



CLUSTER APPROACH: PROMOTING LOCAL DEVELOPMENT



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Livelihoods, Empowerment and Agroforestry Project (LEAF)

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Glossary of Terms

APO	Annual Plan of Operation
CBO(s)	Community Based Organisation(s)
CP(s)	Cluster Platform(s)
EP	Extreme Poor
FM	Female Mentor
GO(s)	Government Organisation(s)
HID	Human and Institutional Development
IC/SDC	Inter Cooperation/ Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
IGA	Income Generating Activities
LEAF	Livelihoods, Empowerment and Agroforestry
LSP(s)	Local Service Provider
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO(s)	Non-governmental Organisation(s)
PNGO	Partner Non-Government Organisations
SHABGE	Strengthening Households' Access to Bari Gardening and extension
SP	Service Provision
UP	Union Parishad
VFFP	Village and Farm Forestry Project
VDC	Village Development Committee
VGD	Vulnerable Group Development
VGF	Vulnerable Group Fund

Summary

Drawing on the experiences of previous projects in rural areas, LEAF identified a key problem, which prevented communities from attaining their development goals. The small number of people involved in any one area simply was not enough to create or sustain project momentum, so the idea of a “cluster approach” was conceived. A Cluster is defined as a group of between 150 -300 households formed from neighbouring villages within a Ward having common socio-economic ties. Hypothesis was that in this way, a critical mass would be achieved to assist communities to implement development projects and interface with other organisations and actors.

Initially, LEAF piloted the approach with a relatively small number of clusters to refine the vision and implementation strategy. This gave group members and leaders a sense of responsibility towards their community development process. The CPs were made up of several members representing each group with special effort to include females and the EP. The meetings were held on a regular basis with CBOs hosting in rotation. Equal distribution of roles and responsibilities prevented any single group from dominating the activities of the CP. The project encouraged a unified approach to devising the APO. The representatives were guided to identify common activities aimed at reducing extreme poverty across their cluster in order to maximize the impact of resources for the greatest number of needy people.

LEAF and the PNGOs signed a single MoU with each CP instead of MoUs with all individual groups representing a CP. LEAF provided advice, coaching, training and support to the CPs in order to build their permanent capacity for dealing with their current problems and coping with future demands. A joint review process led CPs to assess their achievements against their APOs and review the commitments made in the MoU. The CPs refined their roles as required . They grasped the importance of coordinating activities, interfacing with service providers, sharing information and ensuring equity in all operations.

Coordinated activities within cluster boundaries were very efficient. Not only could information and technology be distributed more quickly and cost-effectively, but also it benefited a broad number of recipients. A critical mass of people were integrated into the development of the wider community ensuring that the fortunate ones were also responsive to the issues of the EP.

The CPs could assist with implementing IGAs , tackling gender discrimination and putting pressure on the UPs to respond to cluster demands. The cluster members appreciated their involvement in so many pressing issues, thus CPs were encouraged to undertake wider social responsibilities.

Potential clusters were selected based on the concentration and dynamism of VFFP and SHABGE groups in an area. Starting in 2004, 330 clusters (averaging 2 groups in each) were formed. By the end of 2005, that number rose to 860 averaging 3 groups per cluster.

The success of the cluster approach is obvious despite some minor and resolvable weaknesses. Now, a decision must be made as to whether the platforms should evolve into an institution or simply remain an instrument for facilitating coordination of activities. In order to strengthen positive dialogue and negotiation with local government authorities, local administration, line agencies and market actors the network needs to develop at least to union level. CPs could act as a local branch development partner of the Union Council.

1. BACKGROUND

In the past, CARE-SHABGE and VFFP aimed at reducing poverty in rural areas have been tried. Both undertook initiatives with farmers for enriching their skills and capacity. CARE-SHABGE established 550 Farmer Field Schools, mostly composed of poor women, which taught technologies related to vegetable production. Another, VFFP created its' Tree Farmer Groups to work with 520 existing farmers' organisations aiming to improve their management of homesteads and HID competencies.

These projects started working with small groups although the main objective was to reach the whole community, especially the poor and EP. In an effort to include the wider community, SHABGE invited associate participants and VFFP groups opened up membership, too. Still the benefits of these projects were not reaching everyone for two main reasons. Firstly, the geographical distance between the groups meant that resources were spread thinly and inefficiently. Secondly, the capacities developed within a group did not permeate throughout the community at large.

