

research highlights

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Social Capital in a Rural Community

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What is social capital? In what forms does it appear in rural Bangladesh? What part has it played in shaping the outcome of NGO interventions, and how has it itself been reshaped in the process?

Introduction

Social capital is a key element in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework that has guided CARE Bangladesh's natural resources activities since the late 1990s. But no explicit attempt has so far been made by the organisation to define what it is, to consider how it might be promoted, or to determine how it may already have been affected by the various interventions that have been made. This paper, which highlights the central findings of a more extensive piece of research, is a preliminary attempt to explore these issues. (See Boxes 1 and 2 for further details).

The study draws mainly on a field investigation carried out over a two-week period in one neighbourhood (*para*) where a farmer field school had been established under CARE's former GO-Interfish Project. Briefer reference is also made to a community where a farmer field school had been organised under Shabge – the sister project that has now been amalgamated with GO-IF under the new Rural Livelihoods Programme. PRA methods were used and most of the data were generated through a series of individual household case studies. The work was carried out by a team drawn from the former projects, the Social Development Unit, and the Livelihood Monitoring Project¹.

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Box 1: The series

CARE Bangladesh is transforming itself into a rights-based organisation that will identify and address the underlying causes of poverty. This is one of several studies designed to aid the transition by clarifying the nature of the context in which the organisation works and showing how this affects the activities undertaken. Further details of the series appear in Box 2.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first reviews the literature on social capital, breaking the concept down into a series of components that will inform the subsequent discussion. The second provides an introduction to the main community where the field investigation of social capital was carried out. The third comprises a series of household case studies illustrating the different forms and permutations in which social capital may appear at various levels in the communal hierarchy. The fourth draws on the case materials to identify the types of relationship through which social capital is expressed. The fifth then begins to open up the question of how the two CARE projects and other NGO interventions have interacted with social capital to lead to particular outcomes.

Defining social capital

Social capital first appeared in development discourse in the 1990s, but a universally agreed definition has yet to emerge. Robert Putnam has been central to the debate. Although his concept of social capital differs somewhat from that of DFID's Sustainable Livelihoods Framework, from which CARE's own approach derives, it represents a more

developed working through of the relevant issues, and is adopted as the primary framework in what follows.

To Putnam, social capital is made up three interacting and mutually re-enforcing elements: *trust*, *norms of reciprocity* and *networks of civic engagement*.

Reciprocity may be *balanced*, i.e. characterised by exchanges of items or services of equivalent value taking place within relatively short periods of time. Alternatively, it may be *generalised* through continuing relationships of exchange, where a service offered does not carry any immediate expectation of an equivalent return, but is recognised by both parties as entailing a longer term obligation to reciprocate if the need should arise. Of the two, the generalised form is regarded as by far the more significant.

Networks are characterised by interpersonal communication and exchange, and may be either *horizontal*, where agents of equivalent status or power are brought together, or *vertical*, where unequal agents are conjoined in asymmetric relations of hierarchy and dependence. Networks of civic engagement, like neighbourhood associations, represent intense horizontal interaction and are the essential form of social capital. A vertical network cannot sustain social trust and cooperation in the same way. Patron-client relations, as a type of vertical network, involve interpersonal exchange and reciprocal obligations, but the vertical bonds of clientism work against horizontal group organisation. Kinship and friendship are in some respects comparable to horizontal ties of civic engagement, but these “strong” interpersonal connections are ultimately less important than their “weak” counterparts, like acquaintanceship. The stocks of social capital found in effective *civic societies* regenerate themselves in virtuous circles, whilst the *uncivic society*, with its lack of generalised trust, operates more as a vicious circle.

Putnam, then, defines social capital as a purely collective and unequivocally positive entity, that is exclusively associated with horizontal networks and mainly characterised by generalised reciprocity and “weak”, non-kin-based types of relationship. DFID, by contrast,

sees it as “the social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihood objectives”, which both casts the net wider to include vertical connections, and treats social capital as something that may be accumulated by the individual, rather than as a collective phenomenon. In so doing, it also opens up the possibility that social capital may embody certain more negative characteristics.

