



## Empowerment of farmers' organisations - Capitalisation of a new approach



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Sustainable Land Use Programme

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May 2005

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## Summary

Aimed at contributing to poverty alleviation by promoting improved agroforestry practices, the Tree Farmer Programme commenced with the 6th phase of the Village and Farm Forestry Project (VFFP) in 2000. The first concept of this programme followed a classical extension approach - basically the dissemination of agroforestry techniques. Considering that this technical approach was not appropriate for self-reliance and sustainability, VFFP changed its mind and developed a more innovative concept, based on the vision of farmers' organisations being able to negotiate with a range of service providers and market actors. Another innovative element of the concept was the decision to work with existing dynamic farmers' organisations, selected among small and marginal farmers, instead of forming new ones.

The project and partner NGO staff generally accepted these new approaches with interest, but because of habits or lack of experience, found difficult to internalise them. Orientation and training sessions were ineffective in overcoming the problem. A particular approach of coaching - the accompaniment - was gradually developed in order to strengthen the confidence of field personnel in implementing the programme. The same principles were applied to building up the farmers' capabilities for prioritising, planning, implementing and evaluating their activities of development.

At household level, the programme contributed to a general increase of the homestead production, particularly fruit. For the women, who represent 60% of the beneficiaries, those gains started a process of social empowerment - although still at a very early stage.

These Tree Farmers Groups (TFGs) developed capabilities of leading development activities and the confidence to undertake new initiatives. An increasing involvement of the community in their activities constitutes potential for further development.

The major findings of the TFG experience include:

- Human and institutional development (HID) proved necessary to make technical support more effective and sustainable,
- A flexible approach, which tries to value existing homestead resources, seems more appropriate for the poor and extreme poor, than a sectoral approach limited to the promotion of agroforestry.

The Tree Farmer Programme is still young, but further challenges already appear on the horizon: how to reach a critical mass with such a concept, how to better integrate marketing and processing activities and how to develop a service provision that does not depend on projects and NGOs. However, the progress already accomplished in the field of HID shows that there is scope to find answers to such questions.

## **1. Starting a new programme: the first “Tree Farmer Group” concept**

During the previous five phases (1987 to 2000) VFFP has mainly been promoting tree planting in partnership with local NGOs. Two principal lines of activities were followed:

- the establishment of commercially-run private nurseries owned by small farmers to fulfil the increasing demand for saplings, triggered by the numerous programmes for tree planting;
- the promotion, at the village level, of tree planting, particularly where space was available in the rural areas of Bangladesh: the private crop fields as well as the homesteads.

Although associations of nursery owners were created from the 3rd phase onwards, the support of the project was mainly provided to the individual nursery owners. The promotion of trees used an approach of awareness raising through mass communication campaigns and publicity involving the nursery owners at community level. Empowerment or strengthening of farmers' organisations was not really an objective of VFFP. Poverty may have been a concern of VFFP but not a priority since crop land agroforestry was of particular interest to the larger farmers.

From 2000, with the inception of the 6th phase, VFFP reorganised its activities in two main programmes:

- the continuation the nursery programme, but with an emphasis on both institutional strengthening and quality planting material;
- the launching of a new programme devoted to tree growers: the Tree Farmers Programme.

Meanwhile, in parallel with the promotion of agroforestry, new guiding principles and issues were fixed as a priority for VFFP: poverty, gender, sustainability, partnership, and, in general, human and institutional development.

The consideration of these elements, particularly poverty, constituted a real challenge. The consideration of these elements, particularly poverty, constituted a real challenge. How was it possible to promote agroforestry when people had limited land resources?

A first concept of Tree Farmers Groups (TFGs) was developed. Though new challenges had been set, the concept was implemented with classical approaches due to ingrained habits:

- The notion of disseminating knowledge and technologies "developed" on the basis of the assessment made by the project was predominant. The operational side of this concept took the form of "messages delivery", sometimes giving the impression that the project role was to fill "empty buckets" with knowledge;
- The farmers' organisations were considered more as a means of spreading technical messages (secondary adoption level), rather than as local partners-beneficiaries;

Due to ingrained habits, the first concept took the classic approach of dissemination of technical messages, a rigid extension model and a top-down process...

- An underlying objective was to determine and follow an extension model, and to implement a ready-made training programme before meeting the farmers. Such a plan was easy to implement since it did not give opportunities for doubts, reflection, and unexpected situations -in two words, flexibility.

In addition, most of the staff felt that training of the farmers had to be compensated with refreshments, giving the impression that the farmers were working for the success of VFFP, not for their own sustainability. Fortunately, the decision to withdraw the refreshments in the nursery programme that was taken in December 2000 specifically allowed the TFG programme to start without that "bias".

With these ideas in mind, VFFP formed focus discussion groups - the TFGs - with interested villagers. However, the TFG programme activities did not really start: on the one hand, there were no clear indications provided to the staff on how to proceed with TFGs, on the other, the initial concept itself started to be reanalysed.

## **2. A new TFG concept**

As it was originally planned to work with TFGs for just two years, the groups were seen as intermediaries in the interaction between the project and the farmers. This vision started to be questioned, and VFFP began to think that what happened after the project intervention was more important than what happened during it -particularly issues like sustainability and empowerment. Actually, the development promotion potential of the groups had not been sufficiently appreciated.

The Project decided to change its approach by selecting groups from among existing dynamic farmers' organisations that were interested and motivated to maintain their livelihood through land use, instead of forming new groups.

Experience has shown that farmers' groups or associations formed by projects are seldom self-reliant. These associations last for only as long as the project because they have been established with a top-down approach. Their cohesion and motivation often lie in financial and material considerations. The implementation of an extension system has to consider the challenge of sustainability in relation to the level of self-reliance of tree farmers groups. So, collaborating with existing farmers' dynamics was considered a better alternative.

The new TFG concept was based on the following elements:

- The vision of farmers' organisations capable of negotiating with service providers and market forces.
- Priority given to poverty, gender, dynamism and cohesion during selection of groups from existing local organisations.
- The adoption of a differentiated approach for improving capacities according to the nature of beneficiaries: homestead agroforestry in case of women, cropland agroforestry for men, and processing and post harvest management for the very poor.

*The new concept integrated new approaches such as a vision of farmers being capable of negotiating with service providers and market actors and organising joint actions, and respecting partnership agreements.*

Although the new concept was not a great innovation in the field of development, the field staff, more acquainted with classic and mechanical approaches, faced problems in internalising it.

- Collaboration to be established on the basis of farmers' needs.
- Activities to encompass both technical issues and socio-economic development.
- Farmers' capacities to be developed in needs diagnosis, planning, implementation, follow-up, monitoring and evaluation.
- Farmers to be encouraged to be the principal actors of their development and to take the lead in joint activities.
- The relationship with farmers' organisations to lie on formal and reciprocal commitments and common principles for collaboration, including the sharing of operational costs.
- The actors involved in the programme to contribute to the development and adjustment of the concepts, approaches, methods and instruments in order to make them applicable.

The concept hypotheses included the following assumptions:

- Capable and dynamic local groups exist and constitute good potential partners.
- Dynamic local organisations can be an entry for reaching the whole community.
- Large farmers can contribute to the development of the poor and should not be excluded from the activities, even if the emphasis is given to the poor.
- Working on reflection, dialogue and accompaniment can bring about changes in the habits of the partners.

