. They range from taunts and threats against women by better-off village men for breaking purdah norms by attending group meetings, to arguments for due wages from government Food for Work projects to khas land take-overs and battles for local political power. The Majeruddin dispute of the Madhyapabantair men' s village organisation falls somewhere in the middle and illustrates the kind of persistent backlash that wears down the poor. In fact, this samity suffered a series of internal conflicts before it faced the Majeruddin threat.

Sattar, the president of the samity, got into a dispute with Sharma the Nijera Kori senior staff person in the area, over the allotment of house materials after the 1988 floods. Sattar wanted to give housing materials to a needy non-member but Sharma refused and most of the samity members sided with Sharma. In a fit of anger, Sattar left the samity and formed another one which later participated in Nijera Kori assisted agricultural projects. At that time, Sattar learned that upon the recommendation of Jassim, the leader of the Khammarpabantair men' s samity, Sharma agreed to allot a house to Nabiron, a non-member female who had no place to live and was squatting in the dak bungalow. This infuriated Sattar and he called a meeting with fifteen thana committee members (the majority abstained and Sharma refused to attend) to explain how humiliating it was for him that Nabiron got a house allotment while his nominee did not. In retaliation, Sattar refused to give 25 per cent of his samity' s potato harvest to the thana committee as earlier agreed. The thana committee president, however, took the money and Sattar' s samity fell into inactivity. Sattar then joined another group taking about fifteen samity members with him. Through this group he spread allegations about fiscal irresponsibility on the part of Sharma and filed false complaints against other samity members. Then Sattar faced the conflict with the wealthy and powerful Majeruddin and pleaded to Sharma for help. Sharma allowed Sattar to rejoin the Nijera Kori samity and agreed to help him on the condition that he retract his false allegations and work to rebuild the many samities that he broke up. This history explains much of the ups and downs of this group's life cycle.

Majeruddin, the largest landowner in the village and ex-union parishad member from the start opposed the formation of the samity. Many years earlier, he had bought three decimals of land from Sattar' s father but actually used twenty-one decimals. This fact became known to Sattar and his cousins who jointly owned the land during the 1993 land survey. On the advice of Nijera Kori staff, Sattar filed a suit with the union parishad but Majeruddin did not present himself during the stipulated period. The union parishad' s decision favoured Sattar. Majeruddin retaliated by beating Sattar' s wife when

she stopped him from taking bamboo from the disputed land and then filed a counter case against the male samity members. During this time, there were various incidents of beatings of samity members by Majeruddin's men. In one such incident, when Nijera Kori staff rushed to the spot, Majeruddin's men asked for forgiveness. Majeruddin agreed to an arbitration meeting in which the documents from both sides were examined. This proved without a doubt that Majeruddin's papers were forged. At this point the thana committee upon the advice of Nijera Kori decided to re-activate the criminal case filed earlier against Majeruddin and allotted Tk. 2000 for this.

This dispute has united the samities in the village but it has been a costly one in terms of time, money and physical abuse. In fact, the case is ongoing. Nijera Kori has hired a lawyer to follow it and the three samity members who filed it have to appear in court twice a month. On these days they lose a day's wages and their families go without food. The men's samity borrowed Tk. 2000 from the women's samity and took Tk. 5000 of its own savings to pursue these cases - the land case plus two assault cases. The beatings of samity men and Majeruddin's men continue. Without the persistent support of Nijera Kori, this group would have broken down.

What happens in cases of break up? Groups such as the Barandi men's group die a sudden death but more often conflicts result in members becoming inactive and the samity slowly disintegrates. This is illustrated by the story of the Jamuna Mukhi bhumiheen samity. It was started by a group of well-to-do people to develop a loan fund for recreational purposes. Each deposited Tk. 11 per week into the samity's coffers. It was led by Mannan the educated son of a wealthy and influential villager. In 1988, after the floods, this samity got involved in Nijera Kori agricultural rehabilitation projects and became a Nijera Kori samity. After this, without consulting the samity members, Mannan initiated a lottery to raise samity funds. Much of the money was embezzled by his cronies and Mannan was forced to sell some of his land to make up for part of the loss and take loans at high rates of interest. Secretly, he took back money for land mortgaged out by the samity but this deception became known at harvest time. Though Mannan took the harvest from his father's land to show the samity, the owner of the land came to Mannan for his share of the harvest (Mannan took the land on a share-cropping basis) and explained to the members that Mannan took back the money. Sharma, the Nijera Kori worker could not solve this crisis. His major concern was to keep the samity alive despite his conflict. But the members were not happy. They had no say in the use of samity funds which Mannan operated as his private fund and, moreover, he refused them loans. Later some additional money could not be accounted for and the members filed suits against the cashier. Members were no longer willing to tolerate Mannan's manipulations though they were unable to challenge him openly.

By 1993, five years after it was formed, the samity had fallen apart. In the process, it also pulled down the women's samity in the same village. Mannan's mother borrowed a large sum of money from the samity fund after the lottery incident. Although members opposed this, the Nijera Kori field-worker, wanting to maintain good relations with the village elite, supported it and it went through. This added to the samity's problems in maintaining accounts: no one including the president, Jobeda, could say how much was lent out to whom. The dispute over lending money to Mannan's mother led to irregularity in samity meetings and savings stopped. There was an additional dispute over the amount of land mortgaged out to Mannan and the amount of paddy given to the samity. The members felt cheated but they could not prove anything because they did not keep clear records. Jobeda married Mannan and was disinterested in pursuing the issue as was the Nijera Kori worker who advised dropping the whole matter. The

situation was not acceptable to the members and consequently the samity stopped functioning three years after its inception. The samity members said, 'our fistful of rice was consumed by rich men'.

Age is no guarantee against breakup. The active Shaghata women' samity, one of the first Nijera Kori groups in Gaibandha led by brave wage-working women such as Kasmati and Raheda, broke up after thirteen years. Numerous small disputes between leaders and members and the NGO worker about money, leaders' preoccupation with non-samity affairs in a context where leadership is high, the spillover of personal feuds between leaders into the samity, and leaders' manipulation of the samity for their own purposes - all these led to its downfall.

## **Collective Actions for Economic and Political Gains**

The uniqueness of the GSS and NK models lies in their emphasis on empowering the poor through collective actions that the poor themselves initiate and participate in against the inequities of the system. The essential analytical premise underlying such a strategy suggests that poverty is sustained by the prevailing inequality in the structure of power and access to resources and that this can be rectified only through effective challenges to the system. Such challenges can be effective, however, only if and when the poor are mobilised, and only when actions are organised collectively by the poor. This is in marked contrast to the prevailing NGO strategy of providing the poor with individual access to resources (credit, employment, agricultural inputs etc.) that are negotiated by the external agency of the NGO. So while NK and GSS do not reject outright provisions of credit for their members, they do not see access to credit contributing to the weakening of structures that contribute to the reproduction of poverty. In fact there is an underlying fear that individual credit could actually have a negative impact on the collective consciousness of the poor by promoting individualistic, competitive, profit-maximising behaviour. Hence, where credit is provided, it is subordinated under group responsibility and collective economic activity.

