



inter  
operation



## The Farmer Field School (FFS): An instrument for poverty reduction



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Sustainable Land Use Programme

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## **ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY**

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| AP     | Associate Participant   |
| BS     | Block Supervisor (DAE)  |
| CL     | Community Leader  |
| DAE    | Department of Agricultural Extension                                      |
| DLS    | Department of Livestock   |
| DOF    | Department of Fisheries   |
| ED     | Executive Director  |
| FAO    | Food & Agricultural Organisation  |
| FFD    | Farmers' Field Day  |
| FFS    | Farmer Field School   |
| FL     | Farmer Leader   |
| FM     | Female Mentor   |
| FMA    | Field Management Analysis   |
| FO     | Farmers' Organisation   |
| GO     | Government Organisation   |
| HID    | Human & Institutional Development   |
| IPM    | Integrated Pest Management  |
| LE     | Local Extensionist  |
| LIFT   | Local Initiative for Farmers' Training                                    |
| LOI    | Letter of Intent  |
| NGO    | Non-Government Organisation   |
| PNGO   | Partner Non-Government Organisation                                       |
| PP     | Primary Participant   |
| RF     | Resource Farmer   |
| RULFAO | Rural Underprivileged & Landless Farmers Organisation (NGO)               |
| SDC    | Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation                                |
| SHABGE | Strengthening Household Access Bari Gardening Extension (managed by CARE) |
| TACD   | Technical Assistance for Community Development (NGO)                      |
| VDC    | Village Development Committee (promoted by SDC-WATSAN)                    |
| WBA    | Well-being Analysis   |

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## Summary

Farmer Field School (FFS) is the application of a problem-based learning approach to agriculture extension, adapted by SHABGE for use with poor female farmers. Over the period July 1999 to December 2003, FFS was to be the catalyst for the establishment of a large number of independent Farmers' Organisations (FOs).

The first batch of FFSs was established in September 1999. They were selected according to criteria, which was validated by staff making field visits and consulting members of the community. Each FFS had 20-22 female farmers categorised as Primary Participants (PPs) whose role was to disseminate learning. Farmer Leaders (FLs) were also selected. A second batch of FFSs was established in January 2001 following extensive well-being analysis.

At first, project staff helped members prioritise agroforestry problems and develop study plots to examine these. Farmers also asked for assistance with other livelihood aspects. There was a noticeable increase in farmers' confidence and vegetable production rose 30-50%.

The leadership capacity of FFS committees was developed by the project as it had been found that without a group dynamic, prior learning was neither disseminated nor applied successfully. Training focused on the characteristics of effective leaders, fostering group spirit and dispute resolution. Farmers' Field Days (FFDs) were organised by FLs and, for many of the female farmers, it was the first time they had shared their learning at a large public gathering.

The next step was organisation development. In early 2001, discussions were held between staff and FFS members and three categories of FFS emerged:

- FFSs that wanted to become local organisations;
- FFSs that wanted to merge with existing local groups;
- FFSs that did not want to do either.

The project took steps to support and assist the first two categories. After extensive community consultation and action planning, members from the first batch formed executive and advisory committees. Saving schemes were started, as well as small collective activities. More than a year later over half the first batch of FFSs was evolving into sustainable FOs with accountable leaders. In the same period, 26% had merged with existing organisations. The remaining FFSs had a variety of reasons for not wanting to change; the project planned steps to address these.

Despite the existence of female FLs, women still faced a lack of support from community members and there were problems regarding women marketing their produce. The establishment of Female Mentors (FM) in each FO has helped empower women, both socially and economically. Project staff also assist FFSs form linkages with organisations that can meet needs outside SHABGE's mandate.

By creating an action learning environment, SHABGE's staff have been able to evolve from being trainers to facilitators. SHABGE's FFSs have become platforms for wider poverty reduction in communities and have improved considerably the position of women.

SHABGE was the successor to the LIFT project and changed from a local extensionist approach to an FFS approach

Initially in SHABGE FFS, the farmers learned to diagnose and solve agroforestry related problems. Exercises for team building were the part of FFS activities.

## **1. Looking back: Genesis of adapting FFS in SHABGE**

CARE-Bangladesh's Strengthening Household Access to Bari Gardening Extension (SHABGE) project has been implemented in 20 upazillas from six districts in Nilphamari and greater Rajshahi since July 1999. SHABGE succeeded the Local Initiative for Farmers' Training (LIFT, 1993-1998); the latter's main strategy was farmer-to-farmer extension by developing small or poor farmers as Local Extensionists (LEs) for a particular community. LEs also developed small nurseries to sell planting materials such as vegetable seeds and seedlings and tree seedlings to other farmers. The project found that many people envied the extensionists and did not regard them as friends because they received about Tk 400 (US\$ 10) for their extension work. Furthermore, many LEs could not supply planting materials or demonstrate techniques. These issues affected the wide dissemination of better technology; consequently the one-year LIFT bridging phase project abandoned the local extensionist approach.

During the bridging phase from LIFT to SHABGE (July 1998 to June 1999), project staff provided training support to farmers. This support increased production quickly but the farmers did not sustain the new practices. This was because they depended on the staff instead of developing their own knowledge and agroforestry skills.

In July 1999, SHABGE started its activities and realised that to sustain the use of technology at a practical level, the knowledge and skills of poor female farmers had to be developed. With this in mind, SHABGE adapted the idea of the Farmer Field School (FFS) as an extension approach.

### ***The concept of FFS:***

FFS is the application of a problem-based learning approach to agriculture extension. The approach was developed in the 1990s within the FAO Inter-country Program for Integrated Pest Management in Rice in Asia.

At the heart of FFS is the "Study Plot"; this is used to analyse and understand the crop eco-system and compare conventional and improved practices. In addition to technical action learning, group cohesion building activities are included in this approach.

The major strategies of the FFS approach were:

- Participatory action learning;
- Wider dissemination through learning shared with the community;
- Gradual shifting from facilitator-directed towards farmer-directed action.

CARE Bangladesh's Rice-Fish projects used an adapted FFS approach in rice from the mid-nineties and achieved good results in developing the knowledge and skills of rice farmers. Based on this, SHABGE has adapted the FFS approach to homestead agroforestry activities, shifting the study plot from rice fields to homesteads.

The initial assumptions behind the SHABGE FFS were that FFS would:

- be a learning tool for homestead agroforestry knowledge and skill development;
- be a vehicle for wider dissemination of homestead agroforestry;
- promote local dynamics capable of supporting farmers in homestead farming.

## 2. **Formation of FFS: Beginning of a non-tedious journey**

It took on average two months to form a new FFS. The FFSs were initiated in the Nilphamari and Rajshahi regions with the following considerations:-

- In Nilphamari, LIFT had been working since 1993. To create greater impact, SHABGE included communities under FFS that had not been covered during the previous period.
- The Rajshahi FFSs could capitalise on benefits brought by the existing Local Entrepreneurs (LEs, formally Local Extensionists) that had been developed during the bridging phase for ensuring the supply of planting material to farmers.