Although the TFG concept was not a great innovation, it was new for the project and called for changes in the habits of the partner NGOs and VFFP staff.

### ***3. The difficulty of staff in coping with the new approaches.***

Once the new TFG concept became more tangible, it was decided to re-launch the programme with the new approach and hypothesis, starting the activities with existing dynamic groups.

Visits to villages had shown that there were many organisations of different types. Disregarding youth and cultural clubs and religious and political organisations, a list of criteria were developed and orientation sessions held to help the NGO staff characterise the local groups they would have to identify.

In each region of the Project, a test survey was carried out. Since assessing the dynamism of farmers' organisations was something new for the staff, VFFP sent them to the field in pairs when it was possible, a strategy used to make them more confident.

The criteria used to qualify the farmers' groups were fairly basic: level of organisation and cohesion, existence of objectives and goals, level of self-reliance, level of opening to external organisations and ideas, social categories of members (poverty and gender aspects), initiatives, etc. Used to working with questionnaires, the NGOs staff transformed the criteria into a systematic list of questions for the groups.



*Ms Shovon Rani Saha is a Field Supervisor of a partner NGO (Come To Work) specifically involved in the TFG activities. She contributed to the selection of the first batch of Tree Farmer Groups.*

"After the completion of my academic degree, I started my career with no professional experience. After I joined Come To Work, I was told that my responsibilities would be not only to disseminate the agroforestry-related technologies to the farmers but also to support the farmers' organisations in institutional aspects. At this stage, I was anxious and wondered if I could support farmers' organisations institutionally, as I had no experience. A few days later, we had an orientation on the TFG concept at a workshop. In that workshop, I was informed that we would organise the activities under the tree farmers' programme using the staff-pairing approach. Knowing this, I thought that this approach would be beneficial for me because we could help each other overcome both the limitations of understanding and implementation of the TFG concept.

"We visited many villages to identify the existence of local groups, contacting many individuals and organisations. As I am female, I felt safer with the presence of my male colleague in new places and during discussions with different actors in rural society. We organised discussions with the existing groups in order to assess the level of their dynamics. During the discussion with the groups, I sometimes forgot the questions I should ask them or was stuck in the facilitation process. At that time my colleague took charge of the discussion or complemented. When one of us led the discussions, the other took notes. We launched the TFG programme by organising two separate meetings with each selected group. The methodologies of these discussions were totally new for me as well as for my colleague.

"We organised several sessions with the TFGs to diagnose and prioritise their needs and to elaborate the Annual Plan of Operation by the groups themselves. During these exercises, a staff-pairing approach was also helpful. During the 'field visit' exercise, we were able to accompany the farmers' sub-groups and this helped the farmers. When one person was facilitating the specific exercise, the other arranged and organised the related materials.

"I observed that some of the women's groups hesitated to accept male staff. However, when they saw my male colleague with me, they felt more comfortable. When one of us was in training, on leave or sick, the other continued with scheduled events.

"The TFG programme was new to me. I believe that the staff-pairing approach helped me to organise the programme in the field and to develop more self-confidence in implementing the new programme."



***"I believe that the staff pairing approach helped me develop confidence in implementing the new programme."***



In order to make the field staff internalise the new approaches, the project gradually developed a particular method of coaching - the accompaniment.



The first feedback of the survey-tests proved disastrous. Not only were the staff not able to give general comments or make overall assessments of the groups, but they also considered some minor aspects as "killer factors" for the assessment of group dynamism, for example, the lack of a registration book. The basis for judgement varied from pair to pair - a good characteristic of dynamics for one could be considered as poor or questionable for another.

After the first two feedback sessions, the Project realised some of its mistakes related to the preparation and support of the staff.

Beside the new priorities such as poverty and gender, the quality of planting material and tree management had been a main concern of the 6th phase of VFFP. For this reason, the project had changed the NGO staff configuration by recruiting technical and science graduates. Most of them had a limited practical experience in rural development and relationship with farmers. On the other hand, the social workers employed by the partner NGOs had easy contact with farmers but less experience in farmer organisation development.

The way the staff had been oriented on how to assess farmers' organisations was too theoretical, and not followed by practical exercises. Forgetting their lack of experience, the project probably trusted their ability too much. More than their capabilities, the problem was a question of internalising new approaches. This would require a coaching approach - an accompaniment - to develop the confidence of staff while implementing new types of activities.

Before doing the real survey, the staff was asked to forget their questionnaire and to tell, in the form of a story, their impressions when they met the groups. By exchanges and comparisons, it became clear what could be classified as good, questionable or poor dynamics. From that moment, it became possible to pass from a mechanical approach using a questionnaire to a more analytical approach using structured common sense.

The survey began by collecting relevant secondary information on the Upazillas (sub-districts) such as a list of villages, existing farmers groups and organisations supporting these groups. Various sources were consulted including Government Organisations, NGOs, Union Councils and private sources. In addition, the staff informally visited some villages to verify the existence of the groups. The survey was concentrated in certain Unions, according to a set of criteria such as the existence of potential dynamic groups, poverty prone areas, lack of support from organisations, presence of nursery owners and density of population.

The NGO staff then had discussions with members of the groups and collected more information regarding their potential and the possibility of establishing collaboration with them.

Two years of after starting such surveys, the ability as well as the confidence of field staff to assess farmers' organisations dynamism is noticeable (see box). They do not have even to take a written check list with them; after 30 minutes of open discussions, they can quickly come to a conclusion: "Yes, I think there is a potential" or "Classical savings group, no proper cohesion, better not to consider this group".

#### 4. **A major finding: dynamic farmers' organisations exist in the field**

The first survey, conducted in 2001, identified more than 2200 existing groups, out of which the project had to select the best ones and establish collaboration with a manageable number.

Based on the experience of the survey, the groups were classified into three categories:

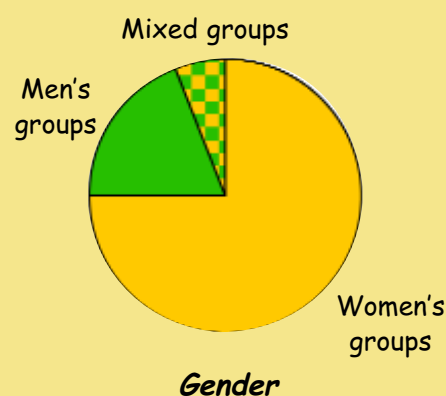
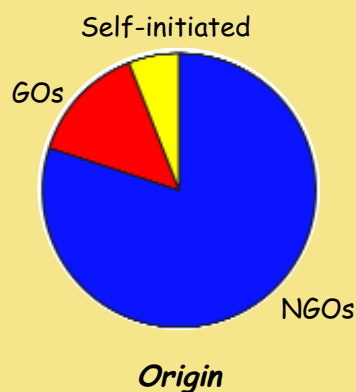
- The "good dynamics" were groups that already had an organisational structure and used planning, implementation and monitoring systems as well as some appropriate institutional tools. Strong cohesion among the members, self-initiative and openness were other important characteristics. The members of these dynamic groups had a high level of commitment towards their association in order to achieve its goals and objectives.
- The "questionable dynamics" were groups fulfilling most of the criteria of good dynamics but with some faults that might affect collaboration with VFFP, such as a group with good cohesion and organisation but depending entirely on the NGO supporting them for decision-making.
- Organisations with "poor dynamics" either showed little initiative and organisation or no interest in collaboration with VFFP.

