



inter
cooperation



Promoting Human and Institutional Development



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Sustainable Land Use Programme

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ACRONYMS, ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

APO	Annual Plan of Operation
ARC	Agroforestry Resource Centre (VFFP Unit)
BRIF	Bangladesh Rural Improvement Foundation (NGO)
CARE	International NGO
CF	Core Farmer
CFA	Core farmers' association
DAE	Department of Agricultural Extension
FO	Farmers' Organisation
HID	Human & Institutional Development
IC	Intercooperation
IGA	Income Generating Activity
NCU	Network Coordination Unit (VFFP Unit)
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NM	Nursery Malik (Owner)
NMS	Nursery Malik Samity (Nursery Owners' Association)
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
SDC	Society Development Comity (NGO)
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation
SERP	Serce Emergency for Rural People (NGO)
TFG	Tree Farmer Group
Uddyog	NGO
UP	Union Parishad (Council)
VFFP	Village and Farm Forstry Project
VDC	Village Development Committee (promoted by SDC-WATSAN)
Wave	NGO

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Summary

The Village and Farm Forestry Project's (VFFP) original aim was to intensify tree plantation on private homestead and crop land. In 2000, SDC mandated Intercooperation (IC) to take over management of the project's 6th Phase and changed the emphasis to poverty reduction and sustainable human and institutional development (HID).

In order to move away from the conventional approach whereby the project disseminated technical agroforestry knowledge to farmers, VFFP was reorganised around HID principles. Farmers, their organisations and communities were to be empowered so that they could analyse their problems (not only in agroforestry), prioritise, plan and implement with the minimal of support.

Introducing the HID concept to the Tree Farmers' Groups (TFGs) was the first step towards VFFP achieving its goal. The new vision strongly challenged the project's predominating technical approach and issues such as gender, empowerment and poverty rose in profile. However, staff were confronted with a range of new and unfamiliar activities and ideas. To tackle this, the project found suitably experienced NGOs and had them sign innovative formal agreements of mutual commitment with the project and the farmers. Furthermore, the accompaniment approach was used in the field to ensure that staff internalised the new focus.

A number of collaborative initiatives helped improve project-NGO relations, leading to a more sustainable development approach that placed the building of farmers' capacities at its heart. In two years, the Nursery Owners Associations (NMSs) changed beyond recognition, becoming dynamic and independent organisations.

VFFP was reorganised into implementation and technical wings. The eventual reorientation helped them work more closely together and was a key moment when HID became embedded in the project as a permanent concern. VFFP arranged a Gender Audit that involved all staff. It made recommendations that VFFP followed, and gender mainstreaming has now reached the farmer level. Progress is ongoing.

Applying the HID approach to TFGs, NGOs, NMSs and VFFP has led to key changes in the way people think and act. The project's values are now understood and internalised. No longer is it promoting trees - people are promoted too. Farmers are more self-reliant, better able to solve problems, and have better links to markets and service providers. It has also brought changes to working habits and methods. More effective planning, coordination, implementation and monitoring are now visible across the project at all levels. VFFP and NGOs are now truly working in partnership; and have become facilitators for the farmers.

1. Introduction

The Village and Farm Forestry Project (VFFP) effectively commenced in 1987, with the objective of intensifying tree plantation on private homestead and crop field land to combat the shortage of fuel wood and fodder, soil fertility degradation and poverty in north-west Bangladesh. Up to its fourth phase the project generated knowledge about the potential agro-ecological suitability of different tree species and the critical management factors for their survival in crop fields; field activities were implemented with the collaboration of local NGOs. From Phase 3, VFFP contributed to the establishment of a network of local nurseries on a commercial basis - a small minority of them women. These nursery owners were key actors in the promotion of tree plantation amongst their fellow villagers and in the supply of tree saplings. For this reason, they were named 'Core Farmers' (CFs). During Phase 4 the project considerably extended the coverage of cropland agroforestry. Tree planting campaigns amongst the general rural population were emphasised throughout out Phase 5, utilising various communication and promotional interventions. But, at this time, VFFP started facing criticism for not being sufficiently poverty-focused. Another concern was the passivity of Core Farmers' Associations (CFAs) as well as the partner NGOs - the latter having no active role in planning and showing no initiative in replicating the approaches in their own programmes.

In 2000, SDC mandated Intercooperation to take over the management of the project. At the same time it was decided to change the approach and the strategy of VFFP, giving the 6th Phase a greater emphasis on poverty and human and institutional development (HID).

2. The notion of Human and Institutional Development

SDC-Bangladesh defined its strategy for human and institutional development in an official document published in early 2000. The overall goal of HID, which contributes to the SDC general goal of a more equitable and just society in Bangladesh, is described as: 'an enabling environment created in which all citizens, independently of their belonging to a social group, will participate actively in 'civic life'.'

In this vision, HID aims to:

- support individuals, groups, organisations and institutions to develop their social and methodological competencies, enabling them to master more effectively life- and development tasks;
- promote an environment for strengthening self-confidence and new stable patterns of behaviour;
- enhance concern and competence for sustainable human and organisational/ institutional development;
- facilitate and promote individual and collective learning processes;
- contribute to the eradication of poverty.



Figure 1: Visualisation of the HID approach of VFFP

HID is considered as a crosscutting domain of intervention, which supports the thematic priorities of SDC (non formal education, micro and small enterprise promotion, sustainable land use and local governance). Beside the process of human and institutional capacity building and strengthening, HID constitutes a means of promoting values and strategic principles such as poverty reduction, empowerment and self-reliance, sustainable benefit, gender and partnership.

Intercooperation shares the vision of SDC on HID. As a core competence of IC, 'HID deals with processes of learning, sharing and positive change within groups, organisations, and institutions involved in rural development. It aims to enhance their performance and to strengthen effective collaboration between all relevant actors, with emphasis on local empowerment and equity. Individuals are trained in view of their function within a group, organisation or institution.'

Three dimensions are considered in this definition of HID:

- capacity building in managerial, technical, methodological, and social aspects;
- promoting an organisational development process aiming at institutional strengthening, which entails learning new roles and taking new responsibilities by stakeholders, organisations, and self-help groups;
- institutional reform and devolution of constitutional power from central to local government to be realised.

In the specific case of VFFP, HID was an approach targeting:

- the empowerment of farmers, their organisations and communities in order to identify their development priorities, arrange joint actions, mobilise resources and services, defend their interest and rights, and participate in local decision-making processes;
- the development and strengthening of an enabling environment that contributes to supporting and sustaining the initiatives taken by farmers' organisations and communities;

In the specific case of VFFP, HID targeted:

- the empowerment of farmers, their organisations and communities;
- the development and strengthening of an enabling environment;
- the internalisation of HID values and guiding principles within the frame of the project and its partner NGOs.

The HID issues at project level were more related to problems regarding approaches and mentalities.

- the internalisation of HID values and guiding principles within the frame of the project and its partner NGOs, in order to provide a more appropriate support to the farmers and their organisations, based on a sustainable development approach.

Figure 1 shows the vision of this approach, based on the capacity of farmers to deal with service providers and market forces, as well as local governance.

3. *The weight of usual and classic approaches*

Although the planning document emphasised poverty alleviation and gender, due to ingrained habits VFFP was still conventional in its approach at the beginning of Phase 6. It followed a top-down vision, driven by the supply side. As such, the dissemination of knowledge and technologies developed on the basis of the farmers' needs' assessment was what made the project. Although the project had the firm conviction that that was 'good enough' for the farmers' problems, the farmers were not really at the centre of VFFP's approach. For most of the project staff, the aim of VFFP was more the promotion of agroforestry and tree plantation than the betterment of poor farmers.