A strategy was devised to join several groups in the same community in the hopes that unity and shared capacity may bolster development. Thus the decision was taken to merge these two projects in 2004 to form the Livelihoods, Empowerment and Agroforestry (LEAF) project. LEAF introduced the "Cluster" concept to work with several (formal or informal) groups in the same village. The cluster was defined as a group of between 150 -300 households formed from neighbouring villages within a ward¹, having common socio-economic ties.

Another aspect of the concept was to coordinate several groups' activities. Since no body existed to lead the representatives, LEAF encouraged the formation of "**Cluster Platforms**" at the community level. These platforms would liaise between the groups and interface with community and local development agents.

LEAF envisioned that establishing a critical mass, in the form of clusters, would have other benefits:

- Establishment of a locally-based service provision
- Local coordination of market development approach
- Increases the pressure that disadvantaged populations that can place on local governance institutions
- Strengthen joint efforts to negotiate with support organisations and tackle market forces at local level.



What is a cluster?

Typically a cluster is defined as: "a group of between 150 - 300 households formed from neighbouring villages within a Ward having common socio-economic ties".

1. Union council is the lowest tyre of local government, each union council is divided into nine wards, one ward is the habitat of about 500 households

2. CLUSTER FORMATION:

Potential clusters areas were selected on the basis of two main criteria; the concentration of groups (VFFP and SHABGE) within a Ward and the level of dynamism of these groups. A mapping exercise and a survey were done in June 2003 for this purpose.

During the first year (2004), the cluster approach was tested within a relatively small area. The scheme was launched with 330 communities in 37 upazillas of 13 districts under Rajshahi division.

The positive response from other groups in the same and neighbouring communities pushed LEAF for consolidation and expansion in the second year. So, by the end of 2005, the total number of CPs soared to 860 involving 2800 groups. The average number of groups per cluster rose to 3 from 2 as well. The process had facilitated the empowerment of 78,000 poor and EP rural households to improving their livelihoods. This number is made up of 67% females and 22% EP.

3. CLUSTER APPROACH IMPLEMENTATION:

3.1 Developing a Common Vision With CBOs

The ultimate aim of LEAF is to assist communities in becoming self-sustaining which includes developing their negotiation and communication skills.

Keeping the process simple, a lot of time was invested in sharing this vision with selected groups to test their response and gain insights into their needs.

The second preparatory stage was to introduce the concept of cluster and CPs. It is important to mention here that adjacent groups and non-member villagers were encouraged to attend these sharing events. It took three months to agree and internalise the vision, concepts and the roles. The facilitators wrote on flip charts without any illustration for their information. This was not a good teaching tool because many people attending the gatherings are illiterate. So, they are developing charts with simple illustrations to convey the subjects. When they could better understand the ideas they expressed their interest in collaboration with LEAF and its partners. This sharing process also gave group members a sense of responsibility towards their own local development process.



Ms. Rahima Razib, Executive Director, Mohila Sanghati Parishad (MSP), Rajshahi:

"In the 1st project-sharing meeting (with LEAF) I learnt about the vision and strategies of the project. Although I questioned the effectiveness of the cluster approach, we started sharing the idea with the small groups around the villages. We experienced some difficulties in creating a unified vision with all of the participants. With the support of LEAF, we addressed the problem by using flipcharts. Eventually, 2 or 3 adjacent groups came under a cluster platform.

I was surprised to see how unified the cluster representatives were in elaborating their APOs. Encouragingly, activities were kept open for all villagers, including some special initiatives for the extreme poor and women. The small groups were given equal roles and responsibilities. It was astonishing to see the extent of achievements made by the cluster platforms.

A single MOU was signed by CBO leaders under same cluster. Knowing their roles and responsibilities helped them develop as an interface between respective CBOs and service providers. This sense of ownership encouraged them to host joint reviews and evaluate their own progress. The HID competencies developed within the cluster platforms made them capable of developing their future vision".



Mosammat Shahida Begum, Cluster Representative, Rajagaon Cluster, Thakurgaon Sadar:

At the beginning of 2004, LEAF workers shared their project's vision with my group, Uttar Dholarhat Mahila Unnyan Dal. We liked the cluster idea and convinced some neighbouring groups to join us. Finally, three neighbouring groups decided to come under the umbrella of Rajargaon cluster. This group selected nine cluster representatives of whom there are six women and three men.