The results of the first survey revealed that 40% of the local organisations had a good level of dynamism, while 18% were "questionable". The second survey, conducted in 2002, covered a further 1700 groups. It identified only 28 % with good dynamics, and 18% who were "questionable." It can be assumed that the field staff capability of assessing the level of dynamism of groups has increased after one year's experience with TFGs.

The surveys conducted in 2001 and 2002 found that:

- In the rural areas, the farmers' organisations have been formed mainly by NGOs (more than 80%). Self-initiated groups exist at a lower level: 3% were found in 2001, but 14% in 2002.
- The number of female groups predominates (75%), most probably due to the policy of NGOs to favour female groups for credit programmes. Combined groups (composed of males and females) are less frequent (6%).
- The male-female ratio of groups varied with the nature of the organisations supporting the groups. The percentage of female groups reached about 90% in the case of

**Statistics on farmers' groups surveyed**



The agreement between the groups and the project included the identification of the main areas of collaboration, as well as the reciprocal commitments.

NGOs. In the case of GOs, the situation varied between 40% in the 2001 survey and 60% in 2002.

- The self-initiated groups had the highest number of combined groups (25%).
- Only 5% of groups surveyed were community groups (village development committees, village-based organisations and people's organisations) out of which 51% groups were found dynamic.
- Groups of the poor were more dynamic than groups of very poor.
- Female groups were more dynamic than male groups in the survey of 2001, but it was the opposite in 2002.
- Interestingly, in both surveys, combined groups were more dynamic than male or female groups.
- Though the first survey observed the same proportion (around 40%) of good dynamics whatever the nature of the group (formed by NGO or GO or self-initiated), the second survey found that this percentage was maintained in the case of self-initiated groups, but decreased for the two others types of groups.

## 5. ***Establishing collaboration with farmers' organisations: a long process to start a real partnership***



*The partner farmers' organisations have gained confidence in themselves and represent a potential that could be used for the development of local communities.*

During the first survey, the NGO field supervisors (FSs) approached the groups by presenting their identity and the purpose of their visit -i.e. to identify groups interested in collaboration with VFFP. The reactions of the groups varied. Most welcomed and accepted the FSs while some groups did not pay any attention to them or even refused to spend time talking to them. In some cases, they received the FSs cautiously because they had had bitter experiences with some so-called NGOs that disappeared with their savings. Their questions were mainly related to the possibility of financial or material support, since they assumed that the purpose of the survey was to launch a credit programme or to provide material support. When the FSs were offered tea and snacks, it was often a strategy to draw their attention to these "hidden" interests. Some groups, knowing from their neighbours that VFFP was surveying farmers' organisations, asked the FSs to be included in the identification in the hope of receiving assistance.

It was realised that the collection of relevant information was not always possible with a short visit and by discussing issues with only a few representatives of the organisation. Another important point was that the groups were not interested in committing themselves to any new activity without a detailed understanding of the project purpose. For this reason, it was recommended:

- to pay more than one visit to collect relevant information if there was any doubt about the group;

- to involve as many members as possible during the discussions;
- to give brief descriptions about VFFP and the partner NGO, the objectives and areas of collaboration so that the group felt comfortable to speak about them.

Once the survey was finalised, the project had to select the groups it wanted to start with. The programme was new, as well as the staff, and it was preferable to limit the ambitions, knowing it would be a learning process for everyone. It was decided to select six to seven groups within each Upazilla, which was a reasonable number, manageable by the FSs without stress and overwork, ensuring that enough attention could be given to the quality of the approaches. Considering the possibility of some groups dropping out during the selection process, eight groups were chosen in each Upazilla. They were among the best -but other criteria such as poverty and disadvantaged groups, location at a strategic place and possibility of reaching the community were also taken into account. Special attention was paid to gender. Since most of the groups had been formed by NGOs for credit programmes, there was a high proportion of female groups (80%). The selection involved increasing the proportion of mixed groups - which often were self-initiated - and men's groups.

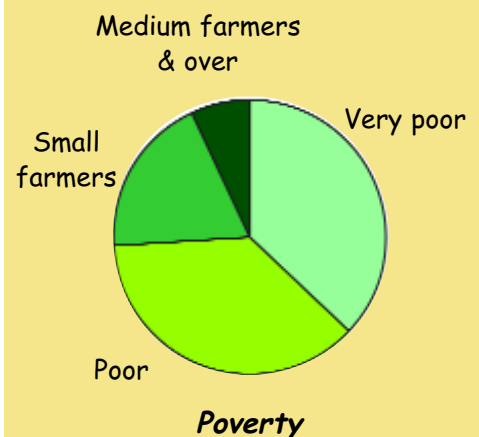
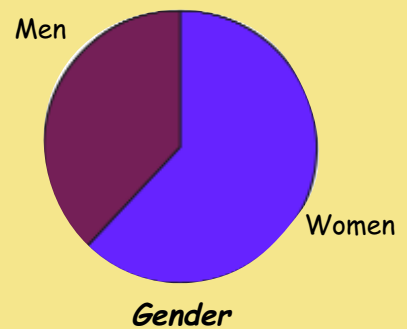
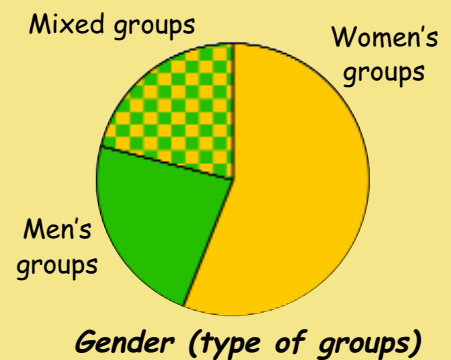
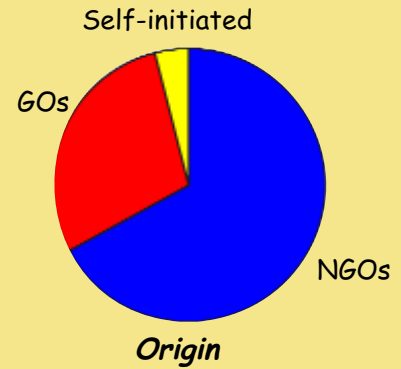
Three general meetings were organised with the groups to determine general and specific fields of collaboration with VFFP. After considering the recommendations of the groups, this phase of negotiation was reduced to two steps. The first meeting was organised to exchange information about the objectives, vision and activities of VFFP, partner NGOs and the farmers' organisations. This meeting also clarified VFFP's support: basically an advisory service regarding agroforestry (production, processing and marketing) and an accompaniment for institutional development. At this stage, some groups realised that they could not fulfil their agenda of getting monetary and material support, and preferred to stop the negotiations.

The second meeting was organised to develop a verbal understanding and consensus between VFFP and farmers' organisations, which included the identification of the main areas of collaboration and of the major elements of the agreement and reciprocal commitments.

227 groups (out of an original 256) were finally selected or accepted to collaborate with VFFP, and constituted the first batch of TFGs. For the second batch, 300 groups were selected.

Many reasons were given from both sides for not establishing collaboration, including the lack of provision of financial support, lack of interest in agroforestry, fear that VFFP might charge levies in future, and negative attitudes towards the NGOs. Some poor groups (day labourers) were not interested because of the difficulty of spending time with VFFP, while large or medium farmers, thinking they would receive a tailored individual service, were less enthusiastic with the idea of committing themselves at a group level. The idea of signing an agreement with VFFP to formalise the collaboration frightened some groups who were afraid of committing themselves with a written document.

