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Promoting dynamism in nurseries' associations



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Sustainable Land Use Programme

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Summary	1
1. The Core Farmer Concept	2
2. From Core Farmer Associations to Nursery Malik Associations	3
3. The NMSs' first crisis	4
4. The question of ownership: whose vision?	5
5. The question of ownership: fund management	5
6. Tackling the problems	7
7. A new vision for the NMS emerges	8
8. Putting the vision into practice	9
9. Revitalised nursery associations	12
10. Improved relationships between the members and their associations	14
11. The reason for the changes	16
12. Formalization of the new partnership	16
13. The common learning process	18
14. The future of the NMSs - a word of conclusion	19

Summary

VFFP's 6th phase was marked by the rationalisation of its work with partner NGOs and nursery owner organisations, as well as a reorganisation of the geographical areas covered by the project. New nursery owner associations (the Nursery Malik Samities or NMSs) were created from the former Core Farmers' Associations (CFAs). While the CFAs consisted of more than 100 members spread over several upazilla (an administrative region of approximately 200 to 300 km²), NMSs were made up of 20 to 30 nursery owners working in the same upazilla.

At the start of this reorganisation members' interest in their new Samities was very high, before slumping after their 3rd meeting.

Initial enquiries showed that the loss of interest and decline in attendance were provoked by the withdrawal of expenses for travelling to meeting venues and refreshments. However, much deeper causes were to become apparent. These were primarily related to the lack of ownership felt by the members in their associations: the absence of an overall vision and objectives for their associations, no control over fund management, a poor range of programme activities, and no meeting venue of their own.

Although VFFP wanted to promote NMSs as professional organisations, the partner NGO staff, mostly fresh recruits, lacked the necessary experience in human and institutional development (HID) to see this through.

A new strategy was therefore developed to re-launch the dynamism of the 79 NMSs. It aimed to:

- develop a clear vision and objectives for NMSs through participatory exercises;
- establish a planning process at each NMS level - developing and diversifying concrete activities for associations to undertake;
- establish a fund management policy ensuring greater involvement of, and more responsibility for, the NMS executive committees.

At the same time efforts were made to work on improving the field staff's awareness of HID issues and their HID capabilities.

This strategy is proving successful and has led to more dynamic behaviour by the NMSs. There is a greater sense of ownership in the associations and greater willingness to undertake new initiatives. The first steps towards becoming professional organisations are being taken.

CFAs (Core Farmer Associations) were associations of nursery owners each consisting of more than 100 members scattered over a large area (3 to 4 *upazilla* or sub-districts).

1. The Core Farmer Concept

Since 1991 VFFP has undertaken intensive work to support the development of nurseries. Amongst its aims have been:

- to develop local capacities for producing timber and fruit tree saplings to meet the demand for afforestation programmes and to satisfy farmers' needs;
- to develop a large network of professional sapling producers whose entrepreneurship can contribute to local agricultural development; and
- to establish local means of disseminating the technologies requested by the tree growers. In order to realize its objectives VFFP worked through a network of more than 30 local NGOs.

VFFP considered the nursery owners as important agents in the development of the forestry sector and so decided to call them "Core Farmers" at the beginning of phase 3 of the project (1991-1994). The underlying idea was to use these nursery owners to spearhead new local forestry initiatives and to promote improved tree management practices. The idea for a Core Farmer Association came from the nursery owners supported by the Bangladesh Seed Foundation, Mymensingh, in 1995. The objective was to raise funds in order to provide credit to those willing to develop and expand their nursery activities. The association grouped together more than 100 nursery owners from over a large area. It was understood that this would cause management problems but the strategy was based on the hypothesis that only a large number of members could generate sufficient funds. The association operated under the wing of an NGO in order to benefit from its accountability and fund management skills.

VFFP built on Mymensingh's initiative and started to establish CFAs in other areas. To facilitate their creation, VFFP adopted an incentive strategy: it would match the savings collected by a new CFA up to a total amount of Tk. 45,000.

Gradually CFAs were organised under the umbrella of each of the partner NGOs of VFFP, each CFA comprising between 90 and 130 Core Farmers. Besides the main objective of establishing funds for nursery business development it proved an efficient way for the NGOs to interact with the Core Farmers. It helped for instance in the organisation and implementation of training programmes while each nursery owner still profited from the individual support of NGO staff.

At the end of phase 4 (1994-1997) VFFP developed two possible visions for the future of the CFAs. One vision called for more independence of the CFAs from the NGOs and their evolution towards a model of self-help organisations. The other vision favoured the status quo – using the associations as a platform for the NGOs to disseminate training from whilst managing the funds. The latter model was eventually followed according to the recommendations of a review mission and during phase 5 (1997-2000) no initiative was taken for supporting the institutional development of the CFAs.