The three individual groups shared their APOs from which the cluster identified some common poverty and gender related problems as well as opportunities. From these points, they developed an APO for the cluster and coordinated activities of the small groups.

The cluster signed a single MoU with LEAF and SERP, in which all parties' roles and supports are clearly outlined. Once a year, we jointly review the achievements, strengths and weaknesses of our program against our planned objectives. By doing this, our organisational capacities have been increased significantly. Now we can understand which GO or NGO links we need to pursue.

Several meetings and workshops with different local development committees resulted in joint action plans. Cooperation with upazila-level GOs and NGOs has resulted in our increased ability to access services for our community people. Direct relationships with service providers have also improved and there has been a reduction in gender discrimination. Ultimately, our social status and dignity in the community have been increased.

3.2 Memorandum of Understanding

VFFP realised the need of clarifying the roles and commitment of the parties (groups, NGOs and Project) in 2001. For doing that VFFP introduced MOUs, that same year in order to define the plan of operation of the groups.



LEAF in 2004, introduced one MoU for all the groups in same CP, which was signed by the chairpersons of all groups, representatives of LEAF and the PNGOs. This time the MoU added to the basic roles, responsibilities and commitments outlined for the strategy. All parties incorporated commitments towards local development and the reduction of gender discriminations and poverty. Signing the MoU for the clusters helped focus the leaders on accomplishing the annual plans for the groups and CPs. They took special initiatives for EP and women and confronted common issues in the community.

Signing a MoU between the CPs and the project created a sense of ownership that inspired people to actively participate their planned activities instead of the feelings of being only recipients of benefits from the project. However, the MoU was not written clearly enough for members of CBOs to completely understand. So, it was rewritten to make it user-friendly.

3.3. Combined Annual Plans of Operation (APOs)

Each group in a cluster had been using an APO to focus their activities but it was a positive, new experience to share these at platform level. The format for making an APO takes in six categories:

- Well-being analysis and socio-economic categorisation of members
- Summary of livelihoods' constraints and opportunities
- Prioritisation of main development activities (micro projects)
- Identification of specific initiatives for the EP members
- Detailing the specific activities under the prioritised micro-projects
- Making a schedule of activities

After the presentation and discussion of the individual group APOs, the participants realised that they were planning some of the same activities. They decided to join forces. This led to efficient use of time and resources and involved a greater swath of the community. There was maximum impact at minimum expense. However, the needs of EP of the whole community are yet to be considered.

3.4. Structure and Roles

The CPs consist of two to three representatives from each group in the clusters. Efforts to encourage representation of women and the EP contributed in highlighting issues of gender and poverty.

The CPs members meet monthly to review their group and cluster activities. They define their immediate activities and delegate responsibilities. Additional meeting may be called when necessary. The responsibility of chairing and facilitating is taken in on a rotating basis, thus the leadership responsibilities are shared equally. This prevented any one group from dominating the proceedings and increased the dynamics of the platform.

Delegating specific roles and responsibilities to members helped the CPs focus on specific tasks. Over time, experience led them to identify practical roles, which includes:

- Mediation between all members of the community and anybody whose actions effected the community, as required;
- Coordinate group or community activities with regards to prioritisation, planning, monitoring and evaluation;
- Coordinate joint training activities and events;
- Advocate for the needs of EP and women, who often overlooked;
- Ensure fair access to public goods and services for the most marginalized members;
- Information sharing.

3.5 Focus on Extreme Poor

Based on the first year of experiences it seemed that there was a need to prioritize activities which would benefit the EP. Some groups had not given the matter any urgency because few members of their community fell into this category. In every case, groups were supported in exploring potential IGA for their poorest members.

- A strategy called the “transect” visit was proposed as a way to really see the problems and identify the opportunities directly in their community. The CP members split up into 2-3 subgroups and walked around the whole community looking to identify;
 - vulnerable families without any support,
 - crucial gender related problems,
 - local potential and resources (water body, fallow land, roads etc.),
 - opportunities for joint initiatives, marketing , income generation activities, etc.



These visits focussed CPs to prioritise some specific projects that could easily contribute to reduction of extreme poverty and impact on local development.