Economic activities organised by GSS and NK therefore revolve around the twin focus of building the strength of the poor through challenges to the system of hierarchy, and economic gains through collective activity. This contributes to the awareness of the poor in their realisation of their strength in effecting social transformations. Collective actions promoted therefore include those for higher wages, for better prices, for take-over of 'khas' land, and for ensuring access to state services. This section explores collective actions undertaken by GSS and NK members to determine the extent of their impacts and limits in terms of effecting social and economic changes.

### *Organising Principles of GSS and Nijera Kori*

The emphasis on collective actions against injustices is explicit even in the initial stages of group formation. The first dialogues that take place between the NGO organiser and potential members often revolve around issues of 'legitimate wages' for work performed, or lack of access to resources, or a blatant disregard for the poor. The NGO organiser additionally tells potential members that the only way this subordination can be confronted is through organised strength, through active mobilisation of the poor. Often such discussions on inadequate wage payments with workers in road construction crews or in earth digging or in Food for Work projects immediately mobilise workers to strike unless full compensations are paid. While such actions do not always result in victories they do set the pattern for future activities. This call for mobilisation against injustices, starting from the initial dialogues between NGO activist and member, underlines the basic purpose of NK and GSS - the need for the poor to have their own organisations against the power and authority of the rich. The following statements by NK and GSS organisers testify to this:

'Gonosongthon is the organisation of the poor. Poor people will benefit if they join the songthon. The wealthy people will no longer be able to exploit the poor. The poor will be capable of collecting proper wages and the wealthy will fail to torture them.'

'You do not get proper wages for the earth work you do. You are not given wages at the rate mentioned in the chart. You shall have to be united if you are to realise your proper

wages. The wealthy and influential people do not give you the proper share of crops when you share-crop. As a result you are getting even more impoverished day by day. The wealthy people in the village occupy and use the "khas" land even though it is the poor and landless peasants who are entitled to use it. You can take hold of the khas land if you become united. You will have to form a gonosongthon in the village if you are to establish these rights.'

'You are all rural people. You live on agricultural work and as day labourers. You have to go to the thana sadar, district sadar and different offices from time to time. You also have to go to the hospital for treatment. But you do not get proper service anywhere. In many situations you are not even aware of what your entitlements are. We are aware that poor people are often deceived. We will provide you with assistance if you launch movements for establishing all your rights.'

'It will be possible for you to establish your right to proper wages if all of you get united. The wealthy people are deceiving you in various ways. They are depriving you of proper wages, making you write off the ownership of your land to them for a very low price. They are also deceiving you in share-cropping. They lend to you at high interest rates. As a result most of your harvest goes to the rich. Both men and women should be united against this exploitation by the rich class. If the poor form samities, only then will you be able to fulfil your basic needs and establish your rights.'

Recruited group members go through an orientation in the form of functional education classes or intensive weekly meetings. Selected members receive more formal training in NGO offices and training centres. Both GSS and NK place special emphasis on the need for institutionalised training of grass-roots group members. The training provides members with a sense of belonging to a larger group of working people from other villages and other regions. Participants at such training, through exposure to lectures on 'structures of power', 'systems of oppression', 'history of peoples' mobilisations' and 'societal transformations', gain an ideological reorientation. This makes them feel that they have knowledge that exposes the hypocrisy of conventional wisdom in its rationalisation of the oppression of the prevailing system.

This is not to suggest that such training provides participants with cogent, coherent, logically consistent arguments. But the training has a strong empowering influence in enabling participants to become familiar with terms such as the proletariat, the bourgeoisie, imperialism, capitalism, state structure and state power, and such historical incidents as May Day, the Russian Revolution, Bangladesh' s Language Movement and own War of Independence. Such terms and concepts, such information, even if half correct and half confused, provides participants, who have always been dismissed as ignorant and uneducated, with the feeling that they know of the world outside, as much and perhaps more than the 'educated' village leaders. This confidence strips away the 'natural' authority that village elites enjoy as 'educated'. It exposes more clearly the real basis of oppression that the poor face and makes more imperative the need for collective action.

People join GSS and NK for support and security. They believe that membership in the samity will make them less vulnerable. They are also attracted by the importance given to the poor, the leadership provided by the poor and the vision of the poor transforming society. Many join these NGOs for the small savings that it will help them generate and the potential for access to resources. However, given that very little resources are provided by these NGOs (compared to others whose entire programmes are based on



channelling resources), there is built-in pressure to opt for collective actions to ensure that groups remain active.

### *Collective Economic and Social Actions*

#### **Economic Actions**

The essential motivating factor underlying people's joining NGOs, including GSS and NK, is the perception of future economic gain. People believe that through NGOs they will be able to access external economic resources. In the case of NK and GSS, where it is explicitly declared that NGO economic resources are not forthcoming, members still think that the strength of the NGO will at least help in creating favourable economic conditions that will contribute to their economic gain. Both NK and GSS also realise the need for economic gains for the membership in order to ensure group cohesion and group development. At the very least, therefore, NK and (to a lesser extent) GSS motivate members to save and use the savings for collective economic enterprises. Members feel that collective savings will allow them to build a large pot in which they can invest to generate incomes for all. As one group described their plans:

‘When the amount of our savings becomes large we too will take up fish culture. The members of our samity will work there. We will mortgage in a few bighas of lands. We will collectively farm the land. This will create employment opportunities for ourselves. We will no longer be unemployed in the months of Ashwin and Kartik. We will receive wages at 20 taka per day. We will get money from the fish culture and paddy from the mortgaged in land. We will no longer starve.’

This process of collecting savings and engaging in income-generating investments from such savings is, however, a slow gradual process that is often both insufficient to meet the needs of the poor and difficult because the structure of the local economy is being tilted against the poor. Thus, while group savings are encouraged to build a sense of collective, members are often encouraged to engage in collective actions that lead to direct confrontations against the power structure. Collective actions are taken to force employers to pay contracted wage rates or to ensure that khas land is actually leased to the poor as stipulated by law. It is common in government-funded road construction projects or projects involving earth work (including Food for Work projects) that contractors and government officials do not pay workers the stipulated wage rates. GSS and NK organise their group members to struggle against the responsible officials. The form of the struggle varies between holding massive demonstrations, ‘gheraoing’ (laying siege to) the officials, and going on strike. In most situations the results are positive. Wages do increase though not necessarily up to the stipulated rates. Such struggles, however, have far reaching implications in terms of increasing group solidarity as well as exhibiting the power of organisation to other poor people as well as the rural elite. Such mobilisations for higher wages had taken place in Polder 22, in Sufalakathi union, in Arua village and in Maddhya Pabantair in Shagatha.