2. From Core Farmer Associations to Nursery Malik Associations

Changes occurred in phase 6 which mainly aimed to rationalize the collaboration between the partner NGOs and farmers' organisations. In order to promote stronger associations, VFFP split the CFAs into smaller nursery owner associations (Nursery Malik Associations or NMSs) consisting of 20 to 30 members. The objectives of these newly formed associations were also designed by the Project. More efficient management of the nursery owners' organisations was facilitated by reducing the size of their membership and by restricting their geographical coverage to the *upazilla* level. Though the CFAs had not taken part in this initiative they welcomed VFFP's proposals. The aim was to channel support to nursery owners through the associations rather than to each owner individually at his/her own nursery. This support was mainly related to the production of quality planting material, one of the most important challenges in phase 6 of the project. This change in approach allowed each NGO to reduce the number of staff supporting the nursery programme from 6 to an equivalent of 1.5.

VFFP's vision for the NMSs was that of professional organisations capable of contributing to the professionalization of their members and able to take initiatives in the nursery business sector. This vision should have been supported by field staff with experience of strengthening farmers' organisations. However, 80% of NGO staff in phase 6 were new recruits with no experience of institutional development. For this reason, and also because VFFP was not focusing enough on HID, the support provided to the NMSs was insufficient to achieve the vision and limited to the organisation of monthly meetings and the provision of technical advice.

Despite important changes, such as reducing the associations' size and trying to improve their organisational capacities, the NMS system did not differ very much from that of the CFA. NMSs continued to absorb both technical and material support without developing strategies to improve their institutional capacities. Since the managerial responsibilities for the associations lay mainly with the NGOs, the members of the NMSs did not have a sense of ownership of their own associations. The first signs indicating weaknesses in the cohesion and in the institutional base of the NMSs appeared several months after the NMSs were created.

NMSs (Nursery Malik Samities) are associations of nursery owners each consisting of 20 to 30 members based in a single one *upazilla*.

3. The NMSs' first crisis

Throughout the first meetings of the NMSs members' interest grew. By the third meeting attendance had reached an average of 70% for the 79 Nursery Malik Samities.

However, once initial enthusiasm had passed, attendance steadily fell. For several months average attendance never exceeded 50%. The lack of specific tasks for members to carry out and the fact that NGO staff did not know exactly what to do with NMSs except deliver technical advice were both contributory factors. Meeting agendas were very limited and the planning of possible activities was strictly short-term. Each meeting was mainly an occasion to discuss what could be done during the meeting and to talk about problems related to loans and savings.



A typical scene during the first monthly meetings: on one side, the NGO staff leading the meeting, on the other side, the NMS members listening calmly.

It may seem surprising that the problem of falling attendance had not been addressed earlier. Each party in the collaboration (NMSs, NGOs and VFFP) was more or less silent on the matter, expecting a natural solution to arise somehow. Even with the decline in attendance, the meetings continued and hopes for the NMSs remained high. One element played a crucial role in the survival of the NMSs at this time: the payment of refreshments and travel expenses. This was leftover from the previous phase when the CFA meetings were subsidised by the project. By continuing to pay these expenses VFFP was sending the wrong signal to the NMSs: rather than creating the expectation that they were to be more independent and dynamic it signalled that they were working **for** the project.

Since VFFP wanted to see more involvement by the nursery owners in the activities of their own associations it decided to withdraw these payments. This provoked an outcry among partner NGOs and some VFFP staff. The change in practice was hugely unpopular, yet the decision was maintained and had an immediate effect on the attendance in meetings. In some NMSs attendance fell to 20%.

4. The question of ownership: whose vision?

To analyse the situation, workshops were organized with NGO staff from each region covered by the project. Four main causes of the loss in dynamism of the nursery owners' associations emerged: the absence of vision and objectives, a poor programme of activities, the lack of control over fund management, and no well-established venue for meetings. Overall the "lack of ownership" members felt in their associations was the central issue.

NMSs had been the creation of VFFP to serve its own objectives. The nursery owners had apparently no vision for 'their' associations. They understood them as a means for facilitating relations with the NGOs now that the Project had given up visits to individual nurseries. They had accepted the creation of their associations in order to receive technical and material support, but had never contributed to the definition of the NMSs' role.

Since the early vision for the NMSs was largely limited to being 'technology absorbers' it is not surprising that the unimaginative range of activities did not address nursery owners' real needs. The NGO staff considered the NMSs as a forum from which to deliver technical messages, often in the form of lectures. This advice was given on a somewhat ad hoc basis. They did not consider anything other than the promotion of quality planting material and gave little scope to discussing the nursery owners' problems, in particular their difficulties selling saplings on the market.