These differences notwithstanding, Putnam, DFID and most other analysts are agreed that social capital is intrinsically valuable and performs a number of important specific functions. These include: reducing transactions costs and risk; discouraging free-riding and encouraging sustainable practices; facilitating the sharing of knowledge; reducing vulnerability to shocks; compensating for a shortage of physical or human capital among the poor; and facilitating access to external resources.

The study community

Azimpara, where the main research was carried out, is in Dinajpur district and comprises 41 Muslim and 36 Hindu households. The Muslims are, on average, much better off, with a greater proportion of large, medium and small farm households; whilst two thirds of the Hindus fall into the marginal and landless categories.

The wealthiest individuals are two Muslim brothers, Azim and Aziz, who between them own 100 acres. As Azim has aged, Aziz has emerged as the dominant force. He works in close conjunction with his two sons, one of whom was the male leader of the farmer field school. Azim and Aziz are grandsons of Piru, who led the group that first settled in the *para* some fifty years ago. The lineage he founded has subsequently incorporated other smaller units through marriage, and now has 32 households, subdivided into three sections. A second, smaller lineage can be traced back to a distant cousin of Piru who was another member of the original group of settlers. There are also a handful of poorer Muslim households descended from individuals who attached themselves to the community more recently.

The Hindu part of the community comprises three separate patrilineages,

each connected by marriage. The largest, which was founded by an individual named Bocha, comprises 18 households and includes three brothers who control most of the Hindu land. One of these, Bhabesh, has emerged as leader, and his wife, in turn, has been appointed as the woman leader of the farmer field school. The second lineage accounts for a further 14 mainly poorer households, and the third for another four.

The social structures that have been described make it necessary to refine the critical distinction that Putnam makes between strong (primarily kin-based) and weak (acquaintance based) relationships. These now emerge not so much as mutually exclusive categories, but as poles to a continuum that begins with the nuclear family, and then continues through the progressively “weaker” categories of siblings, the wider lineage and the religion based group, before arriving ultimately at members of other religions and communities.

Household case studies

Taking DFID’s broad and individually focussed definition of “the social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihood objectives” as a point of departure, but also keeping Putnam’s conceptual framework in mind, a series of household case studies are now explored to see how social capital is accumulated in our study community. Five are Muslim and four Hindu, with the selection covering the spectrum from the wealthiest families at one extreme to some of the poorest at the other. In each instance, an attempt was made to identify the key types of relationships in which the households in question are engaged and to determine the categories into which the other parties involved fell.

We begin with **Aziz**, the effective overall leader of the community. As noted earlier, his household falls within the dominant lineage, and sits at the centre of an extensive network of “strong” kin-based links. He is the second largest land owner, leasing out the greater part of his holding, and directly managing the remainder himself. The direct vertical relationships arising from his land and other assets dominate the household’s social capital, and provide the foundation

upon which many of its other significant linkages are built. The share-cropped land is worked by 20 households, some of whom are drawn from within the circle of “strong” kin relationships, but many of whom only enjoy “weaker” linkages to Aziz. The remaining portion is cultivated by temporary labour drawn from 32 local households, which again cover a spectrum from the very strongly to the much more weakly related. Relatively few of these relationships are of the multi-stranded patron-client type, and even those that are do not tend to involve very extensive obligations.

His powerful economic position enables Aziz to play an important part in *para* and wider institutions. He is a dominant figure on the informal *para* court (*shalish*), and also participates in the village *shalish*. He is involved in running the local *madrassa*, and sits on the *para* mosque committee, which among other things involves overseeing the donation of meat and money at Eid to poor Muslims. Aziz’s wealth has also enabled him to establish contacts and exert influence well beyond the immediate community. He counts some 30 leading local figures among his acquaintances, and together these comprise a major store of critical “weak” relationships, as well as representing important “bridging” links. His external linkages enable Aziz to access key resources for distribution within the *para*. Some of these are allocated to households from his own lineage who are not properly entitled to them, providing a clear example of the kind of abuse that can arise where “strong” relationships figure prominently in the social landscape.