Khas land are those whose ownership rests with the government. These may be forest land, newly created land through siltation, land which had never been transferred to private ownership, as well as land simply being held by the government. The law states that in leasing such land for private use landless people must receive first priority. In reality, of course, it is the rural elite, with assistance from local-level government officials, who end up using such land. GSS and NK place strategic importance on the

forcible take-over of such land by the poor. Since the law favours the right of use by the poor, GSS and NK feel that in such takeovers the law ultimately sides with them. The forcible take-over in addition, provides a strong example of the organised poor wresting resources for themselves.

GSS and NK argue that NGO hand over of resources only increases the dependence of the poor. The take-over of khas land on the other hand indicates to the poor that it is their initiative, their organised strength that results in victories. This builds the confidence of the poor to challenge the status quo. There are many examples of GSS and NK members launching such struggles and, in the short run, even achieving victories. But in most cases, however, control over the land is ultimately lost. The wealthy generally manage to influence the local-level administration to give them back access to these lands. A hundred acres of land in Beel Khukshia (Sufalakathi union) was gained and lost in this way. The government agency overseeing this land did not co-operate; the surveyors were bribed. In Shantola also land was lost through the betrayal of officials of the Water Board. Worse, charges were filed against Songhotan members and many were arrested. Both NK and GSS are now providing some legal assistance to limit police repression and also to ensure that legal norms in the take-over of land are not violated. Collective actions are also taken to ensure proper distribution of relief material, employment on government projects and cards to destitute women under the government' s VGD programme.

### **Social Actions**

Both NK and GSS emphasise the need for collective actions on social issues as well. In a situation of intense class hierarchy and patriarchy in rural Bangladesh, social decisions are taken and actions are accepted that ensure the subordination of the poor and women. It is thought that only through a protracted struggle against such injustices can the voices of the poor finally be heard and space created for the participation of the poor in social decisions thereby reducing the injustices of the prevailing situation. The following are again examples of some of the cases of collective social actions that were analysed.

Assisting a poor man to file a case against the UP member who was trying to evict him illegally from his land. They win the case and the prestige of the samity increases.

Forcing a shalish to be called to oppose the local matbar from forcibly taking away ten bighas of land belonging to a Hindu widow.

Stopping a wealthy man from divorcing his wife of poor background.

Stopping wife-beating through having women' s groups confront the husband.

Shanu, a member of the NK group, was murdered by her husband but the police were bribed so no criminal charges were filed against him. NK organised a massive demonstration participated in by members in several villages. Members surrounded the police station demanding punishment of the killer. The thana officers were forced to file a case in the district court which subsequently convicted the husband.

An NK member in Shaghata Thana was mistreated in the local government hospital. She went back to her group who then involved the other groups to mobilise and engage in a 'gherao' of the hospital. About 400 men and women surrounded the hospital chanting slogans. Many were not group members but just other poor people who too in the past

had only received indignities at the hospital rather than any medical care. The staff of the hospital were transferred because of this.

Shalish organised in Khamardhonaroha (with NK help) to settle conflicts amongst fathers-in-law.

Such victories demonstrate again the strength of organised groups of the poor. They illustrate for everyone in the rural community that the poor are capable of confronting injustices through mass mobilisations and competent enough to dispense justice through the shalish.

Probably the more important social mobilisations have been associated with shrimp cultivation. Shrimp cultivation is common in the southern districts of Bangladesh. While bringing in huge profits for businessmen associated with this, it causes misery for the poor. Waterlogging destroys agriculture as well as grazing ground for livestock. The poor lose their traditional livelihoods. With employment in shrimp cultivation being limited, they are forced to leave their lands. The environmental consequences of shrimp cultivation is also disastrous. Both GSS and NK strongly oppose such large-scale shrimp cultivation. Members of GSS organised and in alliance with local peasant groups (a procession of 1000 people armed with banners and sticks) as well as support from other village people attacked the shrimp farm at 'Dohuri Gher' (July 1988) and breached the embankments that were waterlogging the area. Several people died in this incident including a policeman as police fired at the demonstrators. This generated tremendous enthusiasm amongst the poor in their successful challenge to powerful shrimp cultivators. However, while shrimp cultivation did stop, many of the members were arrested while many others fled the village in fear of police repression.

### **Political Actions**

Representation of the poor in political office is a logical extension of the model that seeks to empower the poor. In areas where group mobilisations have been strong, members have tried to contest for political office, long the exclusive domain of faction leaders. Such participation in local-level elections have been observed in Arua and Giridharnagar and Bashhata and Khamardhonaroha.

During the 1992 UP elections the NK groups in Shaghata union decided to field their own union parishad member candidate. The union-level federation of groups even collected a thousand takas for election expenses. The NK groups also successfully built alliances with other sections of the poor in the union. The NK candidate won the elections. Sometimes members will support a non-member, sympathetic to their cause, to run for elections because of a greater possibility of victory. In Giridharnagar GSS members successfully supported a non-member as candidate for the position of UP chairman.

### **National Issues**

Most of the collective actions mentioned above were local or regional. There were, however, two specific instances of people's mobilisations that were so far reaching in their consequences that opposition to them stemmed from the highest echelons of state power. They also suggest to what extent the state would allow people's mobilisations' till they felt specifically threatened.

In early 1992 GSS decided to contest the local-level elections in Nilphamari. Most of the groups were young, hardly a couple of years old but members were extremely enthusiastic. They had received schooling from GSS where the books had intoned them of their right to elect their own representative, of daring to stand up for themselves and lead and put themselves in positions of authority. Members had also heard GSS workers telling them that the poor were the majority and through united action they could engage in transforming power relations within society. Members resolved that rather than making electoral selections from groups of the rich they would elect one of their own.

The novelty of the idea, the outrageousness of the demand, the seeming ease of the programme, brought all GSS members together in a common dream of becoming the political masters of their own destiny. Fresh from the end of autocracy (the country's military dictator was overthrown the year before) GSS too was caught up in the idea of forcing a democratic option of election of representatives from groups of the majority. Election committees were formed, members nominated, campaigning undertaken; the overall situation was festive. What GSS had not accounted for was the fierce opposition of the minority, the power elite that had traditionally enjoyed political power and economic might. There were two features of the GSS action that were unique. First, GSS candidates (especially for the key post of chairman), were all from the poorest classes of the villagers. Other NGOs have at times supported candidates but they belonged to the better off classes of the peasantry - people who would be socially acceptable. Second, GSS candidates ran on their organisational 'ticket' and made a major statement of the fact that they were candidates of the organisation of the poor.