Having to personally fund attendance at meetings that lacked relevance for nursery owners accelerated the crisis.

5. The question of ownership: fund management

Another important factor in the loss of dynamism within the NMSs was the loss of ownership of their association funds. When the Core Farmers' Association was established funding came from three main sources: the Core Farmers' own savings, a grant provided by the project as a revolving fund, and financial relief provided for the nurseries affected by floods and other natural disasters. The CFA had partial control over its own savings and the emergency fund but the revolving fund, aimed at supporting the nurseries' development, was entirely under the control of NGOs. The CFAs' involvement was mainly to rubber-stamp decisions already made - there was no scope for them to develop fund management capabilities since the NGOs maintained the accounts and handled all fund transactions themselves.

The lack of ownership and vision of their association contributed to a severe decrease of interest from the NMS members. The lack of vision was also a problem for NGO staff and reinforced the crisis.

It took over nine months after the establishment of the NMSs for the funds held in the name of the CFA to be assigned to the respective NMSs - effectively delaying the possibility of any new loans. Moreover, some association members who were defaulting on existing loans profited from the slow-moving transfer to delay repayment of debts, even intentionally avoiding meetings to escape searching questions. This situation created frustration among many other NMS members as they realised they did not have the power to force defaulters to pay up - some feared their money would be permanently lost. Those who had expected access to increased financial resources soon lost interest when they saw there would be no extra funding.

The problem of finding a suitable venue was crucial for the NMSs. The monthly meetings were organized in diverse places: the house of a nursery owner, a school, a teashop, the office of an NGO, and even under trees. The NMSs wanted a fixed venue to store their accounts and other documents, but most of all to express their own identity. For VFFP the establishment of a permanent NMS office was not given high priority since the NMSs seemed to be coping by storing their documents in the house of their president and secretary. But the main reason behind VFFP's reluctance to support this idea was that the NMSs expected VFFP to entirely finance the building of the new office.



The treasurer of a NMS collecting members' savings.

The ownership of the funds and fund management contributes to strengthening the cohesion and dynamism of the groups.

6. Tackling the problems

The loss of direction in the NMSs became obvious when the first results of a survey into local dynamics became available. This survey had been organized in order to identify and select local farmers' groups and associations to collaborate with VFFP in the tree farmers' programme. Different criteria had been established to qualify their performance as "good", "questionable" or "bad". Almost all the NMSs were found to have "bad" or "questionable" performance.

Once the scale of the problem was accepted, VFFP quickly organised a meeting to identify the flawed elements of the strategy. The analysis of the situation proved that the fundamental problem was the almost total lack of ownership felt by NMS members in their associations. It was clear that a sense of ownership had to be cultivated as the basis for developing dynamism within the NMSs. This ideological shift had also to translate into concrete results.

The following strategy was decided on:

- The development of a clear vision statement for the NMSs and the clarification of members' entitlements.
- The establishment of a new fund management policy to ensure greater involvement and more responsibility for the NMS executive committee, as well as reorganizing the system to strengthen the contributions of NMS members.
- The establishment of a planning process to develop relevant and useful activities to be undertaken by the associations.

It was assumed that there would be differences in approach between the NGOs and VFFP since it was the NGOs which had largely been handling the nursery malik associations. It was natural that they would hesitate before giving up responsibility for fund management and start working towards greater autonomy for the associations since a number of NGOs needed convincing that the NMSs were competent enough to run their own affairs.

By this stage VFFP had developed a vision for the NMSs as future professional organisations of sapling producers. In order to successfully 'sell' this vision, one of the key issues had to be dealt with: NMS members' frustration at the lack of control over funding. The following changes to the fund management system were proposed for adoption by NMSs and NGOs:

- The continuation of the existing savings fund but with part of the interest contributing to the operational costs of the association.
- The setting aside of "reserve capital" from the previous emergency fund to buy some assets (such as land) which could be used as a relief fund in case of natural disasters or as security on loans for developing nursery businesses.
- The conversion of the existing revolving fund into an "agroforestry promotion fund" in order to cover the opera-

The strategy aimed at dealing with the problem was based on:

- the development of a clear vision of the NMS;
- the establishment of a new fund management policy;
- the establishment of a planning process with relevant activities.

tional and administrative costs of the association. Unlike the previous system, the set up of the fund had to involve various sources (individual members, VFFP, NGOs, and other external sources).



Visits by NMSs to dynamic associations (for comparing their level of organisation) and to other nurseries (for comparing their technical capabilities) represented an important element of the strategy.

The facilitation of exchanges of ideas among NMS representatives helped develop an appropriate approach for implementing the strategy at local NMS level.