Despite self-reliance being clearly targeted in the project document, minds were more concentrated on technical aspects. An important concern was to determine an extension model and a ready-made training programme to be implemented at the farmers' level. The idea was to transfer the technologies to a first batch of groups, and then pass them to new groups the following year. The farmers' organisations were considered more as a means of spreading technical messages (secondary adoption level) than as local partners-beneficiaries. This trend was reinforced with the obligation for partner NGOs to operate changes in their staff configuration by recruiting technical and science graduates. Most of them had limited practical experience of rural development and forming working relationships with farmers. They had the natural tendency to 'promote' their technical knowledge, most often under the form of 'message delivery', sometimes giving the impression that the project's role was to fill 'empty buckets' - i.e. the farmers - with knowledge.

Some staff, however, were acquainted with participatory approaches, but these remained theoretical or buzz words: either the staff had been trained on participatory rural appraisal (PRA) techniques but never practised them, or understood PRA more as an end ('I must do a PRA exercise') rather than a means.

Other challenges of the project were: poverty alleviation, gender mainstreaming, and creating processes for self-reliance and sustainability. The HID issues at project level were actually more related to problems regarding approaches and mentalities; tackling these would require people's way of thinking to be changed.



The way PRA exercises were carried out did not contribute to strengthen the farmers' organisations - the tools were often seen as an end in itself.

4. Partnership: ambiguity and mutual frustration

With the inception of Phase 6, VFFP made the effort to improve its relations and increase collaboration with partner NGOs, and tried to involve the NGO Directors more in the planning and monitoring of the project. It invited them to submit proposals of innovative extension approaches. The results were rather disappointing, the proposals being either a repetition of previous activities - but with more means - or very classical. The project decided then to develop itself a plan of activities for six months, involving the NGOs in the establishment of budgets.

The first two coordination meetings, conceived as a way to improve the relationship between VFFP and partner NGOs, showed the existence of a large gap in the understanding of the respective roles and of the notion of partnership, and witnessed some tension between the participants, due to the divergence of opinion regarding the partnership.

Jillur Rahman is the executive director of the partner NGO UDDYOG, in Sadullapur (District of Gaibandha, in Bogra region).

"Initially, the relationship between VFFP and their partner NGOs was basically that of donor-recipient. At that time, NGOs were not allowed to raise their voice regarding planning, monitoring & evaluation, and operational aspects of the project. From 1994 to mid 1997, there was no coordination between the project and its partner NGOs. The project treated coordination with only PNGOs as a means of orienting and informing the PNGOs about project activities and targets. These issues were tackled through a limited number of meetings. Later on, during mid 1997 to 2000, the numbers of meetings with the PNGOs increased, but still VFFP followed the same approach for coordination with PNGOs. The PNGOs had no role in project planning, fixing targets or the development of operational strategies for the project. As a result, we did not feel the ownership and responsibility for the project and its implementation. Moreover, we did not replicate the project activities in our other programmes.

"At that time, VFFP did not consider that farmers could play a lead role in their development. The project gave importance to Core Farmers (CF) as change agents, but not the farmers. On behalf of the project, the Core Farmers were mainly responsible for promoting tree farming extension by motivating farmers through organising tree management orientation session and motivational meeting. Moreover, the CFs were responsible for monitoring the progress of tree plantations. Farmers had no scope to participate in the planning process and the project did not consider developing the capacity of the farmers."



"The relationship between VFFP and their partner NGOs was basically that of donor-recipient"



"Our activities were limited only to weekly meetings and savings activities"

Md. Ayub Ali is the Treasurer of Merirhat Somaj Kallayan Samity under Polashbari upazila of Gaibandha district.

"We first organised as a rural credit group in 1998, with the help of a national NGO. The NGO's support was limited to credit issues. They did not consider our other problems and needs, or the development of our organisational capacity. After one and a half years of the operation of this NGO's credit programme within our group, we were not clear about our future steps. Consequently, our activities were limited only to weekly meetings and savings activities. The members treated the weekly meeting only as a means to collect savings, and generally no issues and agendas were discussed. Moreover, due to a lack of skills, we were not able to document the decisions made during meetings. No organisation management skills

were practiced. At that time we had three members in our executive committee (President, Secretary and Cashier), but the committee members were not clear what their roles and responsibilities should be."

Actually, both parties claimed that the relationship between them was anything but a partnership. Both of them were right, but used different arguments. The NGOs saw the project as a donor, and did not understand why it should be involved in the field. For them, the 'partner' has to entrust the NGOs with the implementation of the project's activities, and should not intervene at the farmers' and community's level. The 'partner' was thus just a financial counterpart. Some NGO Directors contradicted themselves, arguing that they were not involved enough in the definition of the project; but at the same time claiming that the role of VFFP should be to provide its partner NGOs with a plan of action and the necessary funds to implement them - a rather peculiar vision of partnership.

For VFFP, the NGOs were mainly considered as implementers of the project. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the function of NGOs was to indirectly employ project staff. The first sentence of the agreement that pertained at that time between VFFP and the partner NGOs illustrates very well how the relationship was understood: 'VFFP shall finance the actual expenditure which NGO X incurs in carrying out the project in the project area during the period under consideration'.

Though complaining that their collaboration was not a real partnership, none of the parties really set the basis for developing it, maintaining ambiguity in the relationship. The partner NGOs pushed for less intervention of the project in their business ('give the money and let us do') while VFFP had the tendency to tell the NGOs what they had to do, though creating space for involving the partners in the development of the project's strategies.

Though complaining that their collaboration was not a real partnership, none of the parties really set the basis for developing it, maintaining ambiguity in the relationship.

What was missing was a real dialogue about the values of each party in order to enter into a real partnership, based on the recognition of respective competences, experiences and resources that each could bring to a balanced relationship.

5. The farmers: passive beneficiaries

At the beginning of Phase 6, the previous Core Farmers' Associations were reorganised into several smaller associations, the NMSs (Nursery Malik Samities - associations of nursery owners). Those grouped 20 to 25 members, within the boundaries of an upazilla (sub-district). At the same time, the project decided to stop the provision of support to individual nurseries, and to work at the level of the associations, for which it continued a system of monthly meetings. Though it was becoming a controversial issue, the project maintained the principle of providing food and transport allowances for attending these meetings, which revealed themselves to be mainly social events for the members, and for the project staff a means for delivering technical lectures. Gradually members' interest in their associations and the attendance of meetings decreased. The root problem was caused by the lack of ownership they felt: the absence of an overall vision and objectives for their associations, no control over fund management (in the hand of partner NGOs), a poor range of programme activities (mainly related to credit management), and no meeting venue of their own. When the project decided to withdraw the food and transport allowances, the nursery programme faced a severe crisis, as attendance in the meetings fell by about 20%.



The project started to work directly with farmers' groups for the first time during the inception of Phase 6. The initial concept of this new programme was to form 'Tree Farmer Groups' (TFGs) through focal group discussions. The idea was to gather farmers interested in agroforestry and tree plantation as beneficiaries of a ready made training programme. They were mainly seen as a means for disseminating the technologies amongst the other villagers, not as farmers' organisations that could contribute to the dynamics of local development.

A classical pattern: on one side, the farmers listening passively, on the other side, the field staff leading the meeting.