Local-level elections in Bangladesh are staggered over several days. The five constituencies for which GSS had candidates, also had voting on different days. In the first day of voting, in one union, GSS members won the office of chairman as well as the majority of the seats for members. The different factions of the prevailing power groups, who up to then had taken little notice of the attempts of the poor to run for political office, saw this as a real threat to their long standing social domination. They could not accept having to report to a day labourer as chairman. All the dominant factions in all the five unions, irrespective of political affiliation, united and unleashed a reign of terror. GSS schools were burnt down, members including women were beaten up, a house-to-house search was undertaken to confiscate all GSS books. In the elections in the other four constituencies, armed men ensured that GSS members could not get to the voting sites. GSS, of course, lost in the other elections.

The government administration sided completely with the local power groups. The police refused to take action against the armed thugs and instead filed charges against GSS members. The Deputy Commissioner (the governmental administrative head) of Nilphamari had this to say. 'All of us want to help the poor and provide charity for them. But when the poor get uppity and want to sit on the head of the rich, when they want to dominate, that cannot be allowed.' He accused GSS of 'organising the poor', an action he felt was 'tantamount to fomenting a revolution'. He had charges filed against GSS field-workers stating that they belonged to underground revolutionary parties. The police conducted raids and arrested a few. Other GSS members left the villages and stayed in hiding for months.

The case of Polder 22 is the second national-level collective action we analysed. Polder 22 was constructed to keep away the salt sea water from entering and thereby destroying crops. Once the polder was built and with support under a Dutch project, agricultural production increased rapidly within the area. Nijera Kori organised groups of landless

men and women to take advantage of the new employment opportunities that were opened up. Women' s groups did maintenance on the embankmentMen' s and women' s groups leased in land under the government and conducted collective farming. Around this time shrimp cultivation had spread in the nearby areas. In 1990 a well-known shrimp cultivator leased in some land from residents in Polder 22 and decided to engage in shrimp cultivation. This would involve breaching of the embankment and allowing the salt water in, resulting in flooding and destruction of crops not only in the land leased in but also land belonging to other people. Worse, the salinity in the water would imply that for years after that, no crops could be grown in the area.

Nijera Kori groups believed that this would mean an end to their livelihoods. They felt that they had to struggle against this, and mass mobilisations followed. NK groups as well as other poor people started preparations. The shrimp cultivators too were organising with armed thugs from Khulna and Dhaka. Ten thousand landless people gheraoed the UP office in late October 1990. In early November the armed thugs of the shrimp cultivators entered with ten trawlers and attacked the landless. One woman was shot dead; many were severely injured. The police, however, who along with the office of the district commissioner were working closely with the shrimp cultivators, filed charges against NK members, arresting many and terrorising others. It is only recently that charges against NK members have been dismissed in the courts. Shrimp cultivation in Polder 22 was, however, stopped.

### *Limits to Collective Actions*

It would seem that organised groups are fairly successful in addressing issues pertaining to conflicts within themselves - adjudicating conflicts arising out of marital problems or dowry or personal enmity. Often organised groups can stop a wealthy individual from forcibly taking over another's assets. Stronger organisations can even successfully challenge corruption at the local level and win access to resources and better wages. However, beyond this, in matters involving even the collective interests of the local power structure, or attempts at accessing major resources such as khas land, or in direct confrontations with the state, organised groups make little headway. In fact they are routinely victimised, harassed and subjected to violent intimidation, causing a serious decline in group strength.

The most formidable challenge to NGO collective actions, as demonstrated in GSS' s election involvement in Nilpahamari, NK' s mobilisations against shrimp cultivators in Polder 22, as well as elsewhere in the struggles for control of khas land, has been from state agencies - the police, the courts, and the civil administration. This stems directly from NGO involvement in political participation. While NGOs are, of course, explicit in denying political roles similar to that of political parties - competing for political power at the level of state authority - the NGO analysis of poverty in terms of structural causalities and the expression of their objectives as participants in the transformation of these structures, necessitate direct intervention within the political space that defines the status quo. This is usually acceptable to the government if it involves merely providing such development inputs as literacy, credit or employment, since these fall within the domain of traditional 'charitable' or 'welfare' efforts to assist the poor. However, when the poor are organised to articulate their demands, to fight for their rights and to struggle for changing the structural basis of their subordination, it most definitely implies challenging the status quo. Governmental agencies perceive their responsibility as one of maintaining the 'law and order' of the prevailing status quo. They, therefore, clearly see

NGO empowerment activity as being threatening. To the government that strives to preserve the present, no matter how inequitable the systemic basis may be, such activities are akin to the political challenges of the radical who seeks to undermine the system itself. Hence, the charges of NGO activists and members being 'subversives'. NGOs need to realise the imperatives of the state machinery to maintain order, no matter how inequitable or undemocratic the prevailing order may be. When democratic norms (of free elections and majority representations) threaten the status quo, it is the status quo that is rescued, order that is restored, the people that are disciplined.

A second problem in sustaining collective actions of the poor is ironically the poverty of the members themselves. Most members earn a basic subsistence level of income where the loss of even one day of work translates into one day without food. In such a situation, being arrested for a few days, or hiding from the police for some time, or even going to court for the day, is too high a price for many to pay.

It seems also that NGO support, both in the form of legal aid and in making a strong presence felt, is extremely important in sustaining long-term collective actions. The decline in membership morale has been heightened where NGOs themselves have become dispirited and withdrawn. Where NGOs have provided strong legal assistance and organisationally played an active role in holding groups together, membership, in spite of deep reversals, has sustained the movement over a long period.

Finally, in most situations factions and kinship, rather than class interests, still play a stronger role in organising the poor. NGO activities often fail to create enough of a class consciousness where the poor see their class interests as distinctly separate. In times of crisis, therefore, rather than relying more strongly on class solidarity, members of the poor align themselves with the wealthy in the hope of economic benefits. Class cohesion suffers, and in the process class politics degenerates.

### *Collective Actions and the Role of the NGO*

NK and GSS organising takes place around the specific issue of empowering the poor. The messages at orientation meetings, the topics discussed in training, all portray a world-view of class disharmony where the poor must act to rectify the prevailing injustices. The collective actions that are undertaken by NK and GSS membership are direct responses to these messages. The movement for higher wages, the demonstration against local government corruption, the shalish against unilateral divorce, all have their roots in the specific dialogues initiated by NGO organisers. The pattern of struggle, therefore, is rather similar across groups, across regions. As groups develop they start conducting their own shalishes to resolve problems amongst membership or amongst other poor people; they start influencing the traditional shalish so that their voices are heard and arbitrary decisions against them cannot be handed down, so that individual members of the rich can even be punished; they combat corruption at the local level in the delivery of relief material or payment of wages. The next higher phase constitutes the mobilisation for take-over of khas land, where the struggle is against coalitions of the wealthy and their links with lower-level state officials. Sometimes vested interests with links to the highest echelons of state power are taken on, often with negative consequences.