7. A new vision for the NMSs emerges

After having outlined its own thinking on the NMSs' aims and the fund management system, VFFP organized a participatory workshop with 24 NMS representatives from all four regions covered by the project. The representatives gave an impressive presentation of their vision for an association. It was that of a professional and self-reliant association, promoting the production of quality planting material with improved marketing. It could professionalise its members, defend their social rights and help them in case of economic problems, develop links to support organisations and service providers, and take initiatives to build apex organisations. Not only was their vision clear and unambiguous, it was also similar to VFFP's.

What is surprising is that such a vision had previously developed in only a small minority of NMSs – yet made a sudden, and impressive, appearance during the representatives' meeting. The reason is thought to be that, in a normal NMS, those with such a vision did not constitute a large enough proportion of each association to have been able to convince the other members. Moreover, the management of the meetings tended to be dominated by the NGO staff. Taking representatives from each NMS – presumably being the keenest and most visionary – and putting them together with like-minded individuals resulted in a creative mix. Participants of that meeting, thus encouraged and armed with even more ideas, were then able to return to their own NMSs and infect them with the new vision.

This experience was so positive that the participatory approach would remain the central principle for the remainder of the process of reform. It also shows the advantages of promoting

strategies by first discussing with groups of representatives from the concerned institutions.

The next step after the workshop was to share the ideas with the 16 partner NGOs. It was known that some NGOs believed the NMSs did not have the ability to evolve into independent organisations. Even if they accepted the general strategy of revitalising dynamism within the NMSs, they did not easily accept the promotion of greater self-reliance for the NMSs. This was because they feared that VFFP could work directly with the nursery associations and thus greatly reduce the role of NGOs. In the end it was decided that the increased independence of the NMSs would not jeopardise the potential of partner NGOs and that working for self-reliance did not mean that the NMSs would become self-reliant straightaway. The partner NGOs came to a common understanding with VFFP that the NMSs should be the main agents of their own organisational development.

8. Putting the vision into practice

In order to re-launch individual NMSs, VFFP developed a plan of action in two phases:

- The organisation of regional workshops in each of the four VFFP regions with NGO staff and NMS representatives to share the vision of the NMSs and to explain the next steps to them.
- The implementation of operational steps, conceived at VFFP level, to be followed by each NMS in order to re-launch their dynamism.

The four regional workshops started by asking the NMS representatives attending the event to draw up any ideas they had for their association before presenting these at the first “national” workshop. For the second time it was clear that many NMSs had progressive ideas but had never had the opportunity to discuss them openly, perhaps out of fear of appearing to criticise the NGOs.

The regional workshops also took into account the suggestions and comments of the NGO staff and the NMS representatives regarding the funding policy and the proposed steps for the operational plan of action. There was no significant difference between what was proposed and what was discussed during the workshops and so the plan of action was given the green light.

This operational plan proposed 4 steps, each corresponding to a specific objective, to be settled during either a monthly meeting or a special meeting or event, according to each NMS’s preference:

- The **first step** was a brainstorming exercise to develop a common vision for the individual NMS on their objectives and the funds’ utilization, based on the feedback presented by the representative who had attended the regional workshop.

The 4-step operational plan to be carried out by each NMS:

1. a brainstorming exercise in order to develop a common vision of the association;
2. a self-evaluation of their level of dynamism (with visits to dynamic groups);
3. the identification of technical activities to be undertaken (with visits to different types of nurseries);
4. the establishment of an annual development plan.

- The **second step** consisted of a self-evaluation of the NMS's dynamism. To help members a visit to a "good local practitioner" previously identified by the NGO staff was organized. The organisations visited did not have to be involved in agriculture (e.g. Rickshaw & Van Malik Associations). After the visit the members had to identify the characteristics of good working practices and assess the strengths and weaknesses of their association in comparison. The assessment was also a means to analyse areas for improvement and to identify the action required.
- The **third step** was aimed more at identifying nursery-related activities which the NMSs should develop, an area previously lacking in variety. In order to provide them with ideas the NMS members had to visit 3 different nurseries with good, satisfactory and poor management. The nurseries could be chosen from either among their own association or outside. The visits were an opportunity to evaluate observed management practice and offer suggestions



Mr. Mahfuzar Rahman is the owner of "Papri Parag" a nursery in Panchbibi upazilla. He is the chairperson of the Panchbibi Nursery Malik Samity and the Joypurhat NMS District Association. He is an active and enthusiastic member of these organisations.

"We then went on to develop a common vision for our association, which was of a sustainable and professional organisation."