Aminul is Aziz’s son. With initial assistance from his father and uncle, he has now secured a semi-independent economic base, and is currently being groomed as a future leader. He has already taken responsibility for dealing with CARE and other NGOs on behalf of the Muslim households, and has begun to build his own bridging relationships with the *Upazilla*, but for the present, most of his key relations are still confined to the *para* and the immediately surrounding area. His household interacts most intensively with the immediate family circle in his homestead, which includes his mother, his elder brother and his wife, and his unmarried siblings. Collectively, this

group engages in an extensive form of generalised reciprocity, where members can be relied upon for support in child care and nursing in times of sickness and will also provide each other with small cash loans, small commodity exchanges, and assistance if natural disaster should strike. Beyond the immediate family, Aminul, like his father, enjoys an extensive network of largely single-stranded “weaker” relations revolving mainly around the operation of his land.

Abul Kalam is a small Muslim landowner who is a farmer field school member and is distantly related to the most powerful households. His closest links are with his mother and his brother, and broadly follow the pattern of strong relations with generalised reciprocity identified in the previous case. He has 0.75 acres of his own land and shares in a further 0.75 acres from Aminul’s brother, to whom he is also linked in a number of other ways. In the wider community, Abul enjoys only limited and mainly reciprocal relations of various kinds with six other Muslim households, as well as single-stranded relations with five Hindu households. He also has a small number of other weak linkages of a similar nature with households from beyond the *para*.

Momena Bewa is a poor Muslim widow whose husband belonged to the less influential branch of the main lineage. She is an associate farmer field school member. She owns the 0.12 acres of land on which her house is built, and shares her home with her own remaining unmarried son. Her two other sons, a medium farmer and a small farmer, live in the same homestead. Her closest relationships are with her sons and two stepsons, who also live nearby. She often looks after their children, and the family group provides several other types of mutual help. Her case thus provides another example of strong relations combined with generalised reciprocity. In addition, she enjoys quite close relations with the three wealthiest Muslim families in the neighbouring homestead, all of whom can be relied upon to provide some help in natural disasters and other major crises. In return she carries out small domestic tasks, and sometimes looks after their children. The picture of her social capital is completed by a handful of more marginal weaker relationships with other Muslim

and Hindu households, whom she helps with child-care, with whom she exchanges small items, and from whom she receives various minor types of assistance. She has hardly any significant contacts beyond the *para*.

Shamsul Alam is a Muslim labourer and tenant with few kin. He owns no land, but currently shares in 1.25 acres from Aziz and Azim, and lives on the edge of a bamboo plot owned by Hazar, the third richest person in the *para*. Shamsul has a brother, but he is also very poor and there is little scope for mutual support. With his wife having no kin of her own in the community, and with only one or two relations elsewhere with whom they maintain much contact, the household has come to rely much more heavily than is normal upon “weaker” extra-family links. The primary contact is with Hazar, upon whom they depend, in patron-client fashion, for a range of different types of assistance. The household also enjoys similar but less extensive links with Azim and Aziz, and maintain a series of mainly single-stranded weak relationships with 15 other Muslim and 10 Hindu households. Perhaps as a result of their lack of kinship ties, Shamsul’s household has proved keen to seize opportunities offered by NGOs, and are associate farmer field school members.

Bhabesh, as we saw earlier, is regarded as the leader of the Hindu part of the *para*. As a direct descendant of the original settler, and the brother of the two richest Hindus, he enjoys a more modest version of the extended strong kinship network found among the leading Muslims. In another example of generalised reciprocity, the group of brothers forms a cohesive and mutually supportive unit, exchanging small loans, agricultural materials and advice, and assistance in times of distress. But such relationships are not exclusively conducted within this inner circle. Bhabesh has inherited 4.5 acres of land and shares in an additional 1.25 from two moderately well off Muslims, who are not closely related to the most powerful households. He directly manages all of his own land, and hires labourers from 26 different households within the community, a minority of whom are also connected to him in other ways as clients.