Such movements are sometimes initiated by the NGO organiser, sometimes by members themselves. In most cases there is active collective participation of group members. The role of the NGO is, however, instrumental in sustaining the movement, especially where the coalition of interests against the poor is strong, and where the state agencies are actively involved in supporting the coalition of vested interests. Movements beyond the village level most often involve actors that are too powerful for groups to take on by themselves. NGO brokerage, especially in the form of neutralising the police, or in the form of legal assistance, becomes essential if the movement is to last beyond the initial conflict when the normal course of action for the rich is to file false charges against group members. While this may imply new lines of dependence between NGOs and the poor, it would at least be a non-exploitative relation; an essential alliance if the sophisticated weapons of the state are to be countered. Ironically the problem, far from being

one of too much dependence, may actually be the NGO failure in playing a far more effective brokerage role. This is evident when there is a backlash to such collective actions and both the NGO and membership become dispirited and disorganised. Effective responses to such backlash in the form of articulated programmes that provide for the survival of members as well as the sustaining of the movement seems to be missing. What happens are *ad hoc* responses that do not go far enough to take the movement to a higher phase.

### *Collective Actions vs. Individual Focused Programmes*

A cursory investigation on the impacts of collective actions may lead one to conclude that for the most part groups engaged in such actions have faced repression from the local elite as well as the state and consequently have been left worse off. The frequent unsuccessful attempts at retaining khas land and at transformations in the local government structure testify to such failures. In fact collective economic ventures have also not proved to be too successful.

Individual focused credit programmes such as the Grameen Bank, on the other hand have proven to be fairly successful in raising incomes and assets and contributing to poverty alleviation (Khandakar et al. 1996<sup>8</sup>). It is widely stated that at Grameen Bank about half of the members cross the poverty line over a ten-year period (Todd 1996<sup>9</sup>). Additionally credit programmes, by narrowly focusing on rectifying distortions in the credit markets, ensure low overheads. In fact most Grameen Bank branches cover all costs and start realising profits after their fifth year of operations (Hashemi and Schuler 1996<sup>10</sup>). More interestingly the Grameen Bank group mechanism seems to be actually having a profound 'empowering' impact on its members through increasing their confidence in carrying out transactions in public and their status at home (Hashemi et al. 1996<sup>11</sup>). All this would make it very tempting to argue that credit programmes may actually be a better option than conscientising programmes, both in achieving economic well-being and in providing women with more confidence to negotiate the inequities of the prevailing public space.

The would, however, be an inappropriate assessment of the long-term achievements of the conscientising model. What GSS and NK attempt to achieve is a more lasting transformation in the perception of the status of the poor. While societal transformations may not have occurred (and in any case this would be a long-term objective), the poor, by challenging the established basis of societal power, can force the elite to take them seriously. In the process, the poor themselves re-evaluate their self-perception and gain self-confidence. The rights of the poor (for proper wages, for access to resources, for legal protection) may still get trampled but they do not get ignored. The conscientising experience of membership in NK and GSS and people's involvement in collective actions leaves a lasting empowering impression on individual members that continues long after groups may have disbanded. This form of empowerment is qualitatively different from that of Grameen's. Where Grameen's is more that of the individual woman's negotiating specific formal boundaries of patriarchy, NK and GSS are more involved in challenging the basis of political and economic power. Where patriarchy can re-adjust and give up some of its formal requirements for maintaining the subordination of women (without any weakening of patriarchy itself), GSS and NK actions force ruling interest groups to actually relinquish some of their authority, some of their resources. This probably represents the real contribution of the NK-GSS model.

There is also a fundamental difference in the approach to economic well-being in the two models. Where individual credit-focused models look toward improving incomes of members, the GSS-NK model situates the struggle for poverty alleviation at the societal level. The task of such programmes are defined as challenging the factors that contribute to the persistence of poverty. Poverty alleviation can occur, it is stated, when such struggle barriers are removed. Unlike credit, which benefits only those receiving it, a renegotiation of prices, of wages, of interest rates, of local government, benefits all members of the poor. Grameen Bank type credit programmes may therefore have contributed to the economic well-being of

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<sup>8</sup> Shahid Khandaker et al., 'Draft Reports from the World Bank Study on the Grameen Bank', 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Helen Todd, *Women at the Centre*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Syed M. Hashemi and Sidney Schuler, 'Sustainable Banking with the Poor: A Case Study of the Grameen Bank', World Bank, 1996, mimeo.

<sup>11</sup> Syed M. Hashemi et al., 'Rural Credit and Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh', World Development, April 1996.

members, but by its inability to include all of the poor (especially the poorest of the poor) and by its inability to stop many of the non-poor from entering the ranks of the poor, have had only a minor affect in making a dent in the macro-poverty figures. Even in the best of estimates poverty figures may have declined by only a few percentage points in the last two decades (Rahman et al. 1996). On the other hand there have been no major statistical studies on measuring the local-level economic impact of conscientising programmes. While operationalising many of the variables will be difficult, and separating out macro-economic impact from programme impact even more so, it is imperative that this task be implemented to determine the real economic contribution of GSS-NK programmes. Net impacts at the local level may not be too far behind that of credit programmes.

The real issue in comparing credit programmes with conscientising programmes may very well be the epistemology one adopts. If one starts with a vision of society in conflict between different economic and social groups (rather than of class harmony) one explains poverty in terms of structures of power. In such a situation credit programmes, even in the best of circumstances, can only improve the economic conditions of its members, but cannot eliminate class and gender subordination, nor inequity. The critical question, therefore, is which paradigm best explains the reality of rural Bangladesh. Only this can determine which strategy is ultimately superior. Much more research and more time is required for any tangible answer to this.



## **Gender & Social Mobilisation**

We have examined relevant gender differences in the context of institutional dynamics, development and sustainability and in our discussion of collective actions. Here we highlight some key findings.

First, the lack of clear economic benefits is a considerable deterrent for women's participation in social mobilisation efforts. Nevertheless, the benefits of belonging to a group to fight injustices, small and large, are not lost on women. Economic class nuances affect women's choices. Better-off women who have other resources and more to lose are more inclined toward credit and loans, while destitute women who must depend on themselves to eke out a living are drawn to support the samity and the NGO offers in collective actions such as fair wage disputes. But the NGO has a role here as well. The general perception at the field level is that social mobilisation is a male issue (in comparison, guarding saplings by the roadside is seen as a woman's job) and because of this, women's groups take a back seat to men in the planning and implementation of collective actions. The exception is where women themselves bring to the attention of the NGO issues such as wage discrepancies and violence against women.