3.6 Joint Review Process

The joint review is a process requires all of the parties in the collaboration process (groups, CPs, NGOs) to review their achievements against their annual plan. They assess the reciprocal commitments, as per the MoU. Taking note of any significant changes in the community, they make recommendations and adjust their next plan of operation accordingly.

Separate joint review sessions take place at group and CP levels. Field facilitators of the PNGOs train the leaders to perform this function. In exceptional cases, the field facilitator will head a session if an appropriate leader can not been found. All members attend this review session with the group leader facilitating the discussion. The exercise takes about two and a half hours to complete.

Through this process the self-analytical skills of cluster representatives have improved, however it was necessary to simplify the language. The joint review process continues to be supported by LEAF.

3.7 Human and Institutional Development

The processes mentioned in the above paragraphs give the indication of the range of competencies required by the various leaders. To assist in their skill development, LEAF offers advice, coaching, training and support. Not only will this help them perform their present duties but it will help build capacity for coping with future demands.

Two capacity building methods were found to be most effective. First of all coaching the leaders on how to analyse, prioritise and manage their plans, then supporting them as they developed their own tools to accomplish these goals. Rotating the chairperson for the CPs meetings helped the development of alternative leaderships, which helped prevent domination by advanced groups and increased the dynamism of the platform.

Cluster leaders used the initial introductions made by LEAF to learn to negotiate with service providers, market actors and government authorities. Also, exchanges between dynamic and struggling platforms allowed the less confident groups to observe through their peers better working strategies. These

opportunities came when groups would collaborate on preparing an event such as: International Women's Day, Environment Day, Independence Day, etc. These events in themselves enhanced competencies for the whole community.



Abdul Matin, President, Chandpara Samaz Kallyan Shangstha, Bogra:

"I am a representative of Chandpara cluster. In 2004, we started collaborating with LEAF. We had no idea about planning processes, however with support from LEAF we developed our annual plan of operation (APO) and learned the skills so that we can now write our own APOs . LEAF facilitated an annual plan sharing workshop with our UP. As a result, we could manage VGD card, VGF card, old age allowance, widow allowance, and sanitary latrine for 18 extreme poor families of our cluster community. Our communications with the UP are productive and they participate in a variety of our activities.

We visited two other clusters of LEAF to see how they used the assistance of the project for their development activities. These visits were very informative. We learned of different implementation strategies, joint initiatives and schemes for the extreme poor. Now, we are confidently organising different community events like training, tree plantation, festival, etc.

In the beginning I was under pressure to lead all developments, but after getting leadership training from LEAF, I now know how to delegate. Others have come forward to organize cluster events.

LEAF first introduced me to local agriculture, livestock, social welfare, etc offices. Now I go to those offices on regular basis to access services for our community. So far, 15 extreme poor of our cluster community have benefited from IGAs (livestock, small business, etc) through these linkages. These people are now earning an average of Tk. 50-60 per day.

I want to provide more support to all of the extreme poor of our community with the assistance of other cluster leaders".

4. RESULTS

4.1. Attaining a Critical Mass

The result of a coordinated cluster plan was greater synergies among the CBOs, communities and service providers. The CPs developed an interfacing role in reaching their communities. They were best situated to disseminate information and bridge access to new techniques and technologies. Numbers of villagers benefiting from the projects rose sharply due to the inclusive and cooperative nature of the clusters. Coordinated events, efficiently, reduced the numbers of events and increased the number of participants.

When segregated groups met, the areas of concern would reflect the gender of that group, ie. male issues dominated in male groups and females issues in female groups. Project staff advised the groups to include both genders, however they were reluctant to do that. The inclusion process remained slow but CPs persevered to increase equal gender representation and participation in local development process.

Small groups were found to be ineffective at dealing with local service providers. CPs seemed much more successful in establishing relationships and gaining access to the resources of service providers. For example, 68% of CPs (of 74 % to apply) received "safety net" services (like; VGD, VGF, Old age and widow allowances) from the Union councils for the poorest members of the community. Many CPs were able to open up opportunities (small fund, IGAs, technical advice, health treatment, marketing, employment etc.) and link access to other service agencies (Department of agriculture extension, Department of fisheries, livestock, health etc.) and union councils.