"In 1994 I benefited, like other nursery owners, from the support of a local NGO called National Development Council (NDC). At that time they offered a loan for the development of our nurseries. An association of 130 NMs was formed in 1996, and I joined it. The main objective of the association was to generate funds for the improvement and welfare of its members. Later on support was provided by another NGO, Thengamara Mohila Shabuj Shangha (TMSS). Each month we had a meeting facilitated by the TMSS staff. As we received travel expenses and meals we never had problems in reaching meeting venues even as far away as 100 km. Though we enjoyed the meetings to some extent, at the end of 1998 many of us started expressing our disinterest in the association under the umbrella of the NGO. The reasons for this disinterest were mainly the time we had to spend in travelling and discussing loan and savings issues and the sole control of the association by the NGO staff. Our needs for professional improvement were not fulfilled."

"We were happy to hear of the decision of VFFP to reorganise the association under the umbrella of NGOs at the upazilla level. Our first and very large association of 130 members was split into five upazilla NMSs with the support of the partner NGO staff. From that time the meetings took place nearer to us and everything started going well in our new association of 25 members. But soon, the interest and attendance of our members began to decline. This was due to the decision of VFFP in 2001 to withdraw the support of the costs of travel and food for our meetings. After that only a few members of each NMS were active. We then organised a special meeting with them to identify a way to revive our association. At the meeting we decided on

about how to make improvements. Technical and marketing aspects were also investigated, as well as economic considerations and links to service providers and support institutions. After the visits the NMSs were required to identify individual and association level needs and identify the potential service providers that could help them. They had to present their conclusions using Venn diagrams.

- The **fourth step** was the writing of a development plan for each NMS. Although the time scale was their decision all opted for an annual plan since “nursery is an annual business”. The plan considered not only technical and training needs – which was usual - but also institutional development needs and organisational initiatives.

Attendance at NMS meetings increased, reaching between 80 and 90% by the second meeting. The renewed interest of members in their associations was itself impressive but even more striking was the number of initiatives that followed.

the vision, objectives and functions of our association. We then invited all members of the five NMSs of the District and held a rally followed by a general meeting. At this gathering we invited the Deputy Commissioner of Joypurhat, the Deputy Director of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) and many other relevant officials, including those from NGOs and VFFP. We conveyed the vision, objectives and functions we had drawn up with the members. Although initially the expenses of the gathering were borne only by the active members, later on all members willingly contributed to the costs. We observed that most of the NMSs in Joypurhat were revived after this event. But we did not know how to continue and sustain this dynamism.”

“Fortunately, in April 2001, VFFP organised a workshop with the representatives of NMSs from all VFFP working areas. The objective of the workshop was to develop strategies for strengthening the dynamism of nursery owners’ associations. The workshop started with the presentation of our experiences. I presented the vision, objectives and functions that we considered relevant. Interestingly, representatives of both the other NMSs and VFFP reinforced our ideas. We then went on to develop a common vision for our association, which was of a sustainable and professional organisation. Through long debates and discussions we developed some steps to put in order our organisational dynamism and professional improvement.”

“According to the decisions and recommendations of the workshop, we visited some local organisations and assessed our own dynamics in comparison. We then planned some actions to make us stronger. At the same time we visited the nurseries amongst us and identified our weaknesses in order to plan necessary improvements.”

“Eventually we realised the association of nursery owners was in our hands: we should not depend upon the NGOs forever. I believe this growing sense of ownership resulted in an increase in the attendance at meetings and other events we planned.”

9. Revitalised nursery associations

Only three months after having launched the four-step process, the situation had dramatically improved. Members of the NMS were far more motivated and enthusiastic, attending meetings in significant numbers and trusting their associations to bring them benefits.

Along with the renewal of interest, a number of initiatives, unexpected until then, emerged from the reform process. For example members, realising the impact of joint investment, wanted to start common woodlot plantations and income-generating activities. They also decided to increase the amount paid to the savings fund and to institute a financial contribution system for operational expenditures such as the office rent, stationery, and the refreshments provided in meetings.

To establish a permanent office NMS members actually made personal contributions rather than use the fund reserved for the creation of assets. Many either donated raw material or labour, or let property or land. For example, Abiron (see box), donated the land for the office, considering it her personal duty. This demonstrated the high level of commitment and initiative amongst members to create an identity for the NMSs.

Nursery associations began to work independently of both NGO staff and VFFP support. The Annual Plan of Operation (APO) they had drawn up dealt mainly with activities outside project support. The construction of the NMS office, the creation of joint investments, self-organisation of the collection of quality seeds and planting material, the creation of apex associations – none of these had been promoted by VFFP. Technical training was undertaken by the most advanced and skilled nursery owners for the first time.

The introduction of nursery audits by the project in 2001 – to assess how nursery practices were actually improving – was welcomed by many of the more ambitious associations as a means of improving their overall quality standards. Successful members also benefited from the publicity which boosted their reputations. Some associations even announced that, if any of their members did not match up to the new quality standards, they would be barred from the association. This is the beginning of the process of professionalization of nursery owners.