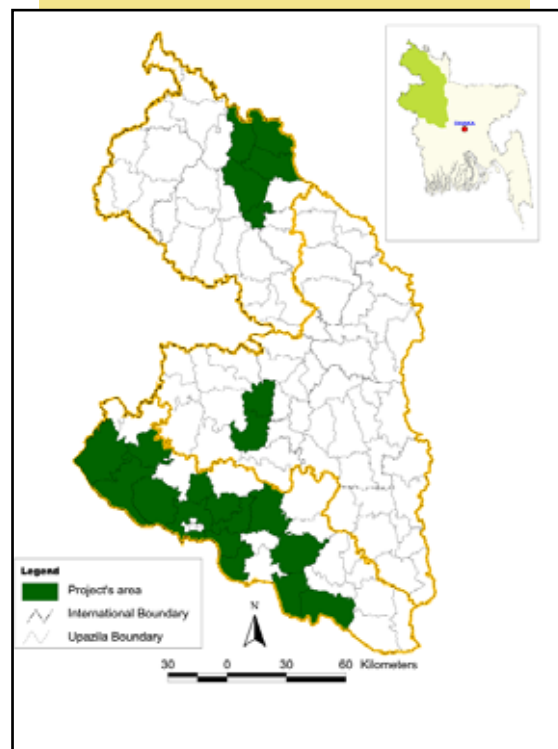
### **Selection of villages: process of sharing views with the community**

Field staff first collected secondary information regarding population, average land holdings and potential for vegetable and fruit cultivation from different line agencies (government and non-government) at upazilla and union level. This was carried out to identify villages suitable for SHABGE intervention. Then project staff verified the secondary information by visiting villages and discussing issues with the local elite and farmers, including women. The field staff checked the level of interest through individual contacts and group discussions. Later on staff organised general meetings in the villages ensuring participation at all levels of the community.

At the general meetings, project staff explained the goals, objectives, interventions and strategy of SHABGE. The community was expected to make a preliminary list of possible participants based on their perceptions. Another important expectation was that the involvement of the community in the FFS establishment would facilitate the participation of women in the FFS.

From September 1999 the project started to support the first batch of 231 FFSs (5,500 participants) by selecting them according to the following criteria:

- Farmers must have a homestead including a piece of adjacent land for vegetable cultivation;
- Maximum land size is one acre;
- Farmers must be interested in working with their own hands;
- Only poor and marginal female farmers are eligible for FFS.



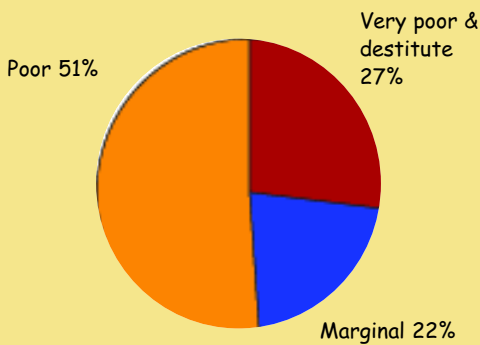
*CARE-Bangladesh  
SHABGE-SDC Project Area*

*Area selection, meeting the community, well-being analysis, establishing agreements for collaboration, participatory needs assessment for setting a learning agenda and planning for implementation are the key steps of FFS formation*

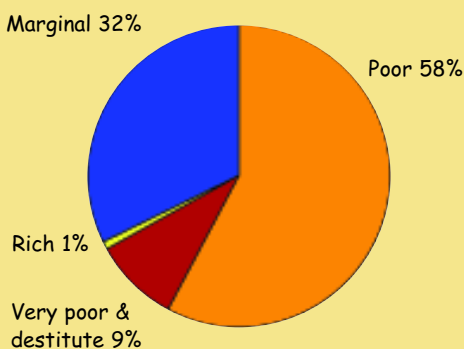
**The steps of the well-being exercise were:**

- 1. Meeting the community**
- 2. Well-being analysis sessions includes social mapping with at least 35 to 40 people**
- 3. Categorising households**
- 4. Households randomly checked for reliability**
- 5. Documentation.**

**Rajshahi**



**Nilphamari**



After five to six months, it was observed that some participants came from middle and upper classes, which was not the project mandate. The reason was that many of the staff drew up the list of FFS participants with the involvement of only one or two people. In addition, after one and a half-years, it was noted that many people (other than FFS members) were not aware of FFS's activities. This hampered the wider dissemination of the project. The project decided to change the procedure by which it identified participants and so adopted the well-being analysis for selecting appropriate participants for the second batch FFS; it also decided to involve the community in FFS activities in order to increase wider dissemination.

**Adopting well-being Analysis Involving Community in 2nd batch FFS**

Well-being Analysis (WBA) refers to the analysis of the socio-economic features of a household as well as a community. The perception of the well-being of people in SHABGE areas varied according to socio-economic and physical characteristics. The community generally categorised people as rich, marginal, poor, very poor and destitute.

After categorising people based on their situations, the community selected potential households from the very poor and poor owning a homestead. However, if the expected number of participants was not available (20 to 22 members) within the poorer categories, the remaining participants were selected from the less poor segment. Following WBA, a second batch of 317 FFS (6,400 participants) began getting support from January 2001.

Although the perception of well-being varied from community to community, many commonalties were found. The category-wise distribution (or more specifically the proportion) of participants in the second batch of FFSs is presented below.

**Entering into an agreement for collaboration between the farmers and the project**

A meeting was held with the selected participants to explain FFS objectives and working procedures, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the farmers and the project. Issues discussed included who would provide land and labour for the study plot, how production from the study plot would be distributed, who would provide the input for the study plot, where meetings would be held and how often. After the discussion the participants decided whether or not to participate. The decisions were documented in the FFS register as an agreement for collaboration. At this meeting participants were split into four or five small groups (four to six members in each) and an FFS implementation committee was formed by the staff and participants to organise activities. The committee comprised four to five Farmer Leaders (FLs) from the small groups. This committee had to organise the FFS training sessions, invite participants, collect and distribute snacks, and set up and monitor different experiments. From these leaders the participants nominated a main leader to look after overall FFS activities. A formal FFS emerged after this meeting.



## **Composition of FFS**

Generally in all FFSs, there are 20 to 22 female farmers termed as Primary Participants (PP). It was assumed that PPs would share their knowledge with their neighbours. To ensure wider dissemination, the project encouraged each PP to select one to two neighbours as their Associate Participants (APs).

### **3. Supporting FFSs: Agroforestry as an entry point**

After the formation of FFSs, the project conducted a participatory session with FFS members to diagnose and analyse homestead horticulture and agroforestry problems. Project staff helped the farmers to prioritise and group problems relating to vegetables, fruit and trees, and to develop separate training plans for each FFS. Based on the priorities, the farmers chose one or two vegetables and fruits for studying each season in the study plot. The farmers also raised other problems about timber tree management, agroforestry combinations and intensive use of homestead space. These were addressed as special learning

*Fahima Begum, 27, is a member of the Shalhati Farmer Field School (FFS) in Dimla Upazilla, Nilphamari district. She has improved her family's life since joining FFS, but this did not happen suddenly. This is the story behind it, says Fahima:*

"I married in 1988 and now have three sons. I lived a hand-to-mouth existence with the little income that my husband earned from selling labour. I had a small thatch house where we lived with many difficulties. We did not have enough food for the first three to four years of my marriage. Then my aunt gave me a goat and suggested that I rear it as shareholder. Within a few months, I had bought another goat after selling the first one. Gradually I became the owner of three or four goats a year and would earn Tk 2,040 (US\$50) by selling them. Then I borrowed Tk 5,000 from an NGO and, adding my own money, bought 15 decimals of land, where I built a house. In mid 1999 I joined SHABGE's FFS and started to cultivate vegetables in my homestead. In 2000 I leased 1.5 bighas (50 decimals) of land from my father-in-law and cultivated different types of vegetables using the improved practices that I had learned from FFS. Since late 2000 I have earned Tk 9,000 to 9,500 per season from this piece of land. With the assistance of my husband, I started stocking rice and wheat. Now I have five bighas of land, purchased from my own income. I have one cow and three goats and cash savings of Tk 7,100. In the future I want to educate our children and construct a house with corrugated iron sheeting. My husband helps me in my work. Now I have a happy life with my family."