## Statistics on TFGs





It took three months to complete all the planning steps, from the needs diagnosis up to the establishment of a yearly plan of activities.

## **6. Diagnosing needs, planning activities and evaluating them: a new role for farmers' organisations and the birth of partnership**

After the selection phase, which had been mainly a negotiating process, the actors were ready to pass on to more concrete activities such as the analysis of the needs and the development of joint actions for each group. With the new concept of TFG programme, VFFP believed in the principle of self-help groups and claimed that farmers' organisations should be the main actors of their own development. For this reason, it was decided to facilitate the development of farmers' capabilities for identifying and prioritising their needs, and then for establishing and implementing a plan of action. The assumption was that the methodologies and the tools for diagnosing and planning would be more effective if the beneficiaries were involved in their elaboration.

A workshop was organised with a good representation from TFGs to develop the methodology of elaborating the TFG plans of operations. Seven PRA tools were identified: village mapping, visits to the village, diagnosis and analysis of the problems and areas of interests, Venn diagram, ranking for prioritisation of the needs and finally, a plan of operation.

The participants were very enthusiastic and the methodology called for five consecutive days of work, probably unacceptable to the farmers. On the other hand, sharing the process only during their regular -often monthly- association meetings could have taken up to five months. Finally the representatives opted for managing the schedule at each group level within a reasonable time span. The advanced members of TFGs, literate and having some experiences of PRA tools, would assist the FSs and the executive committees to organise the planning exercise.

It took three months to complete the entire planning steps from the needs diagnosis up to the establishment of the yearly plan of operations. Except for the groups that had experience of PRA, like the VDCs, the full exercise required six to seven days, an important investment of time for farmers.

Bearing in mind the experience of the survey, more support was given to field staff during the implementation of the planning process with TFGs, after the orientation sessions. After a few experiences, and with the feedback of both field staff and TFGs, the methodology was gradually adjusted. The main difficulties in the exercise came from a lack of experience in participatory approaches and facilitation of planning:

- Influential persons in the groups, or even the FSs sometimes, make changes in the priorities, according to their own interests.
- The tendency to use long lectures and writing instead of pictures and interactive discussions was boring for farmers, especially since most were illiterate.

- The analysis of problems was too complicated, while the problems were in most cases very simple.
- The FSs became sometimes "over-participatory", accepting every kind of need without negotiation, although they were simple wishes.

Farmers considered all aspect of livelihood such as livestock, trees and crops during identification of the problems. They were allowed to come up with general problems they encountered in their homesteads to ensure more participation in discussions. Though VFFP would need to consider only agroforestry issues in the collaboration with TFGs, it could help to link the groups with individuals or organisations with the relevant expertise. This approach encouraged them to identify solutions they could undertake on their own or with the support of other organisations.

The needs diagnosed by the TFGs were mainly related to the homestead fruit trees, particularly the control of pests and diseases. A few groups expressed their interest in getting support to strengthen their organisational capacities or for processing, marketing and other added value activities. In general, institutional issues were not considered as a need.

The resulting Annual Plan of Operation (APO) of TFGs normally consisted of a programme of training sessions (between 8 to 10) followed by their application.

Before starting the implementation of the APOs, a tri-partite Memorandum of Understanding was signed between TFG, partner NGO and VFFP. The main reasons for signing a formal agreement were:

- valuing the notion of partnership between the parties,
- avoiding any future hidden expectations by the TFGs,
- developing ownership and respect for reciprocal commitments.

Since Human and Institutional Development (HID) was not felt as a need, priority was given during the implementation of APOs to technical activities that could contribute to individual socio-economic betterment. Nevertheless, a specific effort was made to strengthen existing farmers' capacities that could help the groups in organisational development. In this regard, a network of farmer facilitators, such as Mr Malek, was developed (see box).

Already the groups had learned to identify and analyse their needs and to plan activities accordingly. The implementation of their APO would be an opportunity to find out how to monitor and evaluate their activities. As it was done for the methodology of planning, a system of six-monthly "joint reviews" was developed by involving TFG representatives. The first exercise took place in July 2002 and showed that farmers were capable of assessing their planning and adjusting the plan of the second semester accordingly. The review contributed to a better understanding of



*Farmers tend to consider all aspects of their livelihoods during the identification of their problems.*



the notion of "reciprocal commitments" and reinforced the idea that the farmers had to take the lead in the actions. In the same way, it consolidated the partnership.

The experience with the first batch of TFG led to an improvement of the methodology of planning for the following year with both for the old and new batches:

- More emphasis was put on poverty aspects. A well-being analysis took place during the process of group selection



*Mr. Malek is an executive member of the Kundulpur Village Development Committee (VDC). With other representatives of a selected local organisation, he attended the workshop to develop the methodology for the TFG plan of operation. He is one of the active and enthusiastic members of the village-based organisation.*

***"I feel we will have to work ourselves for our own development. If we can do that, it will be sustained in the long run."***

"We formed our Village Development Committee in 1997 with the Watsan Partnership Project. Initially our objective was to improve our situation particularly in the field of water and sanitation because we had been suffering from an acute problem of drinking water due to arsenic contamination. From 1997 to 1999 we worked towards overcoming the problem of water and sanitation according to our needs and resources. In our village there are about 200 households and 110 male and female members are enrolled as members of the village organisation. From these 110 members, 20 are elected to form the executive committee. A local NGO supported us in this process; one field staff from the NGO kept regular contact with us and facilitated us in the meetings and planning sessions. During the meetings, I observed that the NGO facilitator tried his best to make us understand our situation, but most of our members were not convinced! As a result we couldn't come to a consensus. This worried me. I tried to discover the reason, and eventually I found that most of our members are illiterate, although I have passed class nine. On the other hand, the NGO staff were educated and used a sophisticated language, which was largely abstract for many of us. From the next meeting I started helping the NGO staff to conduct our meetings and planning sessions.

while needs of the poor members were given priority to provide support to issues other than agroforestry.

- The planning process and steps were shortened and organised in a more lively and forceful way.
- Groups, particularly the first batch, were encouraged to develop new ideas for activities, not only based on problems but also on potential. Organisational development, market and processing were also given attention.

"The NGO was supporting us only in water and sanitation but from the end of 1999, we realised we had many other needs for improving our livelihood and for developing our village. We started many activities, especially raising funds and initiating individual schemes for members and the village as a whole. In the beginning of 2001, we met a pair of workers from another local NGO, Trinamool -a VFFP partner. After several meetings with them, we decided to establish collaboration with them to improve our trees in homesteads and fields. I was invited by the NGO to participate in a workshop where the methods for developing a plan of activities for the TFG were formulated. I felt proud to attend such a workshop because it was the first time in my life I had the chance to share my experiences on this topic. At the same time I realised that I had a role to play not only in contributing to the development of the methods, but also in facilitating my VDC to formulate our plan of operation.

"Returning from the workshop, I called for an informal meeting with important members of the VDC to fix the dates for the planning sessions. According to the schedule, we held five sessions for formulating our plan of operation. Although the Trinamool staff facilitated us, I remembered the past experiences and took the lead myself in these sessions. I found all members were lively and willing to participate in the planning process. Everybody expressed ideas without any fear or hesitation.