Second, through their apprenticeship in social mobilisation efforts, these women gain a language and assertiveness that enable them to speak to higher officials and confront wealthy exploiters. This is not an insignificant gain. Third, if a woman's group is set up and treated independently from a male's group and not simply as an appendage to it, it has a much better chance of being organisationally and politically active. It also has a chance to define its own agenda which addresses women's particular needs. Fourth, regardless of the strength of women's groups or the resourcefulness of their leaders, their dependency on male groups is high because of the gendered structure of resource access. Finally, despite hard won gains in status within the samity and their leadership in collective actions, women suffer physical abuse at the hands of men. This is so common that it rates little attention either from their men or the male NGO workers.

Below are three stories: a short history of a GSS women's village organisation from Nilfamari; and two life histories of women, one a GSS Gonoshonghoton member and the other a Nijera Kori samity member. These stories together capture some of the key findings about gender and social mobilisation.

### *A Women's Village Organisation*

When the GSS field-worker started in Khutamara union in the Nilfamari area at the end of 1989, he initially began by working with men, and a few months later with women. In addition to helping women to gain access to education and work against the dowry system, GSS has, from its earliest days, worked to unite women against the various other forms of social injustices that they face.

Along with the men, the women also expressed interest in attending adult literacy classes, and came forward to say so. In some areas, the enthusiasm expressed by the women outstripped that of the men. Women's husbands opposed their attending adult literacy classes. For example, Mohila and Anjiara Begum had to tolerate considerable abuse from their husbands for their involvement with the organisation, but despite that, they continued to participate.

Firoza Begum, although a widow, was threatened by her brothers-in-law. At the time, Firoza Begum went from house to house to encourage women to join the adult literacy classes. When her house became the school, one brother-in-law said, 'What are you trying to do? Do you want to become a Christian by learning to read and write in your old age like this? If you women form groups, you'll all go to hell.' But the women ignored this harassment and organised the adult education school.

Safia Begum and her sister-in-law Chobitun took the initiative to start an adult literacy school in Horishchandra village. A nine-year-old student from class four, Asma Khatun, began teaching at this school. Asma is Safia Begum's younger daughter. The Mahila Gram Committee, set up on 14 November, 1991, elected Safia Begum chairperson, and Mahila Begum was elected Secretary. At that time, the samity had 400 members. All the women in the village got involved with the sangothon mediating disputes, and participated in various kinds of movement and demonstration. They demonstrated alongside the men to support their demands for a fair wage.

Safia Begum said, 'Instead of six months, we read the same textbook for two years.' Regardless of whether they were Hindu or Muslim, all the poor people of the village became involved with the women's sangothon. They (Mahila Begum, Nurjahan, Anjiara, Firoza, Poroshmoni, Tulabi and others) said, 'After studying in the adult education school, we learned about legal matters, we learned that we could build a movement aimed at achieving our rights, we could obtain financial compensation if we were divorced. We are finding out about such things now. That's why all of us poor people, Hindus and Muslims, have become involved with the Mahila sangothon.' But Safia Begum said, 'In our village, women came to join the adult education school and sangothon in the hundreds. But GSS had not taken any effective steps to make these women members of the Committee.' Although huge numbers of women had initially come forward to become involved in the Sangothon, there was no clear plan to incorporate them into the committee and bring them forward accordingly. Many women emerged as leaders through their own efforts. But after the union parishad elections, the level of abuse directed at women increased. Women and girls were beaten and mistreated. The mahila sangothon became weaker.

Many of the men who joined the sangothon got married and demanded dowries at their weddings. Najma got married to Mohammad Abul Kalam, an illiterate day labourer in Kathali union. Twenty-one thousand and one takas was paid as dowry at this wedding. Even if the number of weddings where dowry is demanded has decreased, the amount of dowry demanded has. Many sangothon men had dowryless weddings. Violence against women has decreased. Now the men are not so quick to hit women for no reason. The head of the Union Committee, Pushpajit, said, 'I slapped my wife really hard one day. The president of the Union Committee, Hujur Ali, told everyone about this. I was very embarrassed at my own behaviour. I will never hit my wife again.' Pushpajit's wife is one of the leaders of the Mahila Gram Committee.

### *Firoza's Story*

Firoza is about 32 years old. She studied up to class four and later worked as a teacher in GSS adult schools. Her husband passed away four years ago. She has two sons, one is 8 and the other is 6. Both of them study at GSS primary education school. Firoza and her husband own two acres of land of which 99 decimals are arable and 44 decimals are barren. Her natal home is at Dhaidam village in Kisamat union of Kishoregonj thana.

Her father is old and her mother dead. Her father earns a living working as an agricultural labourer. Firoza has no brothers; she was one of five girls. She was married off at the age of 18.

'Before my marriage, my father met my husband first at Sabujpara as he [father] used to go there in search of work. My husband used to call my father "mama" [maternal uncle]. One day he saw me in our house and proposed to my father that he wanted to marry me. My husband already had a wife and children and he was much more older than I was. Considering all this I did not agree to the proposition. But my father threatened that he would kill me unless I agreed to marry. He was eager to get me married then and there as my husband did not demand any dowry. He also promised to give me possession of some land. At last I agreed. Then my husband gave me 15 decimals of land in my name. In my husband's house I found out that he had sent my co-wife off to her natal home beating her up. My co-wife never came back during the four years I was with my husband. During that period I gave birth to three sons. By the end of these four years my husband died of an ulcer. We had to sell most of his 270 decimals of land to pay for his treatment.

'My co-wife returned to my husband's house after his death. I wanted to get land ownership distributed among the heirs, but her sons did not agree. They had been cultivating the lands. They said to me, "Who the hell are you? We don't know you. You won't get any share of land ownership." I said "The government will give me my share if you don't." Dr Abdul Majid and Amin Keramat Ali of Tengonmari tried to convince my co-wife's sons to give me some shares of land. But it did not work. My devar [husband's younger brother] told me that they would give me a mound of paddy every month if I went to my natal home. Finding no other option, I went to the Advocate Anisur at Nilphamari who works with GSS. The GSS worker told me that I could always take legal help if I had any problem. Listening to everything the advocate said, "The property will be equally distributed among the brothers. The two co-wives will get four anas (four sixteenth) each." At first my co-wife and her sons refused to agree to such a settlement. But they agreed later as I threatened that I would file a suit if they did not. My son died of diarrhoea after some days. My devar said to my co-wife's sons that they would get the land which fell in my dead son's portion. Then I went to Khoka Miah, the chairman of the union for help. He made it clear to me that my stepsons were not to get any portions of that piece of land, my own sons were entitled to the ownership of the land. But my stepsons would not listen to this. Then the chairman asked me to take legal action.