Although CPs are generally considered to be successful it is worth noting that all representatives from the CBOs clusters are not equally dynamic. Two reasons may account for this; one or two persons dominate others, also some cluster leaders are reluctant to take the lead.

4.2. CPs Advocate for Extreme Poor:

CPs did not have an immediate sense of responsibility towards improving the situation for the EP. In fact, serious resistance came from some small and marginal farmers. It was not in their interest to increase the rate of wages for EP labourers because they would likely be employing them for parts of a the year. LEAF urged the progressive members to take the position of the EP members not ignoring the interests of the whole community. For instance, irrigation obviously benefits the landowning wealthier

Common and coordinated activities of several small groups within cluster boundary led to reduced cost and time for implementation. On the other hand, the activities planned and implemented at cluster platforms level are beneficial for the non-members villagers

Cluster platforms managed the common burning problems, through making the better off responsive to the needs of the community and the extreme poor in particular.



Anjuara, 32, a farmer, Haybatpur, Parbatipur, Dinajpur:

"I have been harvesting bamboo since 1999. My five decimal clump used to be productive but in the last two years the young bamboos suffered breakage and the crops were very poor. Last year more than half of my 40 bamboos were damaged by sura para (the colloquial term for breakage). I, along with other farmers in the cluster were distressed.

Eventually, the CBO and cluster took steps to seek a solution to the problem of shoot rot in their APOs. The cluster platform organised training on bamboo management for the afflicted farmers. A total of 25 participants attended; 9 from CBOs and 16 from the community.

The technical training provided information on the causes, symptoms and control measures of the problem. Then we learned how to identify, remove and destroy the infected shoots. After I burnt the infested leaf litters from my bamboo grove, I sprayed fungicide, piled-up fresh soil, and again sprayed fungicide. Some of the other participants carried out the same procedures with their bamboo clumps.

After only two and a half months, I observed that 160 healthy new bamboos had grown without having any infestation. My Tk. 250 investment (the cost of removing the bamboo and the fungicide) resulted in sales worth at least Tk. 5000!

Several other farmers who used the same management techniques got similar benefits. News of our success spread to neighbouring communities and they copied the practices during the next season."



Md. Nazrul Islam, a Local Service Provider, Haripur, Parbatipur, Dinajpur:

"I am a Para-veterinarian having received training from the youth development department and the Bangladesh Agricultural University. I learned about livestock and poultry rearing and treatment. Prior to this, I spent 4 years going door-to-door to vaccinate individual farmers' cattle. When I was asked to attend a vaccination camp organized by the cluster leaders, I didn't think it

was possible to gather hundreds of animals for treatment. I was surprised to see that they had brought a huge number of cattle, goats and poultry to a particular place at one time, and I could vaccinate them all relatively quickly. That first experience motivated me. I was invited to take several of these camps in different communities organized by their cluster representatives. This system is very cost-effective. I was able to provide efficient services at a lower rate.

I continue to be involved in vaccination programmes organised by the cluster platforms. My monthly income has increased and I have gained a good reputation as a vaccinator in the wider area. I have established a close relationship between the community people and I try to respond quickly if they need my help.

I think that this is a very effective system of developing local level service provision. The whole community benefits from the improved livestock development processes."

Cluster platforms contributed in identifying and implementing income and self-employment generating initiatives for the poor and extreme poor

farmers, on the other hand, there is more employment for day labourers. Transect visits brought cluster members in touch with the reality of the EP in their own communities and a list of the most deprived EPs was included in the APO.

Special consideration was given to activities for the EP in the APO. IGAs, employment, access to public goods and special safety net opportunities were all considered. (Of note; road side vegetable production, tree plantations, share cropping and shared cattle rearing etc..) The CBOs and clusters received support from the project for exploring potential opportunities to generate additional income/employment for the EP and to ensure the flow of public goods and services to the EP from UP and line agencies. A balance between market potential and livelihoods choices was sought.

In the context of a lack of income and self-employment opportunities of community people, the CPs assessed the feasibility of a variety of potential IGAs. CPs arranged flexible loans from different credit organisations (Grameen Bank, RDRS, ASA, Krishi Unnyan Bank, Polli Daridra Bimochon Foundation, Bangladesh Rural Development Board, Department of Social Welfare etc.) for implementing the selected IGAs. CPs ensured loans were repaid on time. This support assisted many poor people to gain from self-employment opportunities. However, the interests of the EP are tragically ignored at cluster level if there is a dominant representation of CBOs with only few EP members.