*Fahima's perseverance in poverty reduction*



***"In the future I want to educate our children and construct a house with corrugated iron sheeting."***

topics in FFS sessions throughout the year. During the training sessions, staff played the role of trainers and sometimes helped farmers to be co-facilitators to strengthen their confidence. Based on the needs and interests of the farmers, the staff trained FFS participants and helped them to translate their lessons into practice with household visits. In addition, staff took the farmers to other homesteads and GO and NGO farms as learning exercises on agroforestry. These were the main activities during the first one and a half years of FFS.

It was observed that practical training and support in applying the new methods boosted the confidence of FFS members. They undertook different initiatives to increase their homestead production, particularly through cultivating vegetables and managing fruit trees. After FFS training, members cultivated some of their fallow land and also tried to maximise the use of existing land. By putting the acquired knowledge and skills into practice, FFS members were able to increase their vegetable production by 30 to 50%.

The project gradually extended its support by incorporating other livelihood aspects based on the needs of FFS participants. As the project staff have limited knowledge and skill in matters outside agroforestry, other GO and NGO services were offered. To do this the project provided support to FFS on group capacity development such as leadership, communication, and linkage and negotiation skills.

#### **4. *Withdrawal of snacks: A temporary crisis in the first batch of FFSs***

The SHABGE SDC project provided refreshments for the first batch of FFSs in early 2000 with the understanding that the food would act as an energiser for poor farmers during the FFS sessions and the practical work in the study plots. The belief was that in most FFSs poor participants came to the training sessions without a meal: giving food and water would help them to be attentive.

Initially this brought some positive results. The farmers spent more time in training sessions while those involved in purchasing and distributing the snacks developed their management skills. But after a few months of providing snacks, the project faced some difficulties. Most of the farmers (especially women) brought their children to training sessions, which disturbed the classes. The mothers were looking after their children rather than participating in the activities. Some people joined the training sessions just before snacks were distributed. Many farmers left after the snacks had been given out. The FLs had difficulties during the distribution of snacks because there were only enough for the participants, not for their children. Several farmers took the snacks home for their families although they were supposed to eat them during the break, so the objective of the refreshments was not fulfilled.

The project proposed to stop the provision of snacks to FFS participants. Most of the farmers agreed and, from September

2001, refreshments were no longer provided. However, to assess the effect on the first batch of FFS participants, the project collected information through group discussions. The opinions of FFS participants are presented below.

About 70% of the participants said that the withdrawal of refreshments brought the following positive results:

- The presence of children has reduced so farmers are able to participate in sessions more attentively.
- The number of disagreements, caused by not providing snacks to all children, has reduced.
- Time saved from snack distribution and eating allows more time for training.
- Farmers and staff do not need to spend time bringing snacks from distant places.

***Shabitri Rani, 29, is a leader of the Vendipara FFS. Vendipara is a remote village in Lakshmichap union, Sadar Upazilla, Nilphamari. She had this to say about the snack issue:***

"As our village is about 18 km away from Nilphamari town, we usually receive little support from government and non-government agencies. Most of the villagers are poor and dependent on agriculture. Many people cultivate vegetables on a small scale in their homesteads. To improve agricultural production, we formed our FFS in the beginning of 2000 with the support of Dilara Apa, a staff member of the SHABGE project.

"We learned improved methods of vegetable and fruit cultivation. We began the FFS sessions at 10 a.m. under the mango tree and continued until 1 p.m. During the sessions we participated in different activities. They included six to seven steps such as reviewing the previous FFS day, Field Management Analysis (FMA) of the study plots, assessing current agricultural problems, discussing special topics proposed by farmers, playing group dynamic games, discussing the message of the month and preparing the action plan. After the practical work in the study plot, the project used to provide snacks.

"Initially, I felt that the provision of snacks improved our active participation throughout the FFS session. But then I saw that some participants joined just before snack distribution and left after eating. Some female farmers came with their children, who created a disturbance. The mothers were more concerned with looking after their children than in participating in training. Our leaders had problems in distributing snacks because they had to provide food to outsiders even with the limited amount they had.

"After a year the project stopped giving snacks and some members dropped out of the sessions. They said they would not attend FFS sessions without snacks. I tried to make them understand the benefits of the training and I managed to persuade some of the farmers to come back. Now we realise that snacks met our immediate needs but training provides us long-term benefits."



***"Stopping snacks in FFS: a new realisation for us"***

However, the remaining 30% wanted the refreshments to continue. They said that the withdrawal of snacks had discouraged some farmers from attending FFS sessions. Refreshments were useful to poor participants who attended without eating. They also thought that snacks convinced their children and husbands to attend training sessions.

Although participation fell by 15 to 30% in the first few months after the withdrawal of refreshments, attendance improved with time due to the motivational activities of farmer leaders and other participants.

The number of children attending reduced significantly and the training environment improved. FFS participants had more time for training thanks to the time saved from eating and washing hands and plates. In all, the withdrawal of refreshments was beneficial for the participants and the project.

## 5. *Birth of a Group Dynamism*



*Sanitation week organised by FFS members.*

At the beginning of SHABGE it was envisaged that FFS participants would continue the practices they had learnt, as this was necessary to maintain production levels. But LIFT's experience showed that farmers did not put theory into practice after project activities had ended, due to the lack of a co-ordinated effort by the farmers' groups. To overcome the problem, SHABGE initiated group cohesion-building activities to support households in homestead farming.

To build group cohesion, farmers were helped to develop their leadership capacity through training and special tasks. The major training topics included the character, roles and responsibilities of a good leader and the methods of fostering team spirit and managing group conflicts. The FLs helped to assess the farmers' problems and identify solutions in a participatory way. Training and special assignments helped to build the capacity of the

FFS implementation committee. Committee members took small collective initiatives including organising different FFS events such as Farmers' Field Day (FFD). During FFDs, FFS members, particularly the FLs, did all the planning, invited villagers including the local elite, set up stalls and presented their learning to the community. For many of the female farmers it was the first time that they had run such stalls and shared their learning with the community at a large gathering. From the success of FFDs, FFS members, particularly women, enhanced their sense of group unity. Moreover, to strengthen group cohesion, many structural experiences and simulation games were shared, which also contributed to developing the organisation's values among FFS members.

The project found that leadership selection was very important for developing an organisation. If leaders were selected at the beginning of FFS formation without testing their interests or abilities, other participants did not accept them. Sometimes FFS members selected people who were not good leaders. The project faced this problem with the first batch of FFSs. It happened because staff did not know about Human and Institutional Development (HID), at the time an unknown concept for them.