Together with his brother and the head of the other comparatively wealthy Hindu household, Bhabesh plays a leading part in the deliberations of the *para shalish*, and represents the *para* on the village bench. Another dimension of his leadership lies in his role as the key contact for NGOs wishing to establish a presence in the Hindu part of the *para*. Alongside the successful links forged with NGOs, Bhabesh has been able to establish further bridging connections with a range of key individuals in the surrounding area, and it is one of these “weak” contacts that has proved particularly helpful in accessing NGO resources. In the wider forum of the union, his membership of the Awami League earlier provided an entrée to the party Union Committee, with its central influence on the distribution of official resources at the local level. As with Aziz, a proportion of these are channelled to “strongly” related but undeserving parties, but the remainder goes to those more genuinely in need.

Tanni Chandra Roy is a Hindu and similarly belongs to the first and most powerful lineage. He is a village doctor and a full member of the field school. He owns 0.5 acres, of which 0.2 acres is shared out, and shares in a further 2.5 acres, most of which is owned by Azim. His closest relations are with the families of his three married sons, and of a nephew from an adjoining homestead. As the senior partner Tanni tends to give more than he receives, and taken as a whole, these relations represent a slightly modified version of the strong links with generalised reciprocity found in many of the other cases that have been discussed. In addition, Tanni has a network of wider and weaker relations extending to 27 other Hindu and six Muslim households within the community, virtually all of which revolve around the exchange of small commodities or of labour. His links beyond the community are much more limited.

Atal Chandra is another member of the most powerful Hindu lineage. His mother also comes from the *para* and is the sister of a big farmer. He owns and farms 0.25 acres and is a full field school member. He shares a homestead and enjoys generalised reciprocal relations with his father and his married brother. Links to

his better off relations are not very close, but they can be relied upon to help if Atal is involved in any disputes coming before the *shalish*. His other important set of relationships are with a number of the most powerful Muslim households, for whom Atal frequently works as a labourer, but none of these are of the patron-client type.

Kirik Chandra comes from the second and poorest of the three Hindu lineages and is an associate field school member. He owns only 0.1 acres of land, and makes his living as a labourer and a rickshaw van puller. He lives on a tiny homestead with his landless father and sharecropper brother in an area separated from other members of his lineage at the fringe of the community. His father and brother assist in times of sickness but are unable to offer much other help, and by contrast with most of the other cases considered, Kirik’s household may be taken as an example of a low strong link/low reciprocal engagement type. His main contacts are with the big Muslim landowners, for whom he works. He also enjoys more limited connections to the dominant Hindu lineage. Beyond this, Kirik exchanges interest-free loans with a handful of other landless households, and engages in one or two other relatively loose single-stranded relationships. The shortage of other forms of social capital is, however, to some extent compensated for by multiple NGO membership.

How social capital is constructed

The case studies reveal several types of relationship through which social capital, in the broad DFID sense of the term, may be expressed and accumulated. In this section an attempt is made to delve more deeply into how these individual components work and inter-connect. A broad distinction is drawn, in the first instance, between relations that are largely internal to the community and those that are external in nature. The internal relations can then be further subdivided into those that are, in Putnam’s sense, vertical and those that are horizontal.

Vertical links between parties of differing status are found primarily in the sphere of agricultural production. In addition to the relationships between landlords and their

tenants, and between surplus farmers and their labourers, these may also arise through the provision of tubewell water and power tiller services for ploughing by surplus farmers to either small farmers or tenants. Other forms of internal vertical relationship include money lending for interest and various types of charitable giving and support in times of hardship. Vertical relations also extend to the sphere of intra-communal negotiation and dispute resolution, encompassing both bargaining around marriage contracts and the deliberations of the *shalish*. A final category of relationship, which generally appears in vertical form, is found in the passing on of knowledge and advice about agricultural practices.