CPs led the efforts of the more fortunate members of the community to respond to the needs of the EP. Small cash donations were made for IGAs as well as contributions towards basic welfare (e.g. emergency health treatments, winter clothing, burial expenses). With respected members of the community putting pressure on the UP's, they managed to obtain vulnerable group, widow and old age allowances, amongst other benefits for more than 6000 EPs. Another example in which the CPs played a pivotal role in negotiating access for EPs to public resources was in the Ashrayan projects. Members of the CP paired lists of the most needy with available resources, then submitted and followed up those applications with the government offices. 1,500 EPs can now access public resources like khash lands, khash ponds and shelters.

Bilateral consensus development workshops took place with clusters and their respective UPs. These meetings garnered support from line agencies and access to public goods and services for community members. These workshops also fostered good relationships with the UPs. Other workshops with

Upazila officials, journalists, local leaders and CBO representatives allowed the cluster vision and APO to be shared. As a result, the representatives of the different offices expressed their interest to cooperate with and maintain regular communication with CBOs and even PNGOs.



Parvin Begum, Bhabonchur, Jaldhaka, Nilphamari:

"The poorest households of our village were continuously denied access to any income generating activities because they could not provide any assets to secure loans from the financial institutions.

The Bhabonchur cluster representatives discussed the matter with the Manager of Jaldhaka Krishi Bank. A list of poor people who were interested in pursuing IGAs was submitted to the bank. The Manager cooperated with us to verify a list of 32 persons who might qualify for loans. Since our cluster had built ties with the UP through workshops, it was easy to secure identity certificates for these people. The appropriate certificates and photographs were submitted with the applications to the bank. On the documents, responsibility as guarantors fell to the cluster leaders and the UP Chairman signed as the introducer. Within one week of processing of the documents, the loans were approved.

The loan recipients applied their money to a variety of enterprises. Some in small trading, some in livestock rearing, one person bought a sewing machine for tailoring and two people started paddy husking with new machines. On behalf of the cluster, we are looking after the IGAs; collecting the loan instalments from borrowers and repaying the Krishi Bank. The beneficiaries are earning a good income now.

Without the support of the cluster platform, I think that these poor people would never have received these livelihood enhancing bank loans."



Md. Hafiz Uddin, Gainpara, Puthia, Rajshahi:

"I am an old, extreme poor and crippled person. I could not manage my daily meals because I have no income. A long time ago, I applied to the Union Parisad (UP) chairman for an old age allowance card. Nothing came.

Eventually, I asked Gainpara cluster platform representatives to help me get an old age allowance card. They took the matter seriously and prepared a list of extreme poor people in our community, myself included. The UP chairman was contacted and encouraged to help in our plight. Finally, some old aged allowance cards were secured, thankfully I got one of them.

Now I get 1800Tk/ year. I can afford daily meals and medicines when required. I am sure that without the cluster platform's help, I would never have got my card. I am grateful to Gainpara cluster platform and pray to God so that they can continue to help the extreme poor like me."

Inclusion of both male and female groups in cluster platforms and the presence of female mentors are effective for mainstreaming gender in the community

Members of Poor and EP designation were nominated for positions in the local power structure. The chosen individuals had some leadership qualities but received support from the CPs who campaigned on their behalf. Many were elected. 268 members are represented on standing committees of union council with 400+ members selected as “Gram Sarker”. Now the poor are participating in the meetings and giving voice to their specific concerns.

4.3 Towards Gender Mainstreaming:

CPs undertook various community mobilisation activities aiming to permanently reduce gender discrimination in their communities. To assist this effort, IC developed a tool for participatory gender analysis. Using this tool creates awareness and realisation of mainstreaming gender by the groups in the community. Now gender analysis is done by more than 400 communities resulting in a fairer representation of both sexes in group activities.

Celebrating International Women's Day was a chance to develop community awareness about gender discrimination. Representatives from all sectors of the wider community (media, teachers, students, local elite, GO and NGO) attended the well-organised activities. The CBO and CP identified problems with particular relevance in their areas, including; early marriages, dowries, illegal divorces, forced abortions, domestic violence and family conflicts. In order to tackle these problems, the position of a Female Mentor (FM) was created. Her function it is to deal with the gender related issues and be instrumental in changing destructive norms, which perpetuate the gender inequality. The CP also provides legal support when necessary.