"I believe outsiders may help but I feel we will have to work ourselves for our own improvement. If we can do that, it will be sustained in the long run."



## **7. The benefits of collaboration at an individual level.**

The main effect of the collaboration at household level was the increased production fruit and bamboo, thanks to a simple transfer of skills to control pests and diseases. If the problems of farmers were numerous, they required simple measures to treat them, not a very elaborated training programme. This implied the adoption of new but more effective methods and approaches of training, based on adult education principles. The use of exchanges and visits also proved successful, often leading, without further inputs of training, to the cultivation of new species and varieties.

The farmers generally used the additional production in their traditional way -first using it for family consumption. If something remained, they shared it with their relatives and neighbours. They sold the surplus for cash, representing on an average 35% of their production.

Thanks to the improved management of their homestead resources, the TFG members have significantly increased fruit production: 30 to 40% in the case of mango and jujube, 20 to 25% for jackfruit and pomegranate. Around 20% of the existing wild jujube trees of participating farmers were renovated. Increases in production and incomes were also observed for vegetables, timber trees, bamboo, medicinal plants, etc. The opening of the project for activities related to marketing and processing, and beyond the strict frame of agroforestry, allowed additional sources of income. All together, these gains are contributing to better the socio-economic status of the households, which use them in many different ways: schools fees, purchase of cloths, health care, house renovation, agricultural inputs, jewellery (for women)...

But one has also to consider the effects beyond the increase of production. In many cases, the extra cash, instead of just being consumed by the household, was used more strategically. Shahida, a member of Kochubari Landless Mahila Samity, bought a goat from the money she got from the increased production of mangoes and jackfruits. Several months later, she sold the goat for twice the price she bought it for. Rangina, another member of this group, earned 700 taka\* from the sale of a mango tree, which did not produce fruit before. She decided with her husband, a sharecropper, to invest the money in fertilizer and seeds to get a greater benefit from sharecropping. Sometimes the extra money helped to solve social problems such as the treatment of a sick child or taking back mortgaged land.

Another effect of the transfer of skills within the members of TFGs is the emergence of some "specialists" who acquired particular abilities. Hasina, for example, is renowned as the "expert" at jujube budding in her Para near Chargat, something she learnt from VFFP. When other members of the groups, and also other villagers, need to graft their jujube trees, they ask Hasina for advice or use her services paying her in kind.

\*One US dollar = 60 taka

## 8. *The benefits of collaboration at a group level.*

At the group level, the collaboration with VFFP has helped to develop an analytical approach in identifying problems, skills for planning and prioritising the needs, and capabilities to evaluate activities for further improvements and plans. Generally, an improvement has been observed in the way the groups organise their own events (meetings, training sessions and other planned activities). But most of all, the groups changed from recipients of support to actors of their own development.

The main change at group level came from the new trend of "thinking together and doing together", an approach that is generally not used, since the farmers' organisations have been formed in many cases as a means to link individuals to a service provision.

*"In 2002, I realised that my seed production business was an activity that other members could develop, even the whole group..."*

*Shahida is a member of Kochubari Landless Mahila Samity (Women's Association) in the Thakurgaon District. Using her own initiative, she started vegetable seed production. VFFP and SERP, a partner NGO, have supported her group since 2001.*

"I learnt useful techniques from VFFP and SERP. For instance, last year I was able to produce jackfruit for the first time in years. I saved 600 taka from the sale of the fruit and reinvested it in buying one goat that I sold few months later for a good profit. One before VFFP came in our village, thanks to the savings I had accumulated over three years, I had been able to buy a piece of land. It was not big, but sufficient to produce vegetable seeds. I was assisted by the East-West Company, which trained and supported me to produce improved seeds of bitter gourd, onion and garlic. This is a small but very profitable business, which just requires seed money and some land to start up. It is very easy to sell the seeds, as there is a great demand.

"In 2002, I realised that it was an activity other members could develop and even the whole group. During the formulation of our plan of operations for 2003, I proposed this idea. Five members from our group showed their interest and decided to launch the same type of activity. I trained them in my plot, demonstrating how to sow the seeds, manage the seedlings and take care of the plants. They also practiced in my field. After this initial experience, three of them have started small-scale production of hybrid gourd seeds in their homestead, taking the foundation seeds from me. All of them are preparing to produce bitter gourd and long bean seeds this winter season."







*Monmohan Roy is the President of Porichoy Purush Samity, a group formed by the men of a Hindu community in Khansama, Dinajpur. They benefit from financial support from CARITAS and started to collaborate with VFFP and BRIF, a partner NGO, in 2001.*

"During the identification of our needs with the support of BRIF and VFFP, we highlighted our problems which included insects and diseases attacking our mango trees, jackfruit and bamboo. When we finished listing all the problems, the two field supervisors of BRIF, Luna and Iqbal, asked us if we had any project we would like to develop.

Two years ago, CARITAS gave us 26,000 taka to dig a pond for fisheries activities. I owned some land, which I agreed to lend to the group for seven years, if the association renewed the embankment after this period. Actually, we dug the pond ourselves and kept the money given by CARITAS as savings for the group members. But a disease that we did not know how to treat attacked our fishes. We asked Luna and Iqbal to help us. They accompanied us up to the local fisheries department, which trained us how to solve the problem and our fishes were saved. The discussions during the diagnosis of our problems gave us

more ideas. We decided to plant 1,600 saplings around the pond and in a woodlot. This activity was planned in our APO and you can see how well they have grown! It will be a good source of income in future. Thanks to the training of the fisheries department, we were able to earn 38,000 taken from the pond. This is a very promising business and in our plan of activity for 2003, we have decided to dig two new ponds. I think that without being pushed by VFFP and BRIF to discuss our problems together, we would not have developed these ideas and our fish would still be sick -or even dead."



The group has been a motivating factor to undertake the same type of activity together at the household level, with economic benefits derived from this "common" action. For instance, controlling the mango hopper requires insecticide that costs 200 taka and the rent of a fruit sprayer for 100 taka a day. Most of the TFG members, who have only one or two trees, are not willing to spend 300 taka, which they may not be able to afford. Treating the trees of the village "together", including TFGs members and other villagers, has become a viable option and is affordable for every household. This practice lowers the individual cost while improving the overall control.

The institutional strengthening of the groups, even as a non-formal approach, contributed to the development of new activities and gave a push for taking the initiative. The Porichoy Purush Samity (see box) shows that "thinking together" brought ideas for projects and gave people the courage to undertake a common activity, fetching help from outside. Realising that the best way to solve the problems identified during the diagnosis is to find the individuals or institutions having the relevant solution, TFGs took on VFFP's vision of farmers' organisations linked to a range of service providers.

The group may also be a way of valuing and scaling up individual initiatives. The examples of Shahida (see box) and Nilu (see box in Chapter 11) show that there is a scope for scaling up economically promising activities undertaken by an individual, at the group level. A double advantage can be seen here at individual level: on one hand, an economic return from a new income generating activity already mastered by a member of the group, and on the other hand, increased production in the same area facilitating access to, and negotiation with, the market.

## **9. The benefits of collaboration at a community level.**

Although TFGs were seen as a way to reach the whole community, there was no clearly defined system of secondary adoption such as the associate participants of the Farmers' Field Schools. Instead, VFFP encouraged the TFGs to open the training sessions to interested outsiders.