To overcome this problem in the second batch, FFS members were encouraged to select leaders after six to eight months of FFS operation. This allowed FFS members and staff to identify appropriate leaders based on their interests and natural leadership skills. These leaders became capable of running group activities, identifying and solving different social problems and conflicts and establishing linkages with GO and NGO service providers.

In late 2000, among the first batch of FFSs, the project observed that female participants became more confident in facilitating different collective activities such as FFD, mass campaigning and significant day observation. They were proactive in sustaining their group cohesion. The project had requests from FFS farmers to help them in developing their organisations, although the mechanisms for this were not clear to staff at that stage. Earlier it was thought that a few group cohesion-building initiatives would help to sustain FFS activities, but after getting requests from FFSs it was clear that something more was needed. SHABGE decided to support FFS members develop their organisations without prescribing a model.

## **6. From FFSs to Local Organisations**

To initiate organisation development activities staff held a meeting with FFS members to get their views in early 2001. FFSs were sorted into three categories:

- FFSs that wanted to evolve into local organisations with formal executive committees;
- FFSs that wanted to merge or integrate with existing local groups or community-based organisations such as VDCs;
- FFSs that did not want to evolve or merge.

After getting the FFSs' opinion on this issue, SHABGE conducted meetings and workshops in August 2001 on how to develop local organisations from FFSs, with the participation of FFS leaders and PNGO and CARE staff. The following steps and activities for evolving FFSs into farmers' organisations were developed.

For the first two categories of FFSs the major steps followed were:

- Support FFSs to develop a constitution or byelaws, structures, mechanisms and support systems for sustainability.
- Assist FFSs to develop capacity for resource generation and management, leadership development, organisational development, linkage establishment, and other related knowledge development.
- Support the development of mechanisms and procedures for responding to the needs of the community.
- Support the development of social capital formation for a safety network, particularly for poor women, and carry out social responsibilities.
- Support the development of capacity for conducting meetings, writing resolutions and developing action plans.

Later, training was provided to the all staff including PNGOs on the steps and activities for developing Farmers' Organisations (FOs). The topics included the objectives and benefits of being an organisation, strategies and steps to form an organisation, and roles and responsibilities of committees.



*Executive Committee of the Karota Farmer Organisation*

In September 2001, project staff facilitated a meeting for preparing the organisation's development plan for the first batch of FFSs formed. Committee members, general FFS members, associate participants, schoolteachers, Union Parishad (UP, local government) members, husbands of FFS members, representatives of existing local organisations and the local elite participated in this planning process. Participants identified the problems that needed to be solved for community development. They used the local resource mapping process and, based on the findings, developed an action plan for solving the problems. The action plan included the flexibility of having different rules and norms for their local organisation. Through this process, FFS members were able to make the community understand the need for their organisation and people could go on to take responsibility for their own development.

In October 2001, FFS members decided to form two committees - an executive committee and an advisory committee. The executive committee consisted of five to nine members, mostly female. Nine to 15 male and female farmers formed the advisory committee. At this stage, the FOs' priority was to improve their access to different GO and NGO services.

FFS members also at this time started saving and began small collective activities such as roadside planting, cage fish culture and handicrafts, which helped improve group cohesiveness.

In early 2002 many of the first FFS batch decided to expand membership beyond FFS members to include other poor farmers. Project staff facilitated sessions for FFSs on the prospects and constraints of involving other people in their committees and identifying suitable members as FOs.

To date, half of the first batch of FFSs are evolving into sustainable organisations. It is happening due to the appropriate selection of leaders by FFS members. Community and husbands' support in implementing the organisation's activities such as FFDs, income-generating activities (IGAs), livestock vaccination, and polio vaccination have also helped to foster the development process. (See the story of Shakhina).

In late 2002 the FOs organised annual/six-monthly meetings of the first FFS batch. General members and others were invited to participate in preparing the FOs' development plan, which created community involvement. At the meetings, the executive and advisory committees of FOs were formally introduced to the villagers. The accountability of FO leaders increased as they explained their roles and responsibilities, as well as the progress of their planned activities, to the villagers. This general meeting was very effective for the organisations' development process.

In the second category of FFSs, leaders of existing organisations were involved in different activities such as preparing community development plans, observing FFDs and being involved in vaccination campaigns. The FFSs and the existing organisations agreed to develop one organisation by merging together instead of developing two organisations in the same community. So far, 26% of the first FFS batch has merged with existing organisations.

In the third category of FFS, it was observed that 24% of the first FFS batch did not want to transform into an organisation for different reasons. In many villages, farmers' groups and fake

*Shakhina Begum is president of the Karota village Farmers' Organisation. She became a member of the FFS in mid 1999. She described the evolutionary process of her organisation:*

"Karota is one of the villages in the Dighapatia union in the Natore district. Most of the villagers are poor and dependent on agriculture, wage labour and rickshaw pulling.

"In the middle of 1999 we met Beauty Apa, a SHABGE staff member working with PNGO RULFAO. We formed the FFS to get technical support on homestead vegetable production. We learnt about improved cultivation methods for vegetables and fruit trees. Together we tried to identify the problems in the study plots. To do this we met fortnightly beneath a mango tree; after a few months, we realised that we also faced problems in poultry, duck, goat, cow, and fish rearing. If we were able to solve these problems, our income would increase. We asked Beauty Apa how to find the solutions.

"Later on, the staff introduced Begum, an FFS member, and me to agriculture, livestock, and fisheries officers. The officers listened to our problems and offered assistance. The FFS members selected Begum as the contact person with these offices, as well as other service providers. We received support from different organisations and gradually the FFS became the centre for attracting GO NGO services. Many other villagers subsequently wanted to become members or to benefit from the FFS.

"In the middle 2001 FFS members decided to form a village-based organisation. Our general committee consists of 46 members. The general committee elected a nine member executive committee, with me as the president. For the FFS's smooth functioning, we included 22 male and female village service providers such as successful farmers, traditional midwives, nursery owners, schoolteachers and Union Parishad [local government] members as advisors to the organisation. We developed by-laws, finance management procedures, and an annual activity plan for our organisation and village development. Khorshed Alam, a member of the organisation, donated two decimals of land for the construction of an office. Other members provided bamboo, labour and money, and now we have an office where we conduct meetings. We have arranged different types of income-generating activities such as garments, paper bag making and cage fish culture for our poor members.

"In the past, we were too shy to go anywhere and talk to outsiders. When we started the organisation's activities, many men criticised us, saying women should only grow vegetables in homesteads without getting assistance from outside. But it did not stop us. Now people of the village say, "All of you have now become experts". FFS has bloomed as a farmers' organisation supporting poor women in different livelihood issues. We are proud to have such an organisation. We are thankful to FFS for showing us a new way to achieve a better life in a sustainable manner."



***"FFS showed us a new dream for a better life"***

NGOs had mishandled the savings of poor people. Inter-village or family conflicts had deposed the organisations' development process in these groups. The project plans to phase out this third category of FFSs with the following steps:

- Developing the leadership, communication and negotiation skills of farmers.
- Supporting FFSs to establish linkages with service providers.
- Supporting FFSs to identify and develop the point persons in the FFS community to provide support on gender and homestead agroforestry.

Although there are examples of successful FOs, many still face difficulties because of a lack of leadership qualities amongst poor women. There is little support from male community members, including husbands, for the poor women.