The weight of old habits, the lack of opportunity and exposure to new approaches, were probably the main reasons of the apparent passivity of farmers.

The vertical relation was due to the habits and institutional culture inherited from previous organisations, but also due to the traditional master-servant power relationship.

With this approach, the field staff did not consider the possibility of the farmers contributing to the planning of the activities according to their problems, needs and priorities, or bringing their experience and knowledge. In certain cases, the staff behaved with farmers like teachers with small children, giving no opportunity to be involved in decisions concerning their own development.

This general problem of attitude - the apparent passivity of farmers and staff dealing only with technical issues - was not really a problem of lack of initiative from the farmers and a lack of consideration for the farmers by the staff. The weight of old habits, the lack of opportunity and exposure to new approaches, were probably the main reasons. There was, both at NGO staff and farmers' organisations level, a strong need regarding human and institutional development; but the starting point had to be the project structure itself.

6. VFFP: an institution with its own habits

With Phase 6 the structure of VFFP was reorganised into two main components: the Network Coordination Unit (NCU) and the Agroforestry Resource Centre (ARC). NCU was the 'implementation wing' of VFFP, in charge of collaborating with partner NGOs to carry out the nursery and the tree farmers' programmes. NCU was composed of a head unit and four regional offices, called 'Regional Service Centres' because they could provide agroforestry services. ARC was conceived as the technical backstopping department of VFFP, in charge of promoting quality planting material (establishment of mother tree orchards and seeds sources) and developing training and communication material related to agroforestry technologies. The Centre was subdivided into two units: one for the fruit trees and one for the timber trees, and a team of people involved in training and communication aspects. The project also had a monitoring and evaluation desk.

With 50 staff and its several departments, units and regional centres, the structure of VFFP was relatively heavy and hierarchical. The relation between the different components and staff was rather vertical, due to the habits and institutional culture inherited from previous organisations, but also due to the traditional master-servant power relationship. This strong characteristic of Bengali society often meant people had a dualistic attitude. Depending on the interlocutor, the same person will behave in opposite ways: charming and servile with superiors, but condescending or tough with subordinates. This difference of attitude follows in reality the same strategy: ensuring one's own survival and social status.

A certain lack of coordination and participatory management, and the traditional supervisor-subordinate pattern, favoured a phenomenon of compartmentalisation between the units and the levels of hierarchy. Every unit/level had the tendency to plan for itself, having sometimes its own conception of the project's vision, objectives and strategies. In certain cases, the tendency of central units to delegate the fieldwork they had planned to the

Regional Centres provoked an excessive workload for the field staff, and the loss of control of the priorities. The yearly plan rested more on quantitative targets than outcomes and qualitative aspects. The current planning was done monthly - and often individually - with a lack of projection for future months. The staff had a natural attitude to try first to satisfy their authorities and show in their reports that they had done a good job in terms of targets achieved and activities accomplished, but less in terms of development impact.

Because of the limitation in conceptual capacities and critical analyses, the project was inclined to follow a technical approach - the promotion of agroforestry and the number of saplings produced - to the detriment of an approach based on processes of changes. In many minds, the vision of their mission did not comprise poor farmers, people's organisations and their relations to other institutions.

7. Promoting HID approaches: misunderstanding, resistance, and motivation

Deepening the initial concept of Tree Farmers' Groups was the first step that allowed VFFP to develop a vision of what it wanted to achieve: that of farmers' organisations able to deal with market forces and a range of service providers, without the support of the project. This vision brought forward the dimension of organisational and institutional development that was missing previously. But at the same time, it challenged the still strongly vivid perception of promoting agroforestry technologies, and two camps started establishing within VFFP: the partisans of the classical and technical approach, and those open to innovative approaches and sensitive to issues such as poverty, gender, and empowerment.

Phase 6 was reorganised from Phase 5, and was confronted with a lot of new activities and ways of working. Moreover, many new recruits had joined the project, coming from very different types of institutions (governmental research institutions, extension agencies, NGOs, projects), which did not favour a unity of mind. They considered HID as a task amongst many others, and maybe more the responsibility of the small but motivated team that started to take a special interest in this approach. HID was thus not felt as one the main pillars of VFFP, which left unsolved fundamental questions on the role and the strategic choices of the project.

However, the introduction of HID was bringing a change in the vision and the definition of the project's priorities. But this process was essentially supported by those who were involved in the 'extension' activities and were in permanent contact with farmers' organisations and partner NGOs - they were thus 'more naturally' open to consider HID. Other individuals, in different hierarchical positions, still had a lack of understanding of HID, which slowed down their acceptance of innovative approaches and contributed to increasing the gap between certain projects' units.

Because of the limitation in conceptual capacities and critical analyses, the project was inclined to follow a technical approach.

The introduction of HID brought a change in the vision and the definition of the project's priorities.



"There is a good marriage between HID and technical approach: when HID is supported by technical contents, it gives good impact"

Farid Uddin Ahmed was the Director of VFFP between 2001 and 2003.

"For many years, I have worked for governmental institutions. The working style of these is very different from that within projects. In meetings, when a senior person delivers a speech, the role of the other participants is often limited to agree with him and even to applause to show their support to his ideas. In contrast, projects are closer to the people, to the poor, and less top-down. In VFFP for instance, I discovered that managing a project goes far beyond the administrative aspects. However, it does not mean the projects are perfect. Previously, I used to take decisions independently, referring only to my authorities. I noticed similar practices in VFFP, but the promotion of HID changed these habits. For example, in 2001 we created a management committee, which was composed of the heads of the different units of the project. This committee took charge of important decisions concerning the project's strategies, and also current issues. To me, this style of participatory management gave me more security, and made me more comfortable -I was not the only one to decide for all.

"HID also brought about other changes within the project. The annual plan of operation for 2001 was very much target-oriented, and each unit of VFFP had planned its activities with almost no coordination with the other ones. At that time, the compartmentalisation of the units triggered a kind of unhealthy competition between them. The introduction of HID in the project increasingly helped VFFP remove this problem, and from 2002, we all became united around common objectives. Instead of planning targets, we evolved towards a process approach. For instance, instead of planning training sessions for farmers in advance, we contributed to developing the capacities of farmers' associations to identify their needs and to plan actions accordingly. We also helped them to identify the organisations from which they could receive support, and facilitated the links with these.

"To me, the development of individual capacities is critical. When individuals have developed, it has a positive effect on their institutions. Interaction between individuals is also essential. I have noticed that better interaction between colleagues makes them understand their roles better, the roles of their respective unit, and that of the project in general. As a result, putting people together eventually maximises the effects of VFFP. But these relations have to be horizontal and allow the participation of all - rather than following the hierarchy.

"While VFFP was predominantly technical, we were mainly addressing the needs of individuals, such as providing personal support to nursery owners. HID enabled us to reach another dimension, more than simply transferring technologies to individuals, and ensured a better diffusion of our activities. However, although I recognise that HID is important, we should not forget the technical aspects. Actually, there is a good marriage between them: when HID is supported by technical contents, it gives good impacts."