Thanks to the natural curiosity of farmers, many outsiders observed or attended the training sessions. Spraying trees in groups in the village was a public activity and attracted many spectators. The number of outsiders participating in training session is still low - about 13% in 2002, and although this increased to 20% in the first semester of 2003, it cannot be claimed that secondary adoption was achieved. However, there is greater awareness of tree management and more participation in the application of the training.

TFGs are getting stronger in organisational and institutional aspects, as Sabiha tells us (see box). In many villages, the whole community, not just the groups supported by VFFP, is treating mango trees against the mango hopper. The benefits

The institutional strengthening of the groups, mainly operated through an accompaniment support, contributed to the development of new activities, and gave a push to take new initiatives.



***"If we discuss our problems in common, we will also be able to solve them in common, at the community level."***



***Shabiha is the President of Sathi Bithi Mohila Dal in Chargat. ACD, a partner NGO of VFFP, formed the group five years ago to facilitate the empowerment of rural women. They started agroforestry activities in 2001.***

"When we launched collaboration with VFFP, we had many problems relating to trees and vegetable production in our homesteads. According to our annual plan of operation, the first training session was organised on "Control of Mango Hopper". Through the training sessions that followed, I developed skills on improved management of fruit trees. Thanks to this, in two years, my mango production increased from 10 to more than 150 fruits and I doubled or tripled the production of jackfruit and guava. In addition, I developed a specific ability for Jujube budding and many people call me to help them in using this technique. The support from VFFP was not only technical. I have also learnt how to diagnose problems and needs, how to prioritise them, how to develop an APO, and how to implement and evaluate it. Now I can facilitate the meetings more easily than I could before.

"The training sessions were organised by our group but we always invited other members of the community to attend. Now we do not have to invite them, they come on their own, asking us when the next training session will take place. They also attend the meetings to develop our plan of activities. Actually, they have the same problems we have - they live in the same village. Since our problems are also community problems, it is normal to discuss them with all members of the community, not only within our association. If we discuss our problems in common, we will also be able to solve them in common, at the community level."

Although progress was made regarding the involvement of the community in the programme, two challenges still remain: the development of local capacities able to ensure the sustainability of the programme, and the scaling-up of the activities at the community level.

## **10. How do women profit from the TF Programme?**

Effort has been made during the TFGs selection process to favour female beneficiaries. They currently represent 62% of the TFGs. However, spouses of the TFG members were also invited to participate in programme activities to avoid an approach exclusively focused on females.

Women's activities do not usually go beyond the limits of their homesteads. During the field visits organised during the diagnosis, it was surprising to see them stopping at the border of their homesteads and not coming with us to the woodlots and orchards. But women take the lead in their home gardens that, in the context of Bangladesh, contribute greatly to the improvement of socio-economic conditions.

The increase in production and income generation contributed to household welfare by improving nutrition, children's education, health care, domestic maintenance, etc. In many cases, the income from the women's efforts is seen as the family property and not as the women's own. However, in other cases, the income generated by the women has contributed to increase in their social status within the family. Some are able to spend part of the benefit for their own use such as buying jewellery. Others admitted that they had cheated by hiding a part of the money they had earned from their husbands. Although the women's ability to control resources is still limited, sharing and exchanging experiences increased their courage in demanding a greater say.

The story of Firoja (see box), helped by her progressive husband, shows that there is hope for greater mobility of women, who are not allowed to sell their products on the market.



*The increase in the production and income generation from the homestead contributed to the household welfare. In some cases, the income contributed to an increase in the social status of women.*



**Monwara** is the Vice-President and **Firoza** a member of the Ramjibonpur Women's Association in Puthia, an association of 30 women formed ten years ago by a credit programme of CARITAS. The group started the collaboration with VFFP and its partner NGO, ACD, in 2001.

**Monwara:** "I sharply increased jackfruit and mango production in 2002 and in 2003, thanks to the support we received in developing our skills to control pest and diseases and for the better management of our fruit trees in general. I appreciate the practical aspects of training. Through the demonstrations, we clearly understand the techniques of tree management. Now we are confident enough to apply the practices that we have learned from the training sessions. In 2002, we consumed almost all the mangoes and jackfruit produced by our trees and distributed the rest to our relatives. But in 2003, I harvested about 370 kg of mangoes and sold at least 75 kg for 700 taka. The rest was used for my family's consumption and distributed to our relatives and neighbours. I had control over the money I earned from the sale of fruits and spent it according to my needs. I have developed good skills in Jujube budding and believe that I can sell my services to other villagers willing to improve the production of their Jujube trees. But I need support from VFFP and ACD to establish myself as an expert in this field. CARITAS provides us credit while VFFP offers its technical and organisational support. I think that these two types of support go hand in hand. Money has no value if we cannot use it properly."



**Firoza:** "My husband is very positive about our activities. To me, this is very important. He encouraged me when I was selected for a study trip to Chapai Nawabganj and joined us on the tour. After the visit, we decided to go into bee keeping as an additional income-generating activity. As it does not require a big investment, it would be a good enterprise for us. My husband joins me for meetings and training sessions. But some of our members' husbands forbade their wives to participate in our group's activities. My husband tried to convince them to change this traditional type of behaviour. He persuaded Sahela's husband, who was very reluctant in the beginning, to allow her to participate in our TFG activities. He pointed out that with the additional income Sahela earned from increased mango production - 45 kg this year against 10 kg last year - she was able to pay her daughter's school fees. Now Sahela is one of the active members in our group."



## **11. Poverty and extreme poverty: from agroforestry to homestead resources management**

Except for specific pilot actions with groups of extreme poor, the members of TFGs are small and poor farmers, followed by very poor. Medium or larger farmers are also represented in the groups but to a lesser degree.

During the prioritisation of the needs of the first batch of TFGs, it was not paid enough attention to the fact that the needs of the poorest were not taken sufficiently, or specifically, into account. It was observed after few months that in several groups, the poorest participated less and less although they had shown their interest in the beginning of the collaboration. There was little scope for agroforestry for them, being landless. Actually it had been planned, while developing the TFG concept, to promote employment for the landless category of beneficiaries, expecting that rich farmers practicing improved agroforestry would employ them. It happened in only a few cases, when very poor people were supported to become specialists in spraying trees. In general, the idea of creating employment opportunities has proved limited, probably because the project worked mainly at production level, while the opportunities may exist more in processing activities. Also, perhaps it has not worked enough with the potential job creators - the rich farmers.

Even if the groups are satisfied with collaboration with VFFP and the partner NGOs, their needs are greater than a sector approach can offer. Agroforestry represents only a part of their holistic approach of managing their household. It is interesting to see how they use the benefits of one production to invest in another. All these small strategies for earning money - or basically for surviving - make a whole picture that should be taken into consideration. If the farmers naturally develop strategies of using all possible resources of their homestead to fight poverty, it indicates that a concept of agroforestry promotion should change to that of homestead resources management.

In this regard, better assistance should be given to the extreme poor, who are more concerned with getting immediate income than in investing their time and money in activities with mid-term returns. The experiences of pilot initiatives with extreme poor groups (see box), still at an early stage, indicate that they accept that agroforestry could be useful to them but still prefer to start with activities giving quick cash because they have day-to-day survival problems. Like Shohagee told us: "For you, two taka is not much, but for us, two taka is two taka!" However, Rehana's experience shows that specific agroforestry activities can also quickly provide a source of income and food. It was noticed that the "group effect" (thinking together, changing from an individual initiative to a group initiative) is particularly valid for the extreme poor such as Shohagee and Nilu's groups.