*NISHUFA is known as the doctor to women and children in her village.*



***"I am trying to help the women of Dewanpara village to avoid the curse of early marriage and violence."***

***Nishufa Khatun, 26, is a Female Mentor (FM) and the president of Dewanpara FFS in Paba Upazilla, Rajshahi. Nishufa gives advice on family issues and primary health care, including birth spacing. She is now known as both the doctor and friend of women and children in her village.***

"I was born to a very poor family and was a victim of early marriage. I was forced to marry a man at the age of 14 and became a mother at 15. When I was 18, my husband demanded Tk 20,000 as dowry. As my father was already struggling to feed eight people, he was unable to pay the dowry. As a result, my husband divorced me. It was the beginning of my new struggle.

"In mid 2002 I met Shefali from CARE and heard about the FFS. After listening to its objectives and activities, I realised that the women of the village are marginalised like me. FFS would help them to produce more vegetables and earn more. We decided to form an FFS with Shefali's help. We learnt about improved methods of vegetable production. To uphold the status of women in the family and community, we received training on gender and rights issues. Then FFS members selected me as FM and CARE SHABGE trained me on gender and reproductive health and basic family law. I also had paramedic training from BRAC.

"A few months later, four early marriages were about to take place in our village. On behalf of the FFS, we discussed the negative effects with the parents. They accepted our arguments and stopped the marriages. Now, as FM, I regularly discuss women's rights and laws on divorce with the community. I am now regarded as a friend of women.

"I am trying to help the women of Dewanpara village to avoid the curse of early marriage and violence."



## ***Involving local contributors created a new dynamism in FFS***

Many female FLs were not able to link FOs with GO and NGO service providers at upazilla or district level because they were busy at home and unable to travel outside the village. To overcome this problem, FFS members decided to find males and females with leadership skills.

In mid 2002 the FFS members selected supportive male farmers to render important services to the community. They are called Community Leaders (CLs) and are from the middle class. Some are educated.

The female farmers noticed that many women face serious problems at home including violence. To support female farmers, the project helped FOs to select a gender focal point person called a Female Mentor (FM), who is often also a FL.

It was difficult for poor female farmers to seek technological advice to solve homestead agroforestry problems. SHABGE encouraged FFSs to select one or two successful farmers as Resource Farmers (RFs) who could collect information from other sources such as DAE, test and adapt techniques and technologies, and support female FFS farmers in need. The FFS farmers included these CLs and RFs in their FOs' advisory committees, and included the FMs in their executive committees.

The project trained FMs and CLs on roles, scope of work, facilitation and communication skills, and gender and rights issues. It introduced them to different GO and NGO service agencies such as hospitals, clinics and agriculture and livestock departments.

Since November 2002, the FMs have been giving advice to poor women on gender and rights issues and health and family planning services available at hospitals and clinics. The services provided by CLs included assistance on hospitalisation, children's schooling, resolution of family conflicts, organising annual general meetings of the organisation and FFDs, and communication with service providers.

The incorporation of CLs and FMs in the organisation has created a new dynamism and is a positive force to mobilise communities to solve their livelihood issues. However, in some FOs, female leaders became too dependent on male CLs, which may create a negative impact on the female leadership development process.

## ***7. Opening up to the Outside World and New Initiatives***

From the beginning of 2001, the project found that the attendance of participants in FFS sessions was gradually decreasing. Because of limited homestead space, most of the production was concentrated on family consumption and there was little surplus for income generation. The participants asked for other income-generating support such as training and credit for goat and chicken rearing, fish culture, handicrafts and mat-weaving as well as support on solving crop problems.

*Mr. Binoy Kumar Karmakar, Block Supervisor (BS) of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE), has been working in Sadar Upazilla, Chapai Nababgonj. He has 17 years of experience in agriculture extension activities at field level. His views on the SHABGE project follow:*

"I learnt of the SHABGE project when project staff were collecting information for area selection. After getting to know the objectives and procedures of the project, I asked them to select my working blocks, Banihati and Ghorapakhia. SHABGE has been operating three FFSs in my blocks since 2000.

"Initially SHABGE worked only with fruit and vegetable production, but when farmers asked for solutions to problems with rice and wheat cultivation, the project staff sought advice from DAE people like me. I advised individual farmers when I was asked to. One day Mr. Moklesur Rahman, Field Supervisor of TRINAMOOOL SHABGE, invited me to conduct an FFS training session; after getting help from SHABGE staff on the participatory training process, I led this session on rice pest management.

"The project staff and I discussed helping farmers using FSSs at the Upazilla Agriculture Extension Co-ordination Committee meeting. Everyone there felt that DAE and SHABGE would be good partners. A joint workshop was organised to strengthen collaboration at FFS level and a joint action plan was developed. This plan requires me to work at the FFSs with the co-operation of SHABGE field staff. I have seen farmers organising Farmer Field Days (FFDs). They demonstrated methods of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and other practices they learnt at training sessions. I was astonished at how much the farmers learnt and how they applied it in the field. It was a good experience for me.

"Usually BSs suggest chemical-based options as this has been the practice for the past three decades. But SHABGE staff and FFS members prefer little or no chemical use. We asked our Deputy Director for training on the SHABGE approach and received three days of training on homestead space planning and vegetable IPM conducted by SHABGE experts. This helped us in the areas of intensive use of homestead space, vegetable IPM and how to deal with female farmers we had ignored earlier. Now I have a good relationship with the farmers of these FFSs and farmers in general. They consult me on their field problems and seek solutions. I have set up some demonstration plots of rice and wheat seed production. I realised the farmers now knew about getting services from different agencies.

"I found the FFSs of SHABGE SDC an effective approach for agriculture development. By working with FFSs, I have achieved 30% more of my target compared with previous years. I must say that FFS helped me to learn a new and more suitable extension approach for women."



***"FFS helped me to learn the suitable extension approach for women"***

*Mr. Joynal Abedin, Executive Director (ED) of Technical Assistance for Community Development (TACD), has been working in Pabna. TACD has been a partner NGO of SHABGE SDC since July 1998. He has 19 years of experience in development work.*

"I learnt about the project from other NGOs and asked to be a partner since the goals and objectives of SHABGE were in line with those of TACD.

"At first we thought that the project would work only with vegetables. We were confused about the FFS approach because FFSs usually dealt with technical issues, and it is a season-bound group activity. But project activities encompassed vegetables, fruits and group cohesion. After seven to eight months of FFS, I saw women organising Farmer Field Days (FFDs). They invited the local elite, spoke in front of microphones and showed their improved homestead production. I was surprised because women did not usually do this sort of activity. For many, it was the first time they had attended a big gathering and addressed a large audience. I realised that FFSs played a big role in building their confidence.

"In April 2001 we decided that SHABGE should expand its activities on other issues by establishing links with service providers. Then we helped the staff to assist Farmer Leaders (FLs) to identify livelihood needs. The TACD staff have agriculture backgrounds and they were trained on Human and Institutional Development (HID). Four out of five of them have worked with TACD from the beginning, which has helped group cohesion among FFS members.

"Based on their needs, FLs were introduced to GO and NGO service providers with visits and meetings. With help from DAE, BSs trained the husbands of FFS members and male farmers on field crops. This improved the acceptance of FFSs in the community. The FFS members then decided to form an organisation with other people in the village. They formulated a village development plan, identifying local resources and relevant sources of support. They submitted written requests to the relevant offices. Many agencies such as DAE, DLS, DOF, Youth Development and BADC are providing support for IGAs to the FFSs.