Reproductive health was recognised as a crucial concern. Females were not provided with proper treatment (sufficient nutrition and care during pregnancy) because of financial or religious concerns of their male guardians, so the CP took up the issue. They started by counselling the husbands or male guardians of the victims. Individual counselling by the FMs was found to be very effective in resolving these problems. The FMs gave pregnant women advice on delivery and birth control. They also supported women in accessing services from upazila hospitals and community clinics.

4.4 Social Mobilisation and Local Development:

Many significant days were marked by rallies, mass gatherings and discussions organised by the CPs. These events included; International Women Day, World Environment Day, International Human Rights Day, Vegetable and Tree Plantation Week and Livelihoods Fair. Issues were highlighted (fair wages, divorce



Jhari Bala, Kaleshwargaon, Thakurgaon:

"I was born in Maligaon village under Radhanagar Union. My parents still live there. 12 years ago, I got married to Shuresh of the village Kaleshwargaon under Debipur Union. In the marriage ceremony, my father presented us with two cows, which gave birth to 4 calves. Shuresh had a very bad gambling habit and he lost 3 calves to pay debts. He never consulted me and whenever I remarked against his behaviour, he would beat me. Daily, the physical torture increased to the point that I couldn't tolerate it any more. I returned to my parent's house.

My guardians informed the Robin market cluster platform representatives of the situation. Their officials took the matter very seriously and spoke with my husband, father-in-law and both chairmen of Debipur and Radhanagar Union Parishads (UP). A letter from our Union chairman of to the other urged that action was necessary. A shalish was organized by the cluster platform involving both UPs' chairmen and both parties' guardians. Shuresh apologised in the shalish and made a vow to abstain from bad behaviour. My husband signed a statement to this effect with a non-judicial stamp of 150Tk.

My husband does not gamble any more. He takes care of our family. I am grateful to Robin market cluster platform for solving this family crisis. It would never have been possible without them".

and dowry law, birth registration, arsenic mitigation, disaster management, role of UP, etc.) and gave people an opportunity to express their concerns and learn about support services they could access. These events made it possible to reach a maximum of beneficiaries as this platform for disseminating information has proven to be most appropriate in this particular context.

Residents quickly felt the value of the involvement of the CPs. Their effective interventions gained them much support and led to CPs undertake even wider social responsibilities.

Firm commitments of support were given by the extended service network (UPs, line agencies, government bodies, etc.) when they experienced the sincerity of the CPs development efforts.

CPs have been fundamental players in motivating and empowering the villagers towards becoming confident lobbyists. They have accepted a serious load of responsibility towards the cluster members and support agencies.

Cluster Platforms acted as a pressure group for making Union Parishads responsive to the demand of Poor/Extreme Poor of the community through bilateral agreement.



Md. Shafiul Islam, 36, Dakkhin Balapara, Nilphamari Sadar:

"We, the Dakkhin Balapara Subarnokhuli cluster platform representatives, organized the first ever tree plantation festival in our village. Everyone participated and enjoyed the ceremony. It was a great pleasure to do something for the development of our community.

Planning for the event started at cluster platform level. The festival was identified as one of the joint APOs for the cluster and the CBO. Roles and responsibilities were designated to six committees led by a conveyer. They were put in charge of invitations, decorations, announcements, sapling collection, cultural events and entertainment.

Plans for a roadside plantation were agreed by the chairman and members of our UP with a contract on a non-judicial stamp of 150Tk signed. The understanding being that in 15 years, the income from the roadside plantation would be split 4 to 1 between our cluster members and the UP, respectively.

The District Commissioner-Nilphamari was the chief guest of our festival. A large number of GO-NGO officials, UP members, media representatives, teachers, students and local elite also participated in the ceremony. As a result, 1,440 fruit, timber and medicinal plant saplings were planted on 1.2 km of roadside. Trees were also planted around ponds, school grounds, common lands, homesteads and fellow lands during the joyful event. An extremely poor woman was employed to protect the saplings for 400Tk/month.

This event taught us lessons and built our confidence. Now, we believe that real local development requires greater unity amongst the cluster representatives to coordinate any community based development initiatives."