The first experiences with the extreme poor indicate the need to start with quick-return activities, although agroforestry can also be a good opportunity for them.



*Nilu is a young and dynamic girl. She lives in a cluster village of the poor established by the government 20 years ago in the northern borders of Rajshahi. VFFP and MSP, a partner NGO, have launched a pilot initiative for the extreme poor in this village.*

"MSP and VFFP came in my village because they wanted to help us. They first discussed issues with the three associations that exist in our village. The discussions led to the decision to work with the poorest of these groups and also with non-members. We now have a new group composed of the poorest of the village. Together, we thought about what we could do to make money. The idea of making paper bags was suggested. Thanks to the information given by the Santal community of Borobangram Shekpara through Shaheen, the field supervisor, we learnt

that one businesswoman who was already making bags was looking for more supply. We made an arrangement with her that she would train us and would buy our bags. We started our first production in January 2003. It took us several days to become skilled in making bags. In the beginning, I was able to make only 50 to 60 a day. Now, I can produce up to 500 bags. Usually we make them when we have time, not all day. We took a loan of 1500 taka to buy raw materials ourselves. It is more profitable than getting it from the buyer. After one month, we paid back a third of the loan. A friend of mine in the village knew a tailor who was interested in buying paper bags. He agreed to pay 10 paisa more than the other buyer if we put a tag with his name and address on the bags. Two months later, we found five new buyers because we did not like to rely on just one. Our bag business went well during the first months, from October to February. Since early March, we have been facing the problem of poor demand because shopkeepers prefer to use a kind of polythene bag again, abandoning paper bags. This made us decide not to depend on the paper bag making business alone. We sat together again, discussed the matter and decided to develop other income-generating activities. To start them, we needed seed money of between 500 to 1,000 taka, which we received from MSP.

"Six of us undertook other businesses including paddy, rice, pulses and flour trading, tailoring, cooking and selling snacks, and cage fish culture. Apart from those doing cage fish culture, which takes time to bring returns, the others have already repaid the seed money we got from MSP. We prefer to use profits to repay loans or generate capital for small businesses.

"We are also doing agroforestry. We told Shaheen, the MSP field supervisor, about the problems we have with our trees and she advised us on how to solve them. She showed us how to grow bitter and sweet gourd. It is simple and profitable. She told us how to manage the trees in our homesteads better. Already some of us have prepared jujube trees to be grafted with a better fruit variety. Others have harvested summer's leafy vegetables and gourds for consumption. Two of us have sold leafy vegetables and gourds. At the moment all the of us are preparing to grow winter vegetable around our homesteads."

*Shohagee is a Santal, a tribal community in Bangladesh. Her hamlet is near Nilu's village. Many of the men have left the village abandoning their wives, who survive by selling labour for rice cultivation. The head of the tribal community, the "Mondol", helped the abandoned women by giving them land for their homes. Like Nilu's group, they have recently started making bags with the support of MSP, a partner NGO.*



"Our main source of money is selling our labour during rice planting and harvesting. It is not always easy to get this job. We earn 60 taka a day and the work is hard. We have to work from early morning to evening. During the rest of the year, we do not have a regular source of income. With the help of MSP and VFFP, we received training in making paper bags, which generated some income for us. From the first bags' production, I made a profit of 30 taka. For you, maybe it is not much, but for us two taka is two taka! Recently the demand for paper bags has decreased and I was worried about what to do if we are not able to sell our paper bags. An idea came to me while talking with a man who sells chicken skin. We have a very popular recipe that uses chicken skin but the Muslims in Rajshahi do not make it. The man who sells us the chicken skin gets it from the city.

"One day with Shaheen, the MSP field supervisor, I visited several markets and discovered that selling chicken skin could be a good business for me. But I needed an initial investment. MSP provided me with seed money of 500 taka. I started the business and I make a profit of 20 taka a day on average. I do not know how my husband came to know that I was earning money. He left me three years ago and married another woman in Jessore. One day he came back to our village and tried to reconcile with me. He asked my father and relatives to convince me to go back to him. I understood that he was more interested in my money than in me. I shall never go back to him because I have found the means to be independent. I do not have to depend on anybody anymore."



*Rehana Begum lives in a cluster village for the poor established by government in Parhalsah Union of the Natore district. Ninety households live in this village and recently they formed an association of very poor women. With them, VFFP and LUSTRE, a partner NGO, have started a pilot initiative to help the extreme poor.*

"I never believed that an outsider could help to relieve our poverty. At the end of 2002, LUSTRE and VFFP gave their support to help the poorest amongst us. Together, we identified about 25 households to profit from the help.

"We had received some land - a bit more than one decimal (0.01 acre) - from the government along with our house. Apart from sporadically planting a few trees, we did not know how to make a profit from

this limited resource. LUSTRE offered to take us on a study visit to another village where they supported agroforestry activities and it opened our eyes on how to manage a home garden. After this visit, most of us planted 200 to 500 bushes of Aloe Vera, as well as various vegetables. You will be surprised to know that after only three months, we started getting a return from our small piece of land. I harvested about 70 sweet gourds and sold 30 of them for 160 taka. We consumed or shared with the neighbours the remaining 40. After six months of Aloe Vera cultivation, I have sold 20 kg of leaves for 100 taka. There are plenty of Aloe Vera seedlings growing here and there. I sold some for 60 taka per hundred. My small piece of land has become a "factory" for me; everyday it gives some money or food.

"After three months of collaboration with LUSTRE and VFFP, I realised that, thanks to one exchange visit and some advisory support on managing land, we were able to change our lives. Now I feel very proud when I have money in my hand from my land. I can feed my children with vegetables regularly and I can supplement some of our family expenses normally borne by my husband, who is satisfied with my work."



## **12. Consolidating the process: the necessary accompaniment**

Since "quality " was a key word in the 6th phase of VFFP, emphasis was given to establishing quality planting material sources, developing high standards of nursery practices and facilitating the access of farmers to improved planting material. This led to recruitment of NGO staff with a technical background. The problems with these new recruits who had little or no experience of working with farmers during the implementation of the TFG programme were:

- difficulty in assessing farmers dynamics and using participatory approaches;
- difficulty in facilitating training sessions according to adult education principles;
- difficulty in supporting farmers' organisations in their institutional development.

A solution could have been to recruit more "social workers" but then the project would have had weaknesses in technical support. On the other hand, the social workers, if they have better communication with farmers, do not necessarily favour a process of self-reliance. It was thus decided to improve the existing capacities of technical staff.

The strategy of FSs working in pairs had already proved useful. When one member of the team forgot part of the process, the other could fill in. But the main advantage was that both FSs felt more confident when they worked in pairs. For the female, it was an advantage to be accompanied by a male staff member in a new area. However, this approach by itself did not really contribute to make FSs internalise new approaches.

The project decided to use training institutions to improve the non-technical capabilities of NGO staff. But this approach was not satisfactory. For example, the FSs who attended six days of training on facilitation techniques came back full of knowledge but were not able to facilitate a meeting with farmers and improve their relationships with them.

The main challenges for FSs were to integrate into a rural environment and understand the local context; show competence in supporting TFGs for organisational, human and institutional development; and to build a rapport with individuals and groups of farmers. Since classical training could not change behaviour patterns, VFFP opted for coaching - the accompaniment - at all levels of staff in the TFG programme.