'I went to the advocate again and he gave me a written statement saying that my stepsons were not legally entitled to own the land. I showed this to a number of men. They appreciated my efforts but refused to fight for me against my stepsons. Then I myself went to the land with an "amin" [land surveyor], got the land measured and took hold of my portions. At first my stepsons refused to accept this, but later the villagers calmed them saying that they could not do anything against the law. The land surveyor came to record land in last Falgoon (March 1993). My stepsons told him to record the land in their six brothers' name only. But I told him that they had another brother, although not from the same mother, who had died. The amin did not record the land given the confusing situation. He demanded Tk. 1000.00 from me for recording the land in my dead son's name. But I told him I couldn't arrange for such a large sum of money. The amin would not record the land unless I gave the money. At last, after learning about my involvement with the Gonosongathon and after I threatened that I would complain against him to DC or SP, he recorded the land properly. But I haven't seen

how he recorded the land. However, I have been using the land which was my dead son' s portion. I shall see how the land was recorded when it will be registered.

'I encountered more trouble in May 1992. I got into conflict with my "debar" and "bhasur" [husband' s older brother] regarding the ownership of a tree behind my house which belonged to my husband. Besides, my debar and bhasur attempted to engage me in an illicit affair after my husband' s death. I started sleeping with a Daa" [big knife] with me. They claimed that my husband had sold the tree to them but I knew that wasn' t true. One day my husband' s brother started chopping down the tree. When I attempted to prevent him, he tried to strip off my saree. He said, "I shall banish you out of the village after stripping you." By then my saree was completely torn. After that I went to the Gonoshonghton leader Pushpajit and asked for justice. Pushpajit arranged a "shalish" at which my debar said, "Why should I accept a solution by a Hindu?" Hearing this Pushpajit left. Then I went to the GSS advocate and filed a suit against my debar. The case was pending for six months. Later a search warrant was issued for my debar. He sought help from chairman Nazrul. Nazrul assured him that he would teach me a lesson and everything would be in order. I went to Jaldhaka thana and asked the second officer to do something about the search warrant. But he demanded 100 takas of me and said that there was no warrant number. I then took the number from the "peshkar" at Nilphamari. I submitted the number to the thana and asked the authority to do something. I explained my situation to them and expressed my inability to offer them any bribe. At last the "Daroga" [police officer in charge of the thana] sent my debar to Nilphamari. In the court I explained how he had tortured me in the presence of other villagers. His advocate tried to prove that I was a bad woman. In the end my debar was sentenced to three months' imprisonment. But the Nazrul chairman brought him out within ten days by bribing the magistrate. He no longer tortures me.

'After I joined the gonoshonghton, I took Grameen Bank training. But my name was excluded from the list after they learned about my involvement with GSS and that I carried out 'dewani' (filing suits). I then went to the Bank with others and demanded that we deserve to get loans. The Bank employees said that they would not extend credit to us as we were involved with GSS. I said that GSS did not give us any money, it only taught us how to become conscious. At last I threatened that we would not leave the premises until we were granted credit. Finding no way out, the GB employees enlisted us as group members and extended credit to us eight days later. I have been with GB for three years."

My debar Mamtaj and bhasur Yusuf blame me for going to GSS and moving with men. They even threaten to dislodge me from my own land. My neighbour Shamsul says that I have become a Christian giving in to the temptation of getting relief materials. Akubuddin blames me for leading processions and filing suits. My relatives speak ill of me and no one gives me any money. They even refuse to give me water from their tube well. Everyone tries to deceive me as I am poor and a widow. I purchased a tube well taking a loan of 1500 takas from GB. But the salesman gave me a tube well of poor quality although he took a high price. I had to fight for a long time with the salesman to get a tube well of superior quality.

'I have become bolder after joining GSS. The adult schooling helped me to become conscious and speak against injustice. Now I try to convince other women to join GSS. I even made my Bhasur' s wife join GSS disregarding the fact of my bhasur' s torturing me. I do love this gonosongathon a lot.'

## *Shabita's Story*

Shabita Sana is 47 years old and illiterate. She works as an agricultural labourer, does earth-cutting on roads as well as the housework. Her husband Satish Chandra Sana, is 59 and illiterate. He is an agricultural day labourer and tills his own land of 86 decimals. They have two daughters and a son.

'I was married when I was eleven years old to Satish Chandra Sana of Bigardana village in Paikgacha, Khulna. At that time, I did not know what was involved in marriage and running a household. My husband pledged 300 takas to my father, and brought me home with him. My father's home is fourteen miles away from Bigardana village. My father was one of five brothers. Together they owned one hundred bighas (3300 decimals) of land. My father's financial situation was good. But my father-in-law's situation was bad. As a result of that deprivation became a familiar thing for me. My husband frequently beat me for no reason, except that he was frustrated and hungry. He would also harass me and tell me to get rice and money from my father. But how many days could I live like that? Four years passed swiftly, and a daughter was born to me. This meant I was even more worried than I had been before. After discussing matters with my husband, I decided that I would get some money from my father and use it to begin trading in rice. After bringing five hundred taka from my father, I used it to buy a dheki to husk rice and bought some paddy from a farmer's house. After boiling, drying and processing the paddy, I sold the rice from my house. At that time, no woman worked outside the homestead. That was why I settled on rice trading as a business.

'I did this work for five or six years, but I was unable to save any money during that time. My husband would forcibly take my earnings away from me and squander the money as he pleased. If I refused to give him the money, he would beat me. I had another daughter, and later a son. Despite all the hardships we faced, I somehow managed to put my daughter in school. The decision to do so was mine. Although my husband was at first not in favour of the idea, I pleaded with him until he came around. In 1982, as a result of the efforts of the NK worker, Tara Mia and the chairperson and a member of the men's samity, Amol and Bipul Ray, I got the chance to join an NK samity. I myself explained the situation to many of the poor women, and set up the first women's samity in Bigardana. When I heard from the NK workers that joining the samity would enable us to put an end to violence against women and provide a means for us to achieve our rights, I joined the samity hoping that this would truly come to pass.

'It was as a result of joining the NK samity that I first got the chance to work outside my home. It was the NK workers who gave me the opportunity to lease in government land. Both the men's and the women's societies had access to the land, so men and women both worked on that land, and earned money. The NK workers said, "If women are able to work outside the home, if they are able to earn some money and help their husbands, this increases their self-confidence and improves their status." I did earth-cutting work at Wada, as well. A few of us persuaded other women in the samity to do earth-cutting work and go outside their homes.