8. Strengthening the conceptual capacities of the motivated ones: birth of a new state of mind

A first step had been taken, which contributed to developing a new vision for VFFP, but many operational challenges were still waiting for implementation, the most important being the development and introduction of a new TFG concept. The numerous working meetings held for this purpose crystallised the energy of those who were already motivated about the new approaches, and contributed to strengthening and refining their conceptual capabilities. Those 'micro-workshops', gathering sometimes only two people for deepening their ideas proved very effective, not only for developing concepts and methodologies, but also for forging a new state of mind within the project. The new TFG concept emphasised the development of farmers' capacities for diagnosing their problems - not exclusively limited to agroforestry - and planning and implementing yearly activities accordingly. Instead of forming new and artificial farmers' groups, the project decided to select existing organisations according to criteria such as poverty, gender, dynamism and cohesion. In order to raise the farmers at the level of responsible partners, it was decided to sign a formal agreement between their association, the partner NGOs and the project. This agreement stipulated the mutual commitments of respective parties - a rather innovative initiative. As for the nursery programme, the principle of 'no incentives no refreshment' was applied. Another innovation was the involvement of farmers in the development of operational methodologies and tools (e.g. farmers' diagnosis, identification of development priorities etc.), something not conceivable before, but becoming a 'natural way' of working.

The next step, the orientation of the whole NGO staff on the new Tree Farmers' programme concept, methodologies and tools, surprisingly did not meet any resistance, except maybe the idea of 'no refreshment'. To the contrary, the field staff were open to the new approach, their problem being more the understanding of the methodologies. Since the orientation sessions did not always contribute very effectively to internalise the new approach and understand the operational methodologies, the project would decide to adopt a specific coaching approach - the accompaniment (see chapter 12).

The selection process of dynamic groups for the Tree Farmer Programme strengthened staff's understanding of what could be the impact of institutional development, since most of them had no experience in this field. This triggered a reflection on the Nursery Programme, which was facing a severe crisis due to the disinterest of the nursery owners for their associations. A new strategy was therefore developed to re-launch the dynamism of the 79 NMSs.

The development of this strategy (see chapter 11 for details), its implementation and the results it caused, constituted a definite step to internalise the HID approach and to anchor it within VFFP.

The development and the implementation of a new concept for the tree farmer programme motivated people for internalising HID issues.

9. Promoting a common vision and participatory management: the birth of a team

Although the HID approach was taking shape, the gap between NCU and ARC persisted. The Agroforestry Resource Centre was still using a technical approach. Concentrating its efforts exclusively on the establishment of seeds sources and mother tree orchards, it had the tendency to neglect aspects of knowledge management, particularly regarding training material for farmers. The shift of NCU towards a people-centred approach, instead of stimulating ARC, was reinforcing the compartmentalisation between them. Time had come to tackle this.

The project organised a self-analysis of ARC and two workshops in order to clarify its role and function - a way also to reorient its conception of development. The sometimes tense debates eventually recommended that ARC should balance what it was doing in the field of system development (establishment of mother tree orchards for example) with knowledge management.

The reorientation of the roles of ARC was a good start toward the 'reunification' of the two main departments of VFFP, but what definitely broke the wall between ARC and NCU was the joint planning process of the VFFP activities for 2002. The several planning workshops that took place involved the whole project staff as well as representatives of partner NGOs -a first for VFFP. 'Thinking altogether' was not a habit, but proved an effective method for developing a common vision, common objectives and common approaches. From that moment, HID and its underlying values of empowerment, sustainability, and so on, became a common and permanent concern of the whole project.

At the institutional level, the system of management became much more participatory with the creation of a collegial decision-making structure, and a new planning and monitoring system. Every two months the latter gathered the whole staff to develop its three-month planning, coordinated between the different components and levels of the projects. The principle of subsidiarity - giving more responsibility to regional offices - started also to take shape.

This new participatory planning process and the coordination systems established between the components gradually expanded the team spirit, though at diverse degrees, to the whole project. The common logical framework, or common thread, triggered a programmatic approach between the project components, and consolidated their ownership of the project.

This new institutional approach was also visible in the evolution of both people's mentality and project units' way of working. The VFFP monitoring and evaluation desk, for instance, passed from the function of collecting data and information amongst the other components (which was sometimes felt as an external evaluation of their performance) to that of facilitating the development of competences in monitoring and evaluation at all levels, including farmers' organisations. Actually, the project - promoting the participatory approach amongst its partners - was adopting a participatory approach within its own structure! A major lesson

The participatory planning process and the coordination systems between the components gradually expanded the team spirit.

learnt in this general process is that 'specialist in agroforestry' does not automatically mean 'specialist in development', and that 'human development' is also required at that level.

10. NGOs: from implementer to partner

When VFFP organised a workshop with its NGO partners on the policy for reviving the dynamism of nursery associations, the NGO Directors continued speaking contradictorily, claiming that they were fighting for the self-reliance of farmers' organisations whilst disagreeing with the idea of transferring the responsibility for managing the NMS funds to the NMSs themselves. But that day, other NGOs with a different vision raised their voices and supported the ideas of the project, showing that there was no uniformity in thinking amongst the VFFP's partners, and that VFFP started to be perceived differently by them.

For developing its 'common' plan of 2002 operations, VFFP invited one NGO Director from the four regions of intervention. This marked a definite step towards improving the relationship between the project and its partner NGOs. The same people were involved in a task force aimed at discussing strategic issues, and played a very positive and supportive role during the subsequent coordination meetings. This contributed to better mutual understanding and trust, previously absent probably because of a wrong perception of each other, and a lack of dialogue.

Other factors played an important role in the improvement of relations, and the move towards a real partnership:

- the numerous coordination events in the regions and planning and monitoring meetings, with the presence of NGO management - not just the NGO staff;
- the facilitation of sessions, during the coordination meetings at central level, by the NGO Directors;
- the commitment of the project to develop the capacities of the staff - mainly in the field of HID and in the capacity of facilitation and accompaniment at the farmers' level;
- the accompaniment missions of the project in the field, and the informal discussions that followed, being an opportunity to share ideas and vision in a friendly way;
- the annual joint reviews of collaboration that were a moment where each partner could frankly assess the outputs of the activities, and the level of collaboration and mutual respect;
- the involvement of NGO Directors in study tours;
- the establishment of new agreement emphasising the values, objectives, approaches and mutual commitment instead of financial considerations;
- the consideration of NGO competences and experiences, and the use of their other internal resources;
- in some cases, the support of the project in order to develop the NGOs' strategic vision and plan;
- the termination of contract with NGOs that committed fund misappropriation, which gave a positive sign of the wish of VFFP to work on a good basis with NGOS.



Himangshu Chandra Chanda, Director of SERP. SERP (Service Emergency for Rural People) was established in 1988, and has been implementing the Village and Farm Forestry Project as a partner NGO of VFFP since 1994.

"Since the beginning of the project, our intention was to establish the idea of introducing trees onto cropland and to promote tree plantation in homesteads. Thanks to phase-6, we had the chance to redefine our objectives - should we only work to promote trees, or should we support the poor to build their capacities for tree management? We felt that the latter would contribute to the poor by improving their production and income for better livelihoods. Accordingly, in 6th phase, we planned to work with the poor sector of rural farmers by supporting them in building their capacities for better

"Farmers realised that their plan was their own, not the plan of the project or the NGOs."

agroforestry practices, to improve their production and income that may contribute to inhibiting poverty.

"Initially, we accepted this approach very positively, thinking that we had a long experience of forming poor farmers groups. We agreed that we would have to form some more tree farmers groups and we would provide them a series of agroforestry training courses. But the first contradiction appeared when, in a coordination meeting, it was decided that we should work with existing dynamic groups and the training should be based on the groups' plan, with no cost. I was not at all convinced by this approach. I had the following concerns:

- Many of our existing groups could be excluded in the process of screening for dynamic groups;
- Working with any dynamic groups supported by other NGOs could be difficult;
- Provision of training with no refreshment is impossible;
- Developing the capacity of planning by groups is time consuming and sometimes difficult.