The various vertical and primarily economic relationships co-exist with a series of more horizontal or symmetric types of linkage. Some of these revolve around the joint ownership or use of various items and facilities, such as hand pumps and ponds. Others, like childcare and tending the sick, involve the exchange of services. Whilst the individual household normally provides the primary unit within which such forms of co-operation takes place, the residential compound can also be highly significant in these instances. Other types of labour exchange extend further beyond the homestead-based kin group. Even more common are the exchange of small interest-free cash loans. Small household items, including oil, rice, salt, onion, kerosene, chillies and coconut oil, are circulated in a similar fashion, usually among women, and are typically repaid a few days later after the next market. Such types of reciprocity are, however, normally confined to relatively small circles of households.

Beyond these internal relationships a number of links connect the immediate community to the wider world beyond. These include general government services reaching down to the *para*, and more occasional approaches made by residents to officials on an individual basis for particular purposes. For the majority, whilst it may not always be impossible to take action on their own behalf, some form of intermediation, involving a combination of powerful insiders and local representatives, will often be required, although in certain instances powerful

households are able to employ their external linkages largely or purely for their own benefit.

The earlier parts of this section and the preceding case studies have demonstrated the diversity of possible sources of social capital if the concept is defined in the more inclusive sense employed by DFID. But to what extent does the picture that has emerged conform to the more restrictive definition associated with Putnam's civic society? Following the criteria detailed earlier, this will depend upon an affirmative answer to three questions: whether networks of engagement are primarily structured along horizontal (symmetric) rather than vertical (asymmetric) lines; whether they are predominantly weak (acquaintance) as opposed to strong (kin-based); and whether norms of reciprocity are generalised rather than balanced in nature.

With regard to the first question, it is clear that relations are structured more along vertical than along horizontal lines. Within the community, the asymmetric links between landlords and tenants, and between the hirers and providers of labour, are central to the livelihoods of most, if not all households. These are accompanied, in turn, by secondary and equally asymmetric re-distributive mechanisms in the form of regular charitable giving and the more occasional provision of material support under conditions of individual or more generalised stress. Beyond the community, the links mediated by the relatively wealthy and powerful minority emerge as of greater importance than those that the majority of households are able to initiate on their own behalf. But at the same time, it should be noted that only quite a small minority of the vertical relations observed are of a clearly multi-stranded patron-client type, with those approximating to the single-stranded form in a clear majority.

But if vertical relations are not of a markedly patron-client in nature, do they remain generally "strong" in the sense Putnam's uses? Employing the definitions developed earlier, it is clear that comparatively strong relations do predominate. We see, for example, close kin providing each other with land,

engaging in sharecropping relations, mutually exchanging irrigation water and linking in other less significant ways. We also see instances in both the Muslim and Hindu communities of leaders arranging access to VGD cards for kin who are not properly qualified to receive them. But, at the same time, it is also apparent that vertical relations are less likely to arise with other members of strongly associated (i.e. kin-based) groups than those of a more horizontal nature.

The dominance of vertical relations in general leaves relatively little space for relations of a more reciprocal or horizontal type, but these still play a significant role for certain actors at least. This is most evident in the case of the powerful minority, who are able to participate in the local branches of political parties and other forms of association related to facilities such as schools and markets. The links thus formed with their peers from surrounding communities and in the wider fora of the Union and *Upazilla* enable them to perform a bridging function that, in turn, provides an additional dimension to the vertical relations contracted within the community. Their poorer counterparts, by contrast, have relatively little opportunity to take part in civic associations. In their case, such horizontal relations as can be maintained are confined mainly to the reciprocal exchange of caring services, small commodities and interest-free cash loans, and even this more truncated form of social capital is not available on a significant scale in all instances.

It is also evident that the great majority of the horizontal relations that do exist are strong rather than weak in nature. There are, however, some limited exceptions to this general rule, where poorer people are able to collaborate across religious and communal divides. And finally, whilst predominantly conducted in the context of strong linkages, it appears that such reciprocity as does exist is often of a generalised rather than of a more specific type, with only a minority of the exchanges that have been documented, such as the free exchange of labour, appearing to carry with them an expectation of an immediate and equivalent return.