"TACD has undertaken additional activities to address livelihood and rights related issues. FFS is becoming a sustainable organisation in the community. Many GO NGO services are used in the organisation. Poor people, especially women, are improving their livelihood and contributing towards community development.

"I found the FFS model of SHABGE to be an effective approach for poverty reduction, female empowerment and a sustainable mechanism for getting GO NGO services. Finally, it seems to me that FFSs are now becoming a platform for poor rural farmers, heralding a prosperous community".



***"FFS is a platform for poor rural women to become contributors to village development"***

Women's groups wanted support to improve health, education and other social conditions and to have access to service providers and public resources. They wanted to stop the dowry system, early marriage and other examples of gender discrimination. The project encouraged its field staff to be open-minded when assessing the needs of FFS members. FFS members identified many problems that could not be addressed by the project due to its lack of internal capacities. The project realised that linkages with service providers could play a vital role in addressing these issues.

***"Now women of Kishorepur village have cash money in their hands"***

***Rina Begum, 42, is Chairperson of the Kishorepur FFS. Kishorepur is a village in a remote area of Bagha Upazilla. Malnutrition, illiteracy and wife beating used to be common here, but not anymore. It took four years for things to change and this, according to Rina Khatun, is how it happened:***

"It began in 1999. We formed an FFS comprising 25 poor women of the village with the help of SNKS, one of the partner NGOs of CARE SHABGE SDC. In the first year we produced many vegetables so did not have to buy vegetables from the market. It was a new experience for the poor women. That year they could meet their needs and share some of the produce with their neighbours and relatives. Many women were inspired by their success and began to produce vegetables in a planned way. Almost every household grew different types of vegetables. During the peak season they had too many and some of the vegetables went to waste. This dampened their enthusiasm. But this problem also created an opportunity.

When we were discussing this at our meeting, Shahina Apa, an FS of the SHABGE project, asked us to think about selling the extra produce locally. She and other women asked their husbands and sons to take the vegetables to the local market but they were very reluctant. When some of them took the produce for selling, the women faced a new problem."

***Rezan, 42, a group member, described her experience of this:***

"My husband took the vegetables to the market and sold them. But he did not give me the money and even got angry when I asked about it."

"Then," said Rina Begum, "we remembered Nilu Miah, husband of Arifa, a group member. He used to buy vegetables from different places and sell them in the market. He wanted to buy our surplus vegetables.

So they organised a new marketing system. Nilu Miah began to buy vegetables from group members' houses on the market days, Sunday and Thursday, and sell them at the market. After a few days Nilu Miah said that it was difficult for him to buy only one or two kilos of eight or ten types of vegetables. According to Nilu Miah, there were three problems. First, it was hard for him to go to all the houses. Second, he had to carry many baskets for different types of vegetables. Third, people did not buy all the kinds of vegetables he had. As a result some were left unsold, causing him financial loss.

From July to December 2001, the project assisted FFSs in developing linkages with DAE to address the farmers' problems on field crops. The major strategies were:

- Signing a Letter of Intent (LOI) between CARE Bangladesh and DAE at the national level for fostering collaboration between CARE projects and DAE.
- Developing joint action plans at the district and upazilla levels for identifying the areas of collaboration and strengthening collaborative activities at the local level.
- Supporting the FLs in visiting government officials at upazilla level and arranging meetings on how FFS members could receive the required services.
- Linking the FFSs with Block Supervisors (BSs) and conducting training for FFS communities on field crops.

Common activities such as poultry vaccination that provide quick benefits to the community help FFS organisations to be more active.

The group members began to think about the problems. A local seeds and seedling supplier, Shahida, proposed that they produced only two or three types of vegetables according to Nilu's requirements. They would also produce other varieties but mainly for their own consumption. Everybody agreed with her. It was decided at the meeting that all the members would bring their produce to Mina Khatun's house and Nilu would buy the vegetables from there.

Rina Begum said, "The next year, in September 2001, a special meeting was arranged where other people of the village were present along with the group members. We asked Nilu which vegetables were most in demand at the market. We made a plan for producing bottle gourd, country bean, lal shak, coriander and papaya, keeping Nilu's reply in mind. We also decided, who would produce what and in what quantity, and how many seeds and seedlings would be required. Shahida was asked to supply the necessary seeds and seedlings."

The FFS members did not stop there. They assigned Mizan, son of Rina Khatun, to monitor the market and keep the members up-to-date on prices. Thus the poor and neglected women of a remote village developed a new marketing strategy. Now the members plan before every season and produce accordingly.

**Rokeya Begum, 30, Secretary of the Kishorepur FFS, said,** "We are not dependent on other people. We do not have to ask our husbands for the day-to-day needs of our children." **Arifa, 27, a member, said,** "This year I earned 800 taka by selling vegetables and with that money I bought an ornament for my daughter."

Rokeya Begum, added, "Now we have money in our hands and we can spend it as we wish. We can buy books and pencils for our children. Sometimes we help our husbands. It is a priceless feeling. Our husbands and even our in-laws treat us with respect. This is totally new for us."

This was how an ordinary village like Kishorepur started taking initiatives to change their lot. Now they are saving money from selling their vegetables. They are earning additional income by involving themselves in IGA activities such as making bamboo baskets and pickles from Jujube. Inspired by the Kishorepur women, 20 neighbouring villages have started this new marketing strategy.



*Women of Kishorepur selling their vegetables to middlemen.*

*Rahida, a farmer leader from Choubaria, presenting farmers' demands to service providers.*



After seeing good results from linking FFSs with DAE in late 2002, the project helped FOs organise a service network development workshop at upazilla level. The objective was to establish effective and functional relationships between different service-providing agencies and FFS communities. The FLs, CLs, and FMs and officials from different government and non-government organisations (approximately 12 departments and five NGOs) participated in this meeting. The FLs presented their action plan and sought appropriate assistance from the relevant departments. GO and NGO representatives expressed their commitment to assisting FFS-based organisations.

At the workshop, GO and NGO officials and FFS leaders agreed to review the FFSs' progress in receiving services every three to six months. Later the project found that FFS communities were receiving training and other services from different service-providing GOs and NGOs such as the Livestock Department, which has vaccinated all cattle and goats in Paba and Nilphamari on a priority basis. The Agriculture Department has included one commercial FFS at its IPM club and the Women's Affairs and Co-operative Department registered 10 FOs. The Youth Development Department trained the FO community's youth on poultry and fish farming and is providing credit.

From April 2003 the FOs and PNGOs organised workshops with the service providers. FO leaders discussed their problems and spoke of governance issues such as officials asking for bribes and the reluctance of some officials to listen to their problems in front of upazilla officials. The officials apologised for these incidents and said they would not occur in the future. The workshop increased the accountability of service providers to the people. The FFS leaders were respected by their communities for bringing GO and NGO services to the people. The project found that the existence of a dynamic group in a community encourages GOs and NGOs to provide a variety of services. For example, a well-organised FO can easily mobilise the villagers to bring their poultry and goats to a specific place, which helps Livestock Department workers to vaccinate them and meet targets.



*A joint vaccination programme in Paba.*

Experience shows that by addressing only agroforestry needs, it is very difficult to improve significantly the quality of life of poor people. Experience also shows that addressing different livelihood issues fosters the organisational development process among the poor.