"However, we reluctantly accepted the decided approach. Within a very short time (within a year), I realised that my above assumptions were false and we had taken the right decision by using existing groups and withdrawing refreshment in farmers' training. Giving them the responsibility right from the beginning prepared the group to take responsibilities for their planned events. In addition, enough time was taken by the group from diagnosis of their problems to finally come up with a specific action plan. This process contributed to the realisation by the farmers that their plan was their own, not the plan of the project or the NGOs. This resulted in the FOs and their members being very enthusiastic to accomplish their plan in due course. VFFP also helped us to follow a new training strategy for farmers training; i.e. one problem, one training period, carried out at the farmers' places. The process required only one to two hours and we did not experience any farmer who wanted any refreshment, rather sometimes they offered snacks to the field supervisors. The involvement of groups supported by other NGOs was also encouraging; they appreciated and well accepted our support, even though they were mainly concentrating on providing credit support to the groups. To some extent, the support provided by us to their groups built the capacity of the group members to improve production and income that ultimately contributed to the regular repayment of the credit."

Shah Ahsan Habib is the Director of BRIF (Bangladesh Rural Improvement Foundation), a VFFP partner NGO in Khansama, Dinajpur. Between 1992 and 1996, its NGO received financial support exclusively from VFFP and, from 1997, became a full partner of VFFP.

"Before, the tendency was to send planning documents to NGOs and ask them to implement the activities according to these plans. The communication was "one way" -project to NGO- and the time of interaction very short. Now, there are plenty of occasions for exchanging our ideas -coordination meetings, workshops, etc. During the first coordination meetings, VFFP had the tendency to take the whole floor, and to tell us what we had to do. Presently, we are far more involved in planning and monitoring, and we are received in a more friendly way by VFFP, which listens to us. Our ideas are now taken into account, such as the concept of fruit-tree villages and herbal villages. As well as this openness, we feel that VFFP has also changed the way they are perceived. Previously, because they felt they had the "money power" (the activities are essentially financed by the project), they found it legitimate to instruct us as per their plan. Even if the financial situation has not really changed, our relationship itself has changed dramatically. We can say that we are partners now. One significant example is the informal and permanent contact we maintain beside our coordination meetings and events. Whenever one of us feels the need to exchange an idea or to raise an issue, we do not hesitate to ring or visit each other. Before the relationships were much more formal, mainly through the exchange of letters. Now, after a field visit, we like to take time to exchanges our viewpoints.



"We can say that we are partners now"

"Actually, the changes in VFFP's objectives to a stronger focus on poverty, plus the reorientation of its partnership policy, have also changed the shape of relationships with farmers. It has become a people-centred project, willing to help the poor and the vulnerable, and is close to the visions and the values of BRIF. Before, there was a linear relation, from VFFP, to BRIF, to the Farmers' organisations. At present, VFFP and BRIF approach the farmers together, and encourage them to establish links with other support organisations much more. This approach encourages a better partnership, but at the same time, as the farmers' organisations are less dependent on us, it improves conditions for the sustainability of our actions.

"If I admit that VFFP has changed a lot, I also have to recognise that me and my staff have changed as well. The numerous workshops, as well as the training sessions we have participated in, have contributed a lot to that. The recent exercise done by VFFP to select the partner NGOs for the new project, LEAF, was an excellent mechanism to deepen our understanding of each other, our organisational culture, while also raising critical questions. At present, I feel that we really have a common understanding of the goals and objectives of the project, and a common wish to achieve them.

"The joint review with VFFP was a very good process. It was the first time in my life that I have carried out such an exercise, and I really liked it. We had the opportunity to assess the activities together, but also to talk frankly and to criticise each other -openly, but friendly- in cases where we felt that was needed. Generally, when we are partners, it is not easy to tell something to the other. But that joint review process was a very good opportunity. I shared my enthusiasm with other partners, Plan International and CARE. Actually, I did more than sharing my enthusiasm -I really communicated it to them-, and now they would like to follow the same approach to assess our partnership, and learn from VFFP how to conduct it."

Beside the improvement in the relationship and in the capacity of staff, the project contributed, to varying degrees, in bringing some changes in the way NGOs think and develop strategies and visions. Their notion of sustainability is now better balanced between what concerns the programme activities, and their own institution. Development of farmers' capacities and processes of self-reliance have become a normal approach. The approaches are more expressed in term of processes, less in term of targets. Effective planning and participatory monitoring can be done more easily.

Today, the gap between the project and the partner NGOs has been bridged. More than participating and contributing to the development of the project, the partner NGOs are a part of it.

11. Farmers: from beneficiaries to actors in their own development

The concept developed for the Tree Farmers' Programme marked an important shift from the classic approach of ready-made training programmes at the three actors' levels: the project, the partner NGO staff and the farmers' groups. With the new concept, the selection criteria gave priority to poor people and gender aspects, while the previous formation of groups through focus discussion groups had the tendency to gather well-off farmers, almost all of them male, who could afford tree plantation in their cropland. As a result of the new approach, 60% of the beneficiaries were women, which provoked also a shift toward agroforestry in homestead and home gardening, activities most often placed under the responsibility of women.

For each of the actors involved in the Tree Farmers' Programme, the approach was rather unusual: farmers doing their own analysis of their problems and the prioritisation of their needs; farmers developing, implementing and evaluating an annual plan of activities; farmers signing an agreement with an NGO and a project; and the revolutionary halting of incentives and refreshment!

The most significant and radical changes were firstly obtained with the nursery owner associations, the 'old clients' of VFFP. After an institutional crisis that had strongly jeopardised the continuation of the nursery programme, the nursery associations made an incredible change in their dynamism thanks to an appropriate strategy that rested on the following elements:

- the development of a clear vision statement for the NMSs and the clarification of members' entitlements through participatory exercises;
- the establishment of a new fund management policy to ensure greater involvement and more responsibility for the NMS executive committee, as well as reorganising 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.

Two years after the implementation of this strategy, one can hardly recognise the nursery associations. They have taken the

The nursery associations made an incredible change in their dynamism thanks to an appropriate strategy:

- the development of a clear vision statement for the NMSs;
- the establishment of a new fund management;
- the establishment of a planning.

lead for facilitating their meetings, and for establishing, implementing and evaluating their yearly plan of activities. The members have now developed the ownership of their association. They have increased their financial contribution, and have undertaken joint income-generating activities. They have established their own office - with important material and financial contributions - and registered their associations with the government. The NMSs are firmly engaged in the promotion of quality planting material and developing new sources of germplasm. They audit themselves to maintain a quality standard. Opening their association to new members, they have banded together to form unions at the district level to better represent their interests to the local administration and to facilitate marketing. The NMSs are beginning to be invited by the local authorities as soon as

Farida Yasmin is Secretary of Gonojagoroni Mohila Samity, Village-Khamar Pirgacha, Union-Sahapara, Upazilla-Gaibandha Sadar, District-Gaibandha. The group organised by their own initiative in March 2000.