Mosammat Fazila Begum, 22, Dakkhin Sonakhuli, Saidpur, Nilphamari:

"There had never been a latrine in my husband's village and people were completely unaware of public health and hygiene. They often used to defecate in the bushes, open fields and roadsides.

Last year, Dakkhin Sonakhuli Bakpara cluster organised a sanitation day. At this event, people learned about the health hazards caused by unhygienic environments. We responded by cleaning community areas, refreshing tube wells and installing sanitary latrines at our homesteads. Now, we have safe drinking water and hygienic ablution facilities. A local Member of Parliament (MP), Mr. Amjad Hossain Sarker, was also present at the occasion. He announced that latrines would be provided from a special fund of Saidpur upazilla for the poorest villagers.

I think the sanitation campaign organised by the cluster platform inspired valuable social mobilisation".

5. PROSPECTS

5.1 Reorganisation

The first challenge is to assess whether the CP should evolve into an institution, or simply remain a tool for facilitating activities and representation for the members. During the two-year experience of cluster groups, their roles towards local development through negotiating and fetching services, resources and goods from local sources were valuable. However, since this process is happening in relatively informal way, how can the process of interfacing continue on a sustainable basis?

Cluster development depends on many factors; existence of embryo platforms (e.g. VDC), enthusiastic leadership, willingness for inter-group cooperation, field staff capacity, etc. Even after a cluster has been formed the refinement of a vision which includes local development, poverty reduction and gender mainstreaming is still a challenge. The CPs try to contribute to local governments regarding planning, monitoring and reviewing initiatives keeping in mind the advocacy role played on behalf of their members' interests. Current feedback from existing CPs suggests that they should further consolidate their capacities through building a network of the platforms, which are bound by a union. However, would this distance them from the direct position of responsibility towards their most vulnerable members?

The farmers' organisations will have to decide the ultimate structure of the next generation of clusters.

5.2 From Livelihoods to Market Focus

Initially, CPs helped people identify the constraints and opportunities of their households. They determined that the simplest strategy for improving livelihoods seemed to be just refining existing practices. For instance; better management of available land, animals, small trades etc. When production increased, skill development activities to improve marketing and bargaining techniques followed. However, small-scale production is a limiting factor to greater development.

Recently, enhancing group production and marketing initiatives at the cluster level has been seen to have the potential to ensure significant local development. For instance, a group of toy artisans made a volume of production that attracted many big buyers. They maximized their profits by negotiating through a platform. Still they face challenges in supplying the demand.





5.3 Sustainability of Cluster Approach

It is very difficult to predict how long support is required to ensure that the CP is self-reliant. Experience showed that the concept took one year to understand and gain acceptance within a cluster. It took another year to realise their roles and responsibilities towards women, the EP and local development issues. Existing clusters view their sustainability in term of capacities and foresee the need to develop a network at least to Union level. They believe that this will help them to maintain successful relationships with local government authorities, administration, line agencies and market actors. Many of the existing and dynamic CPs opined that they need support from LEAF for at least another three years to reach at that level.

6. CONCLUSION

There are many signs of success for the Cluster Approach. The most dynamic leaders took progressive and innovative initiatives for their communities. LEAF's facilitation was crucial in building the commitment and capacity of these leaders. Their involvement was a necessary part of the continuous growth and acceptance of initially challenging development principles such as inclusion of women and the EP in socio-economic activities. Introduction of the "female mentor" and gender analysis tool are prime examples.

A great outcome was the unity and inclusiveness of the whole community spawned by the CP actions. By joining forces, various groups could quickly and cheaply implement an initiative to greater effect. The results were not exclusive to the targeted marginalised groups or the CBOs. The well off members of the community also benefited from better living conditions in the village and became partners to the cluster approach.

Having the support of all members of the community meant that a critical mass grew in support of and to perpetuate CP initiatives. The momentum of the members allowed the platform to work as a pressure group in accessing economic opportunities for their clusters. The positive outcomes of their efforts earned leaders respect. They accomplished more in their interfacing role with groups, villagers, service providers and market actors because of this acceptance, and the process were self-perpetuating.

The CPs have gained some communication and negotiation skills which they use in an informal way. However, a formal link is needed to maintain the role of the CP in a sustainable way. By scaling up their profile the CPs may evolve to act on the same level in a development partnership with the Union Council.

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