Successful dynamic activities made associations realize that they could operate increasingly independently from the project. NMS members commented that the role of the NGO supervisor should primarily be to facilitate the development of their own socio-organisational and institutional capacities. For the most forward-thinking members this NGO support should be provided only until they are able to run their associations on their own.

Mrs. Abiron Nessa is an executive member of the Mohammedpur Upazilla Nursery Malik Samity. Since 1995 she has been involved in the nursery business. She received several training courses from Jagoroni Chakra (a Partner NGO of VFFP in Jessore) and applied her learning in her nursery in order to produce a range of varieties of tree seedlings.

"Along with other members of our Samity, I visited one neighbouring community-based organisation (CBO) supported by Jagoroni Chakra. We were impressed to see the dynamism of this organisation. They had built a community centre in the village which all villagers had contributed in building. Now the centre is being used for many purposes: for meetings and training, as a school and even as a mediation centre for local conflicts and problems. I was struck to see that and asked myself: "Why can we not have a permanent place like this?"

"In the next monthly meeting I raised on the agenda the construction of a permanent office for our Samity. All members laughed as they thought it would be a mammoth task for them. They asked me whether I had any idea of what cost would be required for building an office. Then I referred to the experiences of the visit at the CBO the previous month. The other members reckoned that to build an office we needed a piece of land at upazilla headquarters or another strategic place but the price of land was beyond our means. If we had our own land then it would be easier for us to build an office."

"My house and nursery are located near the Magura-Mohammedpur road. Mohammedpur Upazilla headquarter is only 3 km away. I maintain my family from the income of the nursery. The competition in the seedling market is growing. I conceived that NMS would be an effective forum to safeguard our interests and a helpful means for establishing links to the market. I had 0.20 acre of land that I had bought with the income from my nursery. I believed that NMS will give us opportunities for future business and that I would be able to buy more land in the future. I proposed to donate 0.05 acre of land to the NMS for building an office. At the same time, other members decided to contribute to the cost of building a modest office on that land. The following week I handed over the land and the construction of our office started."



"I conceived that the NMS would be an effective forum to safeguard our interests and a helpful means for establishing linkage with the market."

10. Improved relationships between the members and their associations

Another important observation was the development of the relationship between the members and the associations. Interest in the NMSs was low whilst its objectives were not clear but rose dramatically when members realised the actual benefits they could obtain from their organisation. They began to give a greater personal commitment to the development of the NMSs. For example, they increased their financial contributions, developed cooperative activities such as seed collection and invested in common assets.

At the start of the project the NMSs were seen by many of their members as simply a means to access support from the NGOs and VFFP. It is noticeable that this relationship has changed. NMSs now operate more independently and the members have realised that the associations have the capability to deal with



"The exchanges and visits are really important for improving our technical skills and knowledge."

Mrs. Bharoti Rani, secretary of Puthia Nursery Malik Samity. She represented the NMSs of Rajshahi region in the workshop on the definition of NMS objectives held at Bogra in April 2001.

"I spent two nights and a full day in Bogra in April 2001 during the workshop held for deciding the vision, objectives and functions of the NMSs. We got plenty of chances to interact with each other beyond the fixed objectives of the workshop. During the workshop we had a lot of informal discussions in the leisure periods. Many ideas for business development came out through such discussions. The following month, on behalf our association, I visited some nurseries in Bogra region. I was impressed to see the use of clay pots for raising seedlings and grafts. They sell seedlings round the year. I was curious to know if the use of clay pots was profitable compared to the traditional bare root or polythene bags systems. They responded that it was because the buyers prefer the clay pots which give them the guarantee of survival, even if the price is higher. I started this practice in my nursery when I returned. I shared this idea with the other members of our association in the next meeting. I also demonstrated the practice as the meeting was held in my nursery. All of the members were impressed although only a few of them immediately started that practice."

"My husband works for the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) as a Block Supervisor. This gives me the opportunity of accessing information about new hybrids and improved species and varieties in the local and regional research and horticulture centres. Recently I collected the

other organisations to their profit. As a result members are more willing to contribute directly to the success of the NMSs.

The establishment of networks between NMSs facilitates the development of professionalism and new initiatives amongst the individual nursery owners who had previously operated in relative isolation. The example of Bharoti (see box) shows how the opportunities for formal and informal exchanges between nursery owners can quickly lead to results. In order to further improve access to services and support, and to develop greater professional recognition, 38 NMSs combined to create 8 district NMS organisations within 4 months of the completion of the 4-step process. It was another vote of confidence by the members in the institution of NMS.