"We organised our association in 2000, with the participation of 18 women. Our initial activity was the daily saving of one taka and one handful of rice per person. Although our savings activity continued we were stuck and were not able to decide what more we could do. We were introduced to VFFP in last quarter of 2002. During a negotiation meeting we agreed to collaborate with VFFP. After the negotiation, VFFP helped us to diagnose our own problems and needs, as well as to develop our annual plan of operation by ourselves. During diagnosis we identified needs related to the development of our organisational capacities along with our technical needs. The annual plan of operation was new for us and we were excited by how efficiently we developed it. After elaboration of our plan of operation, we started its implementation in January 2003. As part of the implementation of our APO we received training related to organisation development: how to organise a successful meeting, roles and responsibilities of executive committee members, how to write resolutions, and the use of different books. After the training, VFFP staff members provided regular support to us to implement the knowledge and skills developed through the training sessions. We also broadened the size of our executive committee from three to five. With the help of VFFP we determined the roles and responsibilities of our executive committee members. Consequently, the enthusiasm of our executive committee members has increased and they are more responsible towards the activities of our group. The situation of irregular meetings is gradually disappearing, while democratic decision-making in the meetings is now a regular phenomenon in our group. The organisational development activities have regenerated our members' interest in the group and its activities. In the meantime, we have opened the door to other poor members and have enrolled another three women into our group. The HID support we have received has developed our organisational capacity, which has led to the improvement of our dynamism."



"The situation of irregular meetings is gradually disappearing, while democratic decision-making in the meetings is now a regular phenomenon"



"Due to the emphasis placed on HID, the dynamism of our associations has increased dramatically"



"Without the development of HID capacity, our technical expertise could not be implemented properly"

Md. Tareq Shekh, Treasurer of Modhukhali Nursery Malik Samity and Secretary of Faridpur District Nursery Malik Samity. Faridpur. Md. Abul Kalam Khan, President of Baliakandhi Nursery Malik Samity and President of Faridpur District Nursery Malik Samity. Both of them have been involved in nursery business since 1991, and have contributed a lot to the development of their samities. Their associations are supported by SDC - Society Development Committee, a partner NGO of VFFP.

"In April 2001, VFFP organised a central workshop, with the participation of NMS members, to identify the causes of the problems in the NMSs crisis. At that time, there was an alarming growth of disinterest of the members for their associations -the attendance rate to the meetings was falling down under 20% in certain cases. We participated in this workshop with other representatives of our area. In this workshop the causes of the problem were clearly identified by the NMS representatives. We realised that before the workshop we felt that the crisis had arisen only due to the withdrawal of food and the travel allowance, but during the workshop we discovered different important factors for crisis: there was no vision for our organisations, no ownership of our funds (the loan programme had been stopped), no specific activities for our organisational development, no meeting place, and locally we were treated as an NGO group.

"After returning from the workshop, we discussed the workshop outcomes in a meeting. We started to realise that VFFP was trying to give the leadership of the group to us. By considering the workshop outcomes and with the help of VFFP, we established our future vision. To break the previous ideas and adopt a new approach, we visited some potential local organisations and compared our organisation with these, explored our weaknesses and strengths, and tried to find out ways of overcoming these weaknesses. Accordingly we prepare our annual Plan of Operation with given emphasis on HID because over time we had developed skills in technical aspects of our operations. During this time, VFFP adopted a new approach called accompaniment, which was very helpful for accomplishing our own work. Gradually they gave us responsibilities to accomplish our activities independently and members of the association started to develop a sense of ownership for our organisations. After just one year practising this new approach we are now able to organise meetings and resolution writing, properly maintain our funds, prepare an APO and talk in a big forum, even presenting our organisation in front of foreigners. As a result, the local people and local government agencies respect us, enabling us to increase our bargaining and negotiation capacity, obtain membership of different coordination committees, tree mela (fair) committees, and we are now eligible for getting invitations to participate in any upazilla and district level events.



Technical support and HID go hand in hand.

"Due to the emphasis placed on HID, the dynamism of our associations has increased dramatically within a short time. For instance, a member of a Samity donated land for an office and other members of the Samity contributed other building materials. Now we have our own office building, we have obtained registration, we have a published bulletin, increased marketing, and increased cohesion among members. Even though members of the Samity are poor, one member of the Samity donated land to the Samity with a value of around Tk-50,000. Without dedication to the Samity nobody would give such asset; this is not usual even for the rich men of our society.

The financial contribution of NMSs for building their office has marked a significant step toward self-determination.

"We have appreciated the HID support provided by VFFP, which helped us to organise ourselves, strengthen ourselves, and has enabled us to develop from a seedling and stand on our own legs.

"During our collaboration with VFFP we have learnt a lot about technical expertise and we have realised without the development of HID capacity, our technical expertise could not be implemented properly. HID capacity is the main vehicle for the development of a self-reliant organisation. We are going that way. We hope VFFP will continue their HID support for us, according to our requirements and contribute to our efforts to establish collaboration with other organisations for Quality Planting Materials."





"We lobbied the UP for the maintenance of some village roads, and consequently the roads were reconstructed by UP"

Nasima Islam is the President of Somaponi Mohila Sakti, a group formed by the women in Panchbibi upazilla of Joypurhat district. The group started collaboration with VFFP in 2001.

"During the diagnosis process, at the same time as identifying our problems, we identified some potentially useful support organisations. We became aware that we not only have problems and needs, but also that some organisations exist that could provide support and services to us. We also understood that to tackle our problems and needs we have to establish linkages with these organisations. Because VFFP will not support us in the long term and it would not be able to provide all types of support in all domains. We decided that for the needs beyond the domains of HID and agroforestry, we would have to depend on these other resource base organisations. With accompaniment support from VFFP, we communicated with some government organisations like the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), the Department of Forests, the Fisheries office and the Department of Livestock. In addition, we communicated with some NGOs. Through communication with such organisations we explored possible mechanisms of support and services for our members. This process helped us to develop our capacity and confidence to establish linkages with these organisations.

"In the mean time, we also established a network with other neighbouring groups to manage common issues that could not be solved or dealt with by an individual group. The common issues we identified were: lobbying the Union Parishad (UP) for the building and maintenance of village roads; cooperation for maintaining social security of road side plantations, prevention of dowry, collective bargaining for fair pricing, etc. We got some good results from using this network. For example, we lobbied the UP for the maintenance of some village roads, and consequently the roads were reconstructed by UP. In addition, we have planted trees by the village roads as an IGA. To ensure social security of the plantation, neighbouring groups within our network are helping us."

there are issues related to tree plantation, and publish themselves promotional material and bulletins giving information on price and stocks of available saplings. They have now attained a minimum level of self-reliance and can be considered as partners, rather than beneficiaries, in the future.

The Tree Farmers' groups have not yet reached the same level of independence, but nevertheless show signs that they are on the way. Used to identifying their problems around agroforestry, they have now broadened the scope of selecting their development needs and the support they require from other organisations in various domains (livestock, fisheries, health, legal rights and so on). The project, facilitating its linkages with other organisations at the beginning, has gradually contributed to developing their capacities so they can access directly other services and resources. They have identified local resources farmers who can provide advisory services, often free of charge. Numerous activities were taken to exploit the potential of pro-

cessing and marketing. Their organisational capacities and internal resources, such as the farmer facilitators, have significantly increased, and they are starting to network with other local farmers' groups.

The hypothesis of trusting in the potential capacity of the farmers and their association has proven successful, despite the doubts and a priori pessimism of many staff and partners. At present, their annual plan of operation constitutes the basis for planning that of the project -an innovative trend in the field of development.

The hypothesis of trusting in the potential capacity of the farmers and their association has proven successful.