### **Challenges in receiving services from the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE)**

As most of the Block Supervisors (BSs) are male and have expertise in field crops, they are more interested in supporting the husbands of FFS participants than helping FOs' female farmers in vegetable and fruit production. They do not know about IPM so they recommend high external inputs including chemical pesticides. To overcome this problem the project trained BSs in vegetable and fruit IPM in collaboration with the DAE officials. However, there is always likely to be a problem for female farmers in receiving support from the BSs because of cultural constraints.

## **8. Women: Empowerment in the family and the community**

One of the aims of SHABGE was for women to be able to manage their own resources and have control over their production. The project found this was a big challenge because of social and cultural constraints. In FFSs the female participants were able to improve their knowledge and skills, increasing vegetable and fruit production. This resulted in increased family consumption and income. The income generated from selling vegetables improved the social status of women in the family and community. It was perceived that husbands valued spouses who earned more cash. They used their income for children's education and clothes, and also for savings. Many female farmers preferred to increase their income than consume vegetables.

To mainstream women's empowerment issues, the project organised orientation sessions with husbands on gender issues, marketing and women's rights. It helped to change attitudes of husbands of FFS members to some extent. After joining the FFS, members were able to improve their mobility within the community even up to upazilla level, participate in social activities and gain knowledge of service providers and family law.

A sample survey among FFSs shows that about 26% of female participants could go out of their community occasionally. Several FFS members participate in different committees such as UPs and village development committees. Thirty-two FFS female farmers have been elected in UP elections. The female participants know the law and their rights on dowry, early marriage and divorce. Many of the members are getting involved in family decisions such as the use of homestead land, getting medical services, and buying clothes, especially for girls. Poor female farmers have improved their social capital through working together in the FFSs. They also want to address social problems. Poor women can find support within and outside the community.

### ***Establishing marketing linkages improves women's control over resources***

During the implementation of FFS activities, it was found that staff and FLs push farmers to produce more vegetables without marketing knowledge. Female farmers became frustrated because they cannot sell directly in markets. Their husbands sell the produce and decide how to spend the income, so women have no control over their own production.

Since mid 2001 the project started to link FFS participants with middlemen. However, the middlemen were not always available at the correct time or farmers were not able to produce vegetables according to their requirements. The project helped farmers organise a tri-party workshop involving themselves, middlemen, and vegetable seed and seedling suppliers to select and produce crops intensively. The project trained participants in marketing, crop selection and early and late planting. To get a fair price, the FOs recruited their husbands and children to gather market information. They found out the market price of vegetables from the nearest markets and the upazilla level markets. Based on this information, the FOs fixed their prices, which prevented middlemen from cheating.

*Sharifa got a new life with help from a Farmers' organisation*



***"We are very grateful to the FFS for saving my life".***

***Sharifa Begum, 27, is a resident of Hazrapukur village in Paba Upazilla, Rajshahi. She is very grateful for the help of the Hazrapukur Farmers' Organisation. She explains how she has benefited:***

"I am a very poor woman. My husband and I have three children. Our main income comes from a small piece of land in the homestead. We live a hand-to-mouth existence. After 11 years of marriage I felt a pain in my stomach. Day after day it worsened. Due to this pain I could not work. As we are very poor, my husband had no money for my treatment. My condition became very serious. One day, my husband took me to a doctor. The doctor diagnosed a tumour and advised an operation immediately. It would cost Tk 10, 000 for the operation. After he heard the cost, my husband started avoiding me and I became very frustrated because of my sickness. I had frequent conflicts with my husband. He wanted a divorce to marry a second time. Day by day I became very sick and exhausted.

"I remembered there was an organisation in my village where a female mentor, Asia Begum, helps women. I explained my health and situation to her. She suggested that I come to the FOs meeting. At the meeting, members decided that Asia Begum, on behalf of the organisation, convince my husband to let me be treated. The FFS decided to give me Tk 5,000 as an interest free loan from the FO's fund and collected Tk 5,000 as a grant from the community. Within three days the money was raised and my husband and FM negotiated with the doctor, who operated successfully on me. Now I am fit to work and contribute to my family life. My husband is also happy with me. We are very grateful to the FFS for saving my life."

These strategies helped women have control over production. At present, the female farmers receive money directly by selling their produce to the middlemen coming to their houses.

## **9. FFS Benefits the Other Villagers**

To ensure the wider dissemination of SHABGE activities and strengthen the relationship between FFS members and the community, the project initially followed the following strategies:

- Encourage each FFS farmer to share his/her learning regularly with at least two neighbouring farmers.
- FFSs organise AP days to share their learning once a month. During the AP days, PPs visited AP houses in small groups and shared their learning.

In the middle of 2000, it was found that technology dissemination to APs by PPs was inadequate. The reason was that APs preferred to learn from staff rather than from neighbours. They assumed that the staff were more knowledgeable and could share information properly. APs sometimes felt excluded from the FFS. The PPs also said, because of a lack of time, sharing knowledge with APs was difficult.



**Fatema Begum, 31, is a resident of Purba Nadiapara village in Domar Upazilla, Nilphamari. Her life changed when she increased her homestead productivity with help from FFD. She describes how:**

"I have been married for 10 years. I have two sons. Our only source of income was selling of my husband's labour and on many days, we had to starve. My husband scolded me frequently and demanded Tk 15,000 as dowry. Sometimes he physically tortured me. One day he hurt me seriously. After that, my poor father sent Tk 7,000 dowry to my husband by selling his only cow. But after a couple of months, my husband started to torture me for more dowry. I thought I should generate some income and promised my husband that I would support him by giving cash for day-to-day family expenses.

"I started to think about how could I get money. I heard that an FFS had been established in Purba Nadiapara that dealt with vegetable cultivation. I contacted Manje Ara Begum, a member of FFS, about my problems. She visited my house and suggested cultivating vegetables following improved practices. Although I was not an FFS member, she invited me to attend FFS sessions and visit homesteads of FFS members. I visited the study plots and learnt about improved pits, fruit tree management, and insect and disease control techniques. My husband and I visited Farmers' Field Day (FFD) twice, which was organised by the Purba Nadiapara FFS. My husband was impressed by the technologies and intensive use of homestead land.

"We decided to make our homestead more productive in a planned way. We freed about 10 decimals of land for cultivation. We practised what we learnt at discussions with FFS members and FFDs. I asked Manje Ara to visit my homestead and give me advice. According to her suggestions, I grew eggplant, tomato, kangkong, napa, Indian spinach and pit crops such as country bean and sweet gourd, and earned Tk 1,500 in one year. From this money, I bought two goats and five hens. I worked hard to produce more. Last winter I earned Tk 2,500 from vegetable production. I purchased and planted eight fruit saplings of guava, lemon, mango and jack. Now, I am able to contribute some money to meet the daily expenses of the family.

"I discussed my dowry issue with Kusum Bala, the leader of the Purba Nadiapara FFS. She visited my house with Habibar Rahaman, a Community Leader, and talked to my husband. He has realised his mistakes and has changed his behaviour. He apologised to me. Now he inspires and helps me to increase production in our homestead. We work together in the homestead. We are thankful to the Purba Nadiapara FFS of Domar that helped us to have a better life."