Finally, mention has to be made of the formulation of statutes for the NMSs – the first step towards formal registration. Developed at regional level with representatives from NMSs they have a common base but are flexible enough to acknowledge local wishes. This process is beginning to help members feel proud to be part of a movement and also to achieve a sense of social inclusion and of having specific rights.

hybrid Karambola from Chapai-Nawabganj Horticulture Research Centre. During our NMS meeting other members wanted that variety after seeing it in my nursery."

"This year we discovered through discussions that there is a difference in the demand and supply of some seedlings and grafts around the geographic boundary of our upazilla. While one member is confronting serious scarcity of a given species, another member is stuck with a huge stock of the same species. We then made a list of demanded or offered seedlings amongst us. This information sharing was very helpful in ensuring the sale of our seedlings, saplings and grafts at a fair price."

"The exchanges and visits are really important for improving our technical skills and knowledge. We still need support in this area but I have noticed that these exchanges are mainly possible because we have our own association which exists in collaboration with other associations of nursery owners. The NMSs are now more dynamic than before, but there are still areas to develop. When questioned on what is our priority: technical support from VFFP or socio-organisational support, I would be inclined to say the socio-organisational support."



Bharoti translating into practice the idea of using earth pots that she got from a visit to another NMS.

The MOU between NMSs, NGOs and VFFP is a factor for developing a new type of relationship between the actors, based on partnership.

11. The reason for the changes

The original hypothesis explaining the loss of interest soon after the creation of the NMS was that members felt disempowered, lacking ownership of, and control over, their organisations. This appears to have been 'proved' correct by the explosion in dynamism brought about by devolving more power to the associations. Other factors such as improved interaction amongst members have also greatly helped.

When the NMSs started they identified themselves with the NGO supporting them. However, from the moment they got the opportunity to draw up their own vision and objectives, they realized they were no longer a sub-group of a particular NGO or of VFFP but had their own identity. After the four-step reform process most used the name of their *upazilla* or opted for a totally new name instead.

More than simply participatory, the approach adopted by VFFP prompted associations to take responsibility for their own development. The establishment of an action plan reinforced this by planning clear activities which had to be carried out. Joynal, an NMS president (see box), described this planning process and the choosing of association objectives as "the harness that was missing in order to guide our association".

The NMSs asked for more HID support from the field supervisors. Many realised that they could obtain technical expertise from other sources and that the role of the NGO staff was best suited to helping them establish links to outside sources of information and services. Increased HID support was the best way for the NMSs to meet their organisational objective of greater independence by allowing them to develop their own capacity-building skills. Another lesson learnt was that HID support is a precondition for improving technical capabilities – without it, technical needs cannot be properly addressed.

12. Formalization of the new partnership

The formalization of the relationship between NMSs, partner NGOs and VFFP has been another innovation introduced in the NMS programme. Similar to the associations' statutes, the proposal of Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was written with the collaboration of selected NMs and finalised in a workshop consisting of NGO staff, NMS representatives and VFFP. The MOU defined the field of collaboration, with special emphasis on the sharing of guiding principles such as sustainability and leaving action in the hands of the nursery owners, as well as the reciprocal commitments. This MOU has the double advantage of specifying the roles and responsibilities of each party in the collaboration - with special stress on the responsibility of the NMSs - and of drawing up the limits and conditions of this collaboration. Usually institutional support for farmers is neither negotiat-

Mr. Joynal Abedin, Chairperson of the Parbatipur Nursery Malik Samity in Dinajpur region. Mr. Joynal is a skilled nursery owner and also a very committed and active member of NMS. He has been operating his nursery since 1991 and received several training courses on nursery raising and management from Come to Work (CTW) - a VFFP partner NGO.

"I attended the workshop in Bogra (in April 2001) organized by VFFP for NMS representatives. The discussions and decisions taken in that workshop helped us in many ways. It was the first time we realized the importance of ownership of our own associations and the need to decide upon our own direction. Returning home, I shared the feedback from the workshop with the other members of our association in Parbatipur. I took the lead, with the help of the field supervisor of CTW, in organizing a visit to neighbouring Rickshaws Van Malik Samity (Rickshaw Goods Association). From the discussions with the members of this organisation, we realized we needed serious improvement if we wanted to emerge as a professional organisation. We also visited good and poor nurseries amongst us and assessed our limitations. Finally we designed an action plan through analysis of our observations and findings from both visits. During this process we discovered that some of our members had very poor quality nurseries. For these members we decided to proceed with an audit, giving them a deadline to improve their nursery practices. This was done to ensure the quality label our association was identified with. If they did not improve they would have to leave our association. We also decided to terminate the membership of those who were no longer involved in the nursery business. These members never attended our meetings because they had taken out loans that they were trying to avoid paying back."