Lota Begum is president of *Shapla Forum* (a women's group), organised by the NGO *CCDB*, ten years ago. The group established their collaboration with *VFFP* in 2001.

"Lack of capital for the production of seasonal crops is one important problem for all of us. We are now in a process of receiving loans from "*Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank*", "*Bangladesh Rural Development Board*" and other institutions, not only for our members, but also for other small farmers of our community who have been neglected by "credit institutions". We have already communicated with the government's women's department to get registration for our group. Our ultimate plan is to manage small pieces of land for our landless poor members to provide permanent shelter.



"One of the most important activities listed in our APO was to initiate income-generating activities (IGAs) for the members. We organised several meetings and identified some potentials. From these we prioritised three potential IGAs. These were Handicrafts (Bamboo Basket), Hand embroidery *Panjabi*, and Dry food processing (Rice Cake). *VFFP* staff asked us whether we had considered the feasibility of the IGAs, considering their market. After initial hesitation, three members of our group, including myself, agreed to conduct a market survey. Interestingly, after the market survey, we realised that only one of the three IGAs was feasible. We accepted 'Rice Cake' , and discarded the Bamboo Basket and Hand Embroidery *Panjabi* activities. This was because Bamboo Baskets are a slow item to produce, the profit margin is minimum and traders are not interested in purchasing them regularly. National wholesalers sell Hand Embroidery *Panjabi* to the local market on credit. Consequently, the local retailers are interested in purchasing them on credit. If we wanted to do or follow the same provision for *Panjabi* we would need to manage large amounts of capital, which is beyond our capacity. Moreover, it is a seasonal business and the market is highly competitive. Considering the above reasons, we discarded these activities. Accordingly four of our members initiated an IGA on "Production and Marketing of Rice Cake". During the launch, they produced in small scale to gain experience and earned a profit of Tk. 520 within a one and a half month period. They will gradually expand their business. Now we have a level of confidence to assess the market before selecting new production enterprises."

"One of the most important activities listed in our APO was to initiate income-generating activities"

12. Promoting new approaches and internalising them: the force of accompaniment

Many project staff, and a fortiori NGO staff, perceived positively the innovation in the approaches, but at the same time felt uncertainty and lack of confidence. Used to implementing technical activities according to pre-defined targets and ready-made models, they were far less at ease in a kind of research and action approach, which gave more emphasis to processes and socio-organisational aspects. When NGO staff were briefed on how to try assessing the level of dynamism of farmers' organisations, they immediately translated the checklist given as a reminder into a structured questionnaire. During the first meetings with farmers, they scrupulously filled in the questionnaire, but at their return from the field, they were not able to assess whether the groups they had met had a good or a poor dynamism.



Accompaniment of farmers contributed not only to develop skills, but also the confidence in themselves and in their organisation.

Later on, at the moment of the development of TFG annual plans of operation, some field staff still had the tendency to impose ready-made training programmes. This led to situations such as farmers being trained on mango disease when none of them had a single mango tree in their homesteads. The demand-driven approach, though accepted, took time to become concrete. The tendency to stick to usual approaches was due essentially to the problem of not internalising new approaches, rather than resisting or rejecting innovation. However, there was still a big gap between accepting the new ideas and implementing them. During the early steps of the development of the Tree Farmers Programme, VFFP organised orientation sessions about the programme concepts and methodology. These meetings gathered the NGO staff of each region, and were organised like a training or briefing event, giving little room for exchanges. Soon, it was discovered

that these sessions, even improved with role-plays, were not sufficient to help the staff really own the new approaches. VFFP had also taken the decision to form pairs of field staff instead of sending them individually to the villages, in order to strengthen their confidence and minimise the risks of deviation; one member of the pair being able to complement certain weaknesses of the other and vice-versa. The pairing approach definitely eased the work of field staff, but proved again limited for really internalising the new approaches, since nobody was present to advise them at the time they were in the villages. The use of specialised training institutions in order to strengthen staff capabilities in domains for which they had weaknesses (communication and organisational development) also proved limited, since these institutions were rhetorical and not in touch with the field realities.

There was thus a need for providing 'on-the-job' support to the field staff. Accordingly, a team formed of an NGO supervisor and VFFP regional office and central office staff went into the field whenever the NGO staff were leading or facilitating an event such as a TFG training session or an NMS meeting. After having observed the field staff on the spot, the team asked them for

Mizanur Rahman is a Field Supervisor of the partner NGO WAVE, in Darsana (District of Chuadanga, Jessore region). He was involved in the development of the TFG programme from the beginning.

"In implementing the TFG programme, we worked through a pairing approach; i.e. I worked jointly with one of my female colleagues. This approach allowed us to help each other in internalising and implementing the concepts, strategies, approaches and methods relating to farmers' programmes. While facilitating group events in pairs, I observed that the members felt more comfortable. Therefore, I think that for the implementation of new activities and in new areas, the staff pairing approach is useful.

"For implementation of the project activities, we received accompaniment support from different levels, which was both effective and useful. With this support, we identified our mistakes and weak areas of facilitation techniques and undertook initiatives for our improvement. Moreover, the accompaniment support improved and strengthened our confidence levels. The Farmers' Organisations were also able to benefit from this process. As a result of the accompaniment process, the Farmers' Organisations developed their capacities on managing their organisational activities including organisation of IGAs, and the farmers developed their level of confidence to face external authorities, including registration authorities.

"The HID support from the project also developed and improved my personal capacities. Now I am capable and confident enough to deal with other organisations and individuals. Moreover, my level of knowledge relating to organisational and institutional development has been improved."



"Now I am capable and confident enough to deal with other organisations and individuals."

their own impressions about the way they had performed, and exchanged ideas and comments on how to improve their intervention for the next session. This way of coaching proved time effective for internalising the new approaches since there was an opportunity to discuss the conceptual and methodological aspects from the participants' actual experience. The field staff felt less isolated and had the opportunity to get answers to their doubts and increase their confidence because of the presence of 'accompaniers'. Accompaniment was provided until the moment the staff were confident enough to continue independently, which took the project staff a considerable but necessary amount of time.

The accompaniment approach also contributed to changing the supervisor-subordinate relationship that prevailed. For many years, the role of 'supervisor' was understood as a controller in charge of assessing the progress of project activities and the performance of staff. Usually, when the project staff visited the field, they simply took over leading the meetings with farmers from the NGO staff, to show them 'how to lead a meeting'. With

Accompaniment was provided until the moment the staff were confident enough to continue independently, which took the project staff a considerable but necessary amount of time.

Accompaniment was not only an effective way of promoting HID, but revealed itself as a means of favouring a process for capitalising the project's knowledge.



Accompaniment of NGOs staff: squatting a closed shop, after an event with farmers, the team tries to identify what should be improved, and how.

the accompaniment, this role evolved towards that of a coach, advisor and facilitator who helped the staff to be more effective. This triggered for the field staff a new understanding of their own role vis-à-vis the farmers' organisations. Using the same approach, they played the role of accompanier to the groups to adopt a democratic decision-making process in the selection of needs. They also helped the TFGs and NMSs build their capacities in taking a lead role in their organisations and in the implementation of their plan of activities, the field staff gradually becoming observers during the meetings. After the training and demonstration sessions, the field staff were always present at the moment groups started applying what they had learnt - a presence that comforted the farmers.