'Every year, I catch shrimp hatchlings in the river and sell them. From this, I earn seven or eight thousand takas a year. Now we have the opportunity to work outside the home. Now we are no longer afraid of the wealthy. If a wealthy person threatens me, I threaten them in return, and come away. We poor people have been united through the samity.

We have the organisation of Nijera Kori behind us. From them we get legal help, advice on various matters and other kinds of assistance. My husband no longer takes my money away by force. I can buy anything I want to, according to my own wishes. I can go to town or to the markets as I wish. I can go for medical treatment on my own. I gradually saved money from my own earnings and bought two goats. After two years, I sold three goats and bought a cow. After keeping livestock for five years, I sold two cows and eight goats for 6,500 taka, and along with some money saved from my husband' s earnings, I bought one bigha of land. My husband and I both work on this land, and earn from it.

‘Our household is running fairly smoothly now. After my three children were born, I thought of their future and chose the safe period as a means of birth control. But my husband is a very selfish person, he does not want me to spend any time where no money is involved. As the chairperson, I have to spend a lot of time on my samity' s work, but as a result, I have to put up with very nasty behaviour from him. Even though we are samity leaders, we have not yet been able to take any action against this type of abuse.’

## Conclusion

We began by questioning the notion of group sustainability post-NGO withdrawal and proposed instead that group development is a complex, non-linear process dependent on a variety of factors and that group sustainability is highly dependent on the support of the external change agent - the NGO. Our overall findings support this hypothesis but more important, we are able to delineate some of the paths in this complex process.

First, when we look at groups, we do not see a uniform pattern. Group profiles are dependent on the history of their formation especially particular village circumstances, leadership typologies and economic and social gains. We posit a set of leadership typologies - entrenched patron, emerging patron, representational, egalitarian and satellite - which describe leadership types and can be used to analyse differences in group dynamics.

Second, we found that group cohesion defined as the level of group involvement and sense of identity within a village organisation, is galvanised by group actions but sustained in the long run by the economic success of group efforts. Groups commonly experience a high level of internal conflict. Inactivity among members in between group action is high and group breakdown is far from uncommon.

Third, class solidarity is difficult to sustain and often breaks down because of: economic heterogeneity in groups, factional and kinship loyalties, state repression, limits in NGO support and the absolute poverty of members that disallows continued participation.

Fourth, we found that group cohesion is highly correlated with the involvement and support of the NGO. This support ranges from group formation to assistance in implementing social actions and economic projects, conflict management, and strategic planning of social actions (andolans) and elections. Though NGO dependence in management of day-to-day group affairs may decrease over time, the resource brokerage role of NGOs becomes more and critical over time. This implies that NGO withdrawal is likely to lead to a high level of inactivity in groups and eventually a breakdown. As groups mature and set their sights on more and more politically risky actions such as khas land take-overs and participating in union parishad elections, their need for NGO support and guidance increases. The form of this support needs to graduate over time from day-to-day management of groups to co-planning strategic group directions and mediating between groups on the one hand and state systems and exploitative private interests on the other. Therefore, the costs of sustained NGO involvement need to be weighed against the social benefits accruing to the poor in their being able to better negotiate the power structure and access resources.

Fifth, most studies on individual-focused credit and income-generating NGO activity (such as Grameen and BRAC) indicate increased economic welfare for members; our study on GSS and NK indicates the difficulty of holding on to collective gains stemming from collective actions of NGOs. This may lead one to suggest a micro-credit-based strategy as superior to a conscientisation strategy in alleviating poverty. However micro-level economic benefits to members in credit programmes have as yet not translated into general improvement in conditions of poverty throughout the country. On the other hand social mobilisation efforts attacking the structures of power that reproduce poverty hold forth the promise of economic gains that can be shared by the entire community (through better prices, higher wages, lower interest rates). More importantly, such

mobilisation, by conscientising the poor, makes them assertive and confident and better able to challenge, at a daily level, the basis of their subordination. What, therefore, in the final analysis, works best in terms of sustainable development of the poor? Pending a meticulous area-level impact study, this will continue to remain an open question.

Finally, we find that poor women are eager to get involved in collective actions both to gain better economic terms and conditions of work and to establish some sense of dignity in the eyes of their men and other villagers. But this potential is inadequately tapped by male NGO field-workers who tend to view women as supportive players rather than leaders in collective actions. Regardless of the strength of women's group cohesion or the resourcefulness of women leaders, they are still dependent on men's village organisations in brokering resource access and dealing with state mechanisms. If women's groups are set up independently of male groups, they have a higher potential of being more organisationally and politically active. But a higher status earned through strong leadership and facing tremendous opposition, does not prevent the physical abuse of women at the hands of their male kin.

Together, these findings give greater texture to our understanding about the formation, working and life of local-level organisations. They bring into question generalised and simplistic notions of group development and sustainability. They provide insights which can be applied in further examinations of how groups come together and how they perform.



## GLOSSARY

Andolon

struggle, mobilised movement to achieve specific objectives

Anna

one-sixteenth of a taka (the unit of account); this system of accounting was officially discontinued in 1961 but people still refer to it

Ashwin

the sixth month of the Bangla calendar; the Bangla year starts from mid-April

Beel

low-lying depressed marshy area filled with water most of the year. People are generally able to get a winter harvest in these areas

Bhasur

husband' s older brother

Bhumiheen

landless

Bigha

one-third of an acre

Char

new land formed with silt deposits from rivers

Chinnyamul

literally 'uprooted'; refers to those who have been forced to leave their land and homes due to poverty

Debar

husband' s younger brother

Dewani

the judicial court

Falgon

the eleventh month in the Bangla calendar

Gherao(ing)

literally 'to surround'; refers to the act of political agitation involving 'laying siege' to officials so they remain imprisoned

Gono Shahajjo Sangstha (GSS)

people' s voluntary organisation

Kartik

the seventh month of the Bangla calendar; associated with the lean season, unemployment, poverty and famines

**Khas**  
governmental land; land over which no private property rights exist

**Matbar**  
village headman; often a family name

**Mitali**  
friendship

**Naxals**  
members or supporters of a Maoist movement in South Asia; takes its name from Naxalbari in West Bengal - the scene of a major peasant and indigenous people' s uprising in the late 1960s

**Nijera Kori**  
we can do it ourselves

**Samity**  
association; group

**Sangha**  
association; group

**Sarbohara Party**  
literally the political organisation of 'those who have lost everything'; the party of the proletariat; in Bangladesh it is currently an underground organisation

**Sardar**  
leader; organiser

**Seer**  
unit of weight; equal to 2.2 pounds

**Shalish(es)**  
village adjudication body composed of village elders; the system of adjudicating of local conflicts

**Taka**  
the unit of currency; one US\$ = approximately forty takas

**Union**  
lowest administrative level

**Union Parisad**  
the office of local government