*Purba nadiapara, an FFS member, showed Fatema a new way of life*



***"We are thankful to the Purba Nadiapara FFS of Domar that helped us to have a better life"***



***"I observed that many of the FOs depended too much on staff for performing their group activities such as contacting service providers".***

***Masuda Akhter, a Field Supervisor with MSP, a partner NGO, has been working since the beginning of FFS formation. She has provided facilitation and accompaniment support to the FFSs since 1999 in Paba Upazilla, Rajshahi***

"To me, it was not an easy job to evolve the FFS into an organisation. I faced many problems in facilitating and supporting the organisation's development process because of the diversified nature of the work. I had to look after the activities of the first and second batches of FFSs after two years of project work. The second batch placed more emphasis on agroforestry while the first batch concentrated on the organisation's development aspects.

"I was assigned to develop farmers' knowledge and skills on vegetable and fruit production through FFS. With the first batch of FFSs, I selected FLs without considering their abilities. After a few months I realised that the FL's role was becoming important in running the FFS but many FLs were not able to perform as required. After seven to eight months FFS members replaced the poor performing FLs with better ones. This experience made me see that it was not right to select FLs at the beginning of FFSs. The selection of the right FLs is very important for the organisation's development process. Learning from this experience, I helped the second batch of FFS members to select FLs after six to seven months when the FFS members had a better idea of potential leaders.

"During this time, I felt that many FLs were not able to ensure services to FFS members because it was difficult for female FLs to communicate with outside service providers. The FFS members wanted to include some males and females from the poor and middle classes to accelerate the organisation's activities, since they have natural leadership abilities and mobility. I felt that this contributed to the organisation's development.

"However, at first, I was not so confident about dealing with so many diverse issues of human and institutional development. From our training we thought that the FFSs would focus more on agriculture and technology. We took a long time to rearrange our ideas and accommodate the changing needs of FFS members. I observed that many of the FOs depended too much on staff for performing their group activities such as contacting service providers. Hopefully FFS members will be able to reduce their dependency on the staff in time."

In late 2001 the project encouraged PPs to organise “SHABGE week”, to be held at the beginning of the production season to motivate villagers and APs to cultivate vegetables and plant and manage trees as a group initiative. Farmers tried to motivate all the village households, putting up posters about vegetable and fruit cultivation techniques and organising community meetings about vegetable cultivation. FFSs organised Farmers’ Field Days (FFDs) in the winter and summer to share their learning with the community.

Besides demonstrating different techniques and technologies, folk songs and drama about SHABGE activities were presented in FFDs. Local elite, UP members and other local level government officials participated in the SHABGE-related discussions. FFDs were a good way of sharing FFS learning with many people within a short time.

### **Dissemination in the community**

The project conducted a survey to learn the wider effects of dissemination in 43 randomly selected FFS villages in April 2003.

The survey showed that 77% of APs practised at least two technologies in their homestead areas such as the preparation of improved pits, hand pollination of gourd vegetables and fruit tree management. The survey also showed that 91% of villagers could explain two to three technologies from FFDs and 49% of villagers practised at least two technologies in their homesteads. As a result, 45 % of APs have increased their vegetable and fruit production by 29 % compared to the previous year. The findings also revealed that more than 60% of APs want training by staff on a regular basis at two to three month intervals. Regarding the means of learning, 44% of villagers learnt by observing FFDs, 33% learnt from FFS members, 3% learnt from project staff and 3% learnt from farmer leaders. About 17% of respondents could not specify any way of learning.

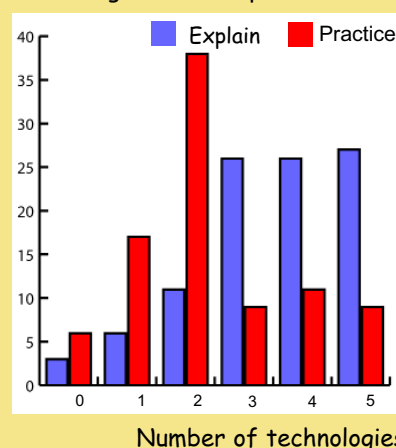
Farmers’ Field Day (FFD), PP-to-AP individual sharing, AP day and SHABGE week contributed to disseminating technologies. Moreover, villagers (non-APs) had suggestions on how to establish demonstration plots. The survey showed that the FFS approach has played an important role in disseminating horticultural and agroforestry technologies among the community.

Finally, many of the PPs felt the work was enjoyable and were confident in sharing the learning with APs as well as the community. FLs played an active role in ensuring dissemination of FFS learning by encouraging individual farmers in these activities. FLs said the initiatives had helped them to increase acceptance of FOs in the community and strengthen the process of organisation development.



*A Stall in Farmers' Field Day*

Percentage of APs capable to...



*Technology dissemination amongst Associate Participants (APs)*

## **10. From Agroforestry to HID: A new experience for staff in implementing the process**

The staff formed FFSs to implement project activities including developing farmers' capacity to solve their agroforestry problems. During training on technical and social issues at the FFS, staff encouraged farmers to share their experiences and alternative options for solving problems, in order to reduce farmers' dependency on staff. They tried to create an environment where farmers discussed problems amongst themselves and decided on appropriate action. They also assisted the farmers apply their learning to new but similar situations. After one and half years, the FFSs started to evolve from being farmers' 'clubs' and the staff's role gradually changed from being trainers to being facilitators.

As facilitators, staff have to take the lead at the beginning of the development stage. Later on they can hand over these responsibilities to the Executive Committee of the FOs. The time this took varied from FO to FO, depending on the capacity of staff and FLs.

Staff assisted FOs to identify local resources, develop action plans, link and negotiate with service providers, and develop and follow the rules of the organisation.

However, staff facilitation skills in evolving the FFSs into farmers' organisations seemed insufficient. Many staff faced difficulties in facilitating human and institutional development activities such as FL, CL, FM development and supporting FFSs to evolve as self-reliant organisations. Initially the staff tried to lead and guide the farmers, but they were not easily accepted. Then, in late 2000, the project adopted the idea of accompaniment and staff were trained on the concept. Gradually they began supporting FS as accompaniers.

## **11. Conclusion**

Although SHABGE FFSs were initiated in mid 1999 as a learning instrument for developing the knowledge and skills of poor women on agroforestry, it was clear that FFSs were becoming a sustainable centre, or platform, for community development activities and were contributing to the reduction of poverty. However, the areas of human and institutional development could be improved.

FFS members suggested that different livelihood issues such as income generating activities, marketing advice and health be addressed along with agroforestry from the start of FFS activities. The linkages for accessing information and improved technologies on homestead resource management have contributed to the development of the rural poor to a large extent.

The most significant impact was the improvement of the position of women in the family and the community. The incorporation of FMs and CLs has strengthened the organisation's development activities and support mechanisms for poor women. However, there is a possibility of increasing dependency on male CLs.

The facilitation skills of field staff in human and institutional development needs improvement to expedite the process of building a self-sustaining organisation in the community.

May 2005



inter  
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Natural Resource Management  
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- Promoting dynamism in nurseries' associations
- A journey from advanced from farmer-to-farmer training to farmer-centred training
- Empowerment of farmers' organisations: Capitalisation of a new approach
- The capitalisation of experience into knowledge (a Manuel on how capitalising).
- Promoting human Institutional development.
- Reaching the poorest: Capitalisation of an Experience.

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