Since HID had mainly to deal with changing ways of behaviour and introducing innovative approaches of development, accompaniment needed to be applied at all levels of intervention: regional staff, NGO staff, and farmers' organisations. Actually, 'accompanying the accompaniers' was a necessary step, because they had at the same time to understand their new role, and make their juniors understand their own role as well. The accompaniers from the head of NCU were thus involved in accompaniment processes up to the NGO staff level, which helped establish a permanent link between the conceptual and implementation levels. For instance, through the accompaniment of field staff, VFFP realised that the training methodologies that were utilised were very conventional, and developed further a new training approach, built on adult education principles.

Accompaniment was thus not only an effective way of promoting HID, but revealed itself as a means of favouring a process for capitalising the project's knowledge, and the development of new concepts and approaches based on experience. However, sometimes the partner NGO felt that the project was too much involved in the management of their staff. The concept and approach of accompaniment - a new role for the project - has thus to be explained in order to avoid risk of conflict and misunderstanding. A good way to operate is to include the NGO management in the team of accompaniers.

13. Promoting Gender

Following its new HID strategy, SDC Bangladesh actioned the 2001 initiative to promote gender throughout its projects and programmes, and organised the first workshop with its partners. VFFP attended the event, and developed afterwards a plan of activities for promoting gender. Several initiatives were taken, such as the organisation of traineeship for young female graduates, and the encouragement of women applying for job positions. But, in general, they were still limited, and the concept of gender mainstreaming was not really communicated to the whole VFFP staff. While gender was a concern of the project, it was more taken into account intuitively in the field than formulated in terms of a strategy. For instance, special focus was given to women during the TFG selection - 60% of the VFFP

Md. Ayub Ali is the Treasurer of Merirhat Samaj Kallyan Samity under Polashbari upazilla of Gaibandha district.

"To meet the needs we identified for developing our institutional capacities, VFFP provided training to improve our skills. VFFP also provided regular, accompaniment support to our executive committee members during the practice of these skills, which strengthened our capacity and improved our confidence. Now, we can implement our meeting sessions and write the decisions in the resolution book on our own. We have also introduced some tools relating to documentation, management of group savings and general funds. With support from VFFP, we have opened a bank account in the name of our group. We are now capable enough to manage banking transactions by ourselves. In the mean time, we have applied to the government authority to get registration for our group. We hope that the legal authority will register us soon. The process of strengthening our institutional capacity has increased our members' enthusiasm towards the group. This was proven when we saw our members establish our new office through their own contributions.

"Before collaborating with VFFP, our group only considered males as potential members of our group. However, after the collaboration, we realized that for the sake of real development we should open the door for the females also. Thus, we amended our bylaw and changed the name of our organisation to "Merirhat Samaj Kallyan Samity" (Association for welfare of Merirhat Society) instead of "Merirhat Shukher Ashay Purus Samity" (Association for the Hope and Happiness of the Men of Merirhat). We enrolled three female members into our group and to one of them we gave the responsibility of being vice-president.

"I think all of the above was only possible for us through the improvement of our institutional capacity. It is clear to us that level of development we have achieved is closely related to the promotion of our group's capacity for self-reliance. Our vision is that one day we will be a self-reliant organisation, which could help us to take the lead on local development priorities.

"I have seen many NGOs who work with local groups, but they do not consider the development of capacity for self-reliance within these respective groups. This is the first time I have come across VFFP, who placed massive importance on the promotion of self-reliant organisational capacity alongside the promotion of agroforestry and other livelihood schemes."



"We realized that for the sake of real development we should open the door for the females also"

The establishment of 'gender focal points' help women contact hospital, solve family conflict, avoid early marriages, gain control over income, and so on.



The development of women capacities for facilitating meetings contributes to gender mainstreaming.

The understanding and the internalisation of HID values strongly contributed to pass from 'the promotion of trees' to the 'promotion of people', from a 'structure approach' to a 'process approach'.

clients being women. Gender was often an issue felt and considered more personally than institutionally.

The organisation of a Gender Audit, implemented by a local specialist, enabled VFFP to make progress in the matter. The audit utilised a participatory approach involving the whole project staff as well as partner NGOs, and presented practical recommendations at different levels: structure, policy, resources, capacity building and advocacy. Gender issues have now become an institutional challenge, and are gradually being integrated and internalised by the whole staff, though the process of mainstreaming has started only very recently.

Promoting equal opportunities both for women and men has faced constraints, most often due to the availability of qualified women willing to work at field level. The promotion of female recruitment was most generally well accepted, though in a few cases individual resistance has been met. Gender balanced promotion has become a strong concern of key staff, who have decided not to compromise on gender issues and to raise immediately their concerns as soon as it seems to be forgotten.

Gender mainstreaming has now reached the farmer level. Since the level of discrimination against rural women both in their family and community is particularly significant in Bangladesh, the gender approach adopted by VFFP gave a priority to the empowerment of women as an initial step. For instance, the establishment of 'gender focal points' (NGO staff and female villagers having a good predisposition for promoting gender balance at the local level) help women contact hospital, solve family conflict, avoid early marriages, gain control over income, and so on. The next step, once the women gain enough confidence, will be to involve their spouses more in gender issues, by using participatory gender framework analysis tools open to the whole community.

14. Conclusion: off to new approaches and towards sustainability

The human and institutional development operated within the project and its partners (NGOs, NMSs, TFGs) led to a series of changes: changes in the ways of vision building, of thinking, of working and of interacting with one other.

The understanding and the internalisation of the project's stated values - poverty reduction, equity, empowerment, promotion of gender issues, sustainability, and responsible partnership - strongly contributed to transform at all levels what was mainly a technical project into a people-centred project. It passed from 'the promotion of trees' to the 'promotion of people', from a 'structure approach' to a 'process approach'.

The development of capabilities in the field of HID within the project and the partner NGOs contributed to the implementation of innovative approaches that emphasised the development of farmers' capacities for organising themselves, identifying their

development priorities, implementing joint actions, and dealing with services providers and market forces. This new way of thinking - compared to the traditional conception of technologies of dissemination - opened new doors and dimensions. The consideration of social and economic spheres, and of other needs apart from agroforestry, gradually generated new ideas on how to give more appropriate support to farmers. The facilitation of links with other support organisations, the exploration of markets, and the development of income-generating activities go far beyond the usual delivery of technical messages. Gradually, livelihood and marketing approach concepts took shape in this process.

Beside the approaches, HID brought about changes in working habits and working methods. More effective planning, coordination, implementation and monitoring are visible at all levels: project, partner NGOs and farmers organisations. The present participatory way of working contrasts with the habits of the past. The project and its NGO partners have now evolved more towards a role of facilitator, inviting the farmers' organisations to depend on them less, and to be the first actors of their own development.

The relationship between stakeholders has also taken a new form. VFFP and the NGOs are now engaged in a partnership that is not only in name, but is a balanced collaboration in which each party is recognised and respected by the other for its competence, experience, and commitment. This partnership benefits, at various degrees, the 'clients' of the project. The impressive institutional capacities development of NMSs enabled them to graduate to the rank of the project's partner, and to cut the cord that links them with the partner NGOs. The TFGs still have a way to go before reaching such a degree of reliance, although they are on course to do so. But they have gained in confidence, and have realised that they can access different resources and services by themselves, with a little help from VFFP. They have developed the capability to identify their own priorities, and a certain capacity to segregate the real support they need. They are building the foundations for a sustainable process of development.



The ownership of farmers on their development process is certainly one of the most important achievements of promoting HID.

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