"We strongly respect our plan of activities because we have realised that it is like the harness that controls the horse and directs the cart to destination. In a meeting of our NMS, members expressed a heavy demand for coconut seedlings and immediately we decided that the Association itself would organise the collection of seeds. From the workshop in Bogra (in April 2001) I knew about the availability and low price of coconut seeds in Khulna from the NMS of Jessore region. Our members wanted 250 seedlings but if we wanted to collect coconuts from Khulna, we would have to buy at least one truckload (5000 coconut seeds!). I contacted other NMSs within the working areas of "Come To Work " with the help of the field supervisor. Fortunately, all the other NMS members had also shown an interest in buying coconut seeds. We brought one truckload of coconuts from Khulna, treated them with chemicals, and supplied them to NMS members at the rate of Tk. 10.50 each, while the local wholesale rate was Tk.20 per seed. The retail sale of the NMS member was Tk. 30.00 each. All members were happy as they earned a handsome profit. If it were not for such a joint initiative, it would have been impossible for an individual member or even the members of only one NMS to undertake this task."

"I appreciate the support of the CTW field supervisor who helped me to network with other NMSs and accompanied me to collect seeds from Khulna (as none of us knew about Khulna city). We plan to collect seeds from Khulna next year, and that time we will not require the help of FS."



"We strongly respect our plan of activities because we have realised that it is like the harness that controls the horse and directs the cart to its destination."

ed nor formalized (except in the cases of credit programmes where a contract is signed) and does not take the form of a real and mutual collaborative agreement. Instead of being a one-way contract to maintain a semblance of rapport between the donor and the recipient, the MOU between NMSs, NGOs and VFFP is more a means to fix the frame of the collaboration with respective commitments, and an instrument for monitoring the collaboration. Regular review meetings are built into the MOU and constitute formal moments for assessment, as well as for defining steps to be taken for improving or adjusting cooperation.



The MOU is also a factor in developing a new type of relationship based on partnership. It helps the farmers to strengthen their feeling of ownership of their organisation rather than 'just' being a farmers' group 'belonging' to an NGO. It also invites the NGO staff to consider the farmers' groups in another respect: not just as simple recipients of technical instruction but as partners working towards their common goals as set out in the APO.

A new relation has been developed between the NGO staff and NMSs. While the executive committee takes more and more the lead of the association, the field staff evolves toward a role of "accompanier". This latter prepares the meetings with EC, and leaves the facilitation role of the events to the selected EC member.

13. The common learning process

The first lesson learnt was that creating artificial groups that were over-reliant on the support of outside agencies created a lack of dynamism. This could be changed by listening to what participants wanted and by working towards increased autonomy and institutional capacity-building for those groups. Appropriate HID support is vital and must be given as much attention as technical assistance. NGO staff should be trained and experienced in this area.



A second lesson is that VFFP should be more self-reflective when looking for the causes of problems. The NMSs lacked dynamism largely because they were denied the power to do anything of significance and were seen as organisations to 'give' technological support to.

A third lesson is not to underestimate the capabilities of the people agencies work with. A common tendency in the world of support institutions and NGOs is the belief that farmers do not have sufficient skills to run their organisations and thus need quasi-eternal supervision. During

the process of reform it became clear that farmers' capabilities do really exist, albeit to varying degrees. Most of the time these were not used, either because there was no incentive or encouragement, or because they lacked the necessary tools or training. It was observed that some of these skills can develop independently and exceed expectations. Some of the NMS members are now confident businessmen, skilled nursery managers and experienced in the field of human resources management.

Finally it should be remembered that many resources exist within the nursery owners' associations and that support should not automatically be sought from external sources. VFFP's role should be oriented more and more towards identifying and strengthening these resources and facilitating their use where it is most needed.

14. The future of the NMSs - a word of conclusion

Do the NMSs have a future? In June 2001 this was uncertain yet today the huge change in organisational behaviour has meant their future is much brighter. Although some of the NMSs still have room for improvement the general upward trend is clear. The NMSs are developing more confidence and independence and evolving into professional organisations. There are hopeful signs that the majority of nursery owners associations will become entirely self-reliant in the future and that the NMSs will maintain their role.

At this stage it is clear that almost all NMSs will play a significant role in the improvement of nursery management and can be trusted to improve the quality of planting material.

And, for VFFP and its partners, this experience has provided many ideas about how to approach and support farmers' groups that will be of great benefit in the future.



One NMS member showing his colleagues how he prepares his saplings for sale.

Instead of expecting everything from the field staff, NMSs now realize that they have their own competences which they should value.

Many positive outcomes came out of the NMS "crisis".

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