Whenever new steps and new methodologies were introduced in the TFG concept implementation, the project organised a general orientation session for the staff. On the basis of a plan of activity developed at the end of the session, supervisors from partner NGOs, VFFP head office and VFFP regional staff attended events conducted by the FSs. Not only it was a means of coaching the FSs, but it also made clear to them what methodology to follow. Afterwards, the regional staff provided an accompaniment until the pair of FSs was confident enough to continue independently. This approach required a higher

*Accompaniment was found to be a useful and effective method at all levels of the programme to coach field staff and farmers.*

*Nilufar Sultana is a Project Officer at VFFP's Regional Office in Dinajpur. She provides an accompaniment support to the partner NGOs staff in the implementation of the TFG programme in the field.*

"We implemented the TFG programme following three major steps: the identification and the selection of local dynamic groups, the negotiation and the establishment of a collaboration with them, and the development and the implementation of a plan of operations for each one. When we started the TFG programme, most of our field staff consisted of new graduates or people having no experience in the development of farmers' organisations. They lacked the skills and confidence for participatory approaches. Although we tried to orient them, they still had problems while interacting with farmers. We decided then to provide an accompaniment support to each pair of field supervisors (FSs) during one or two events (meetings with farmers, training sessions) before introducing any new steps. We observed that our accompaniment support helped the FSs build enough confidence to interact with the farmers' groups independently. But we learned

that accompaniment was also an appropriate method for the field staff to use in supporting the institutional development of the groups. Through this the method of coaching, the field staff contributed to building the farmers' groups capacities in technical and institutional aspects. In the technical aspects, the farmers often had a problem in undertaking action after the training or demonstration sessions. This was due to a lack of confidence. We decided that the FSs should be present during the implementation of the new knowledge farmers had acquired to strengthen their confidence. In the institutional aspects, the FSs supported the groups in democratic decision-making to prioritise their needs. They also provided other institutional support according to the specific needs of the groups using the same method of coaching. So, a proper accompaniment always helped the field staff and the farmers stay on the right track.

"During the diagnosis phase we observed that farmers identified all the problems in their homesteads, going beyond the field of agroforestry. In the first year of implementation of our programme, we had to limit our discussions with farmers' groups to agroforestry related activities. But later on we realised that for improving their lives, we should support them in many other activities such as poultry, livestock, fish culture and field crop production. We broadened the area of diagnosis and prioritisation of needs the next year, knowing that they could also get support and services from other organisations.

"Thanks to our support, the farmers have increased their homestead production and generated more income. They want to grow trees and vegetables. In the second year of the TFG programme, many groups came up with ideas for income generating activities such as mat preparation and marketing, selling puffed rice, tailoring, poultry vaccination, pickle preparation, poultry and pig rearing, bamboo crafts, carton and candle preparation. Although we cannot support them directly, we encourage them and identify the resources they need. This is a support in the field of institutional development.

"In the first year we were confronted with new concepts, new approaches and strategies. It was an uncertain time and obviously we made mistakes. But we learnt from the experience and even from our mistakes. The field staff are far more confident and capable than at the beginning of our programme. To me, this is a great achievement."

***"At present, the field staff are far more confident and capable than at the beginning of our programme. To me, this is a great achievement."***



Technical support and human and institutional development go hand in hand.



involvement of VFFP staff but contributed to strengthen and consolidate the internalisation of the new approach with them.

Accompaniment was found to be an effective method at all levels of the programme to coach field staff and farmers. Using the same approach, FSs played the role of accompanier to the groups to adopt a democratic decision-making process in the selection of the needs. They also helped the TFGs build their capacities in taking a lead role in implementing the activities. After the training and demonstration sessions, the FSs were always present at the moment TFGs started applying what they had learnt - a presence that comforted the TFG and strengthened their confidence to undertake actions.

### **13. Conclusion: off to a new dynamism**

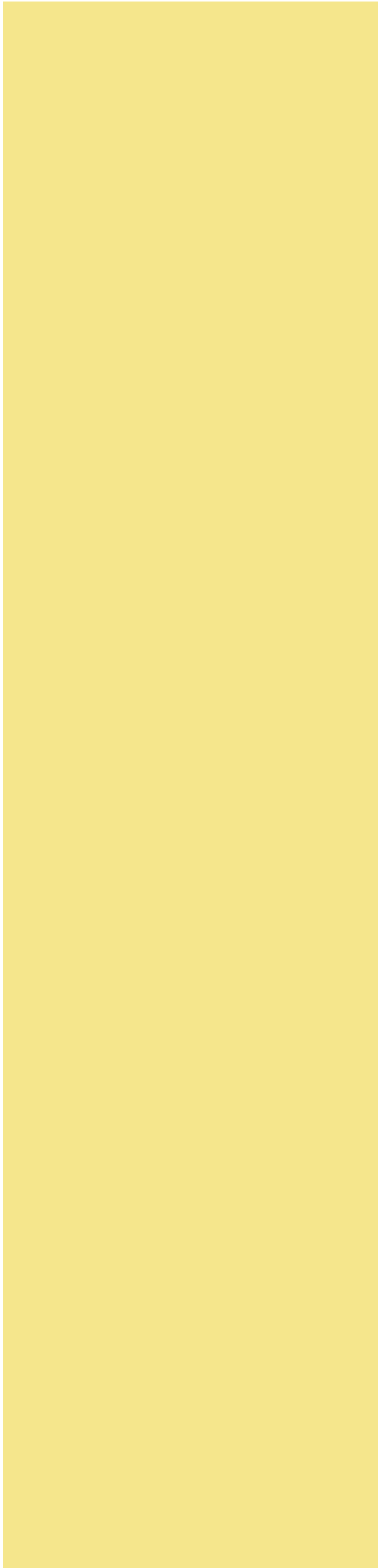
The TFG programme began as a classic extension programme relying on the dissemination of technologies. This top-down model placed all the emphasis on technical aspects. The project realised that this approach was unsatisfactory not only because it was not sustainable, but also because the farmers were considered passive actors and the recipients of a support that did not meet their needs and priorities.

The new concepts and approaches that were developed focused more on human and institutional development, realising that it must go hand in hand with technical support to increase the effectiveness of the programme at the socio-economic level and increase potential for its sustainability.

The first experiences demonstrate that benefits derived from the collaboration with the project were at the individual level with an increase in agroforestry production and at group level with improved capabilities to lead development activities. The TFGs - a better name would be farmers' organisations - have gained confidence in themselves and could themselves benefit their local communities.

However, while there is new dynamism among the farmers' organisations, the programme still faces some challenges. The way to reach a larger number of people through the TFG programme is still to be found. The question of addressing poverty issues through agroforestry should be answered. Among the new issues to be explored are marketing and processing, the development of linkages with service providers and how to ensure a good quality, sustainable service.

One of the main lessons learnt in the TF programme is the considerable capacity of evolution of the stakeholders which were involved in this innovative approach. This experience provides the project with a large measure of confidence -despite the challenging questions that still have to be faced.



May 2005



DEZA DIREKTION FÜR ENTWICKLUNG UND ZUSAMMENARBEIT  
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This document was originally produced by VFFP (Village and Farm Forestry Project) in December 2003. VFFP was a project funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and managed by Intercooperation, which ended in 2004.

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