Taken as a whole, the application of the three criteria suggest that this is a relatively uncivic society, which currently

only possesses a modest supply of social capital in Putnam's sense. But the fact that the dominant vertical relations are not exclusively ordered along patron-client lines; that forms of horizontal relations are present which are not entirely "strong" in nature; and that norms of reciprocity are quite strongly generalised; together indicate that it is not absolutely uncivic in nature. The specific civic elements that are found represent potential building blocks for the establishment of a more generally civic society in future. In the next section, we ask how far current NGO interventions, including CARE's farmer field school, might be able to turn that potential into reality.

How NGOs affect social capital

Whether they do so will, in the first instance, be a function of whether a strategy of co-existence, collaboration or conflict with dominant communal figures has been pursued. Outcomes will then need to be reviewed to see whether vertical relations have been re-enforced or horizontal ones given greater prominence, whether it is strong or weak links that have been encouraged, and whether new horizontal bonds have been created with other organisations. The current investigation has focussed on pre-existing forms of social capital and cannot delve into these matters in any depth. Some preliminary data and indications are, however, available and these are summarised, starting with the work of other NGOs, and then turning to the case of CARE itself.

Before CARE established a presence, five other NGOs were already functioning in the *para*, of which Grameen and BRAC were the most important. Grameen members were found in almost equal numbers in both parts of the *para*, whilst BRAC operated only in the Hindu quarter. Members of all classes were found among the NGO membership, but in overall terms, marginal farm households were most likely to belong, followed in sequence by small farmers, middle farmers and the landless.

Among the Muslims, NGOs seem to have opted for "co-existence", with the most powerful households seeking neither to block, nor to themselves participate to any significant degree in what has gone on.

The households that have been involved seem neither to be very closely connected to the better off, nor concentrated in any particular lineage. Those that participate most extensively are actually those from the group with the least extensive set of kin relations, and it seems that they may actually have sought an NGO affiliation to compensate for their relative lack of other forms of social capital.

The situation in the Hindu part of the *para* corresponds more closely to the elite “collaboration” type. The larger number of NGOs functioning here and the higher overall level of participation partly reflect the presence of more relatively poor households, but are also in part a function of efforts made by leading members to draw in external development organisations. All sectors of the Hindu population benefit, although there are considerable variations in the degree to which different parties participate. It appears that the BRAC group is to some extent shaped by what Putnam would describe as strong relations, whereas Grameen has shown greater potential to become a truly civic association. This in itself, however, says nothing about the actual effectiveness of either grouping. Within the broad overall patterns observed, further differences between individual households may be identified, with some households emerging as far more prolific “joiners” than others.

In the case of CARE, it was found that 56 of the 77 households in the *para* belonged to the GO-IF farmer field school. Virtually all full members were drawn from the big, medium and small farmer categories, whilst the more marginally involved associate or ‘buddy’ members nearly all came from the small, marginal and landless categories. Of the 28 full member households, 68% were Muslim and 32% Hindu, whilst Hindus accounted for just over half of the buddy category. There is little evidence of domination by particular lineages or exclusion of others, with degrees of participation and non-participation largely reflecting relative differences in wealth. On balance, it would therefore appear that there may at least have been some promotion of the desirable “weak” relations in this instance, but it is important to note that all of these comments are based on only the most superficial examination.

Finally, a word should be said about Shabge. In the present enquiry, which focused primarily on a community where GO-IF had been working, it was only possible to make a quick visit to one site and to reproduce only a tiny part of the basic study. This did, however, throw up one or two potentially important comparative insights. The GO-IF farmer field school was formally made up of men and women, but effectively male dominated. Given the usual principle of residence, where men remain in their own communities at marriage whilst women move, this meant that the new organisation brought together people who already had many other connections, and it is likely to have functioned in a way that reflected this. Shabge, by contrast, worked only with women and mainly with those drawn from the poorer categories of household. As such, pre-existing kinship links between members were far fewer and less well established, and the potential for the creation of new “weak” link structures, of the type specifically highlighted by Putnam, would therefore have been greater. This view is reinforced by preliminary investigations into the types of intra-group relations, which revealed quite highly developed patterns of horizontal reciprocity, but at the same time showed much lower levels of other forms of interaction, and revealed hardly any present capacity to form “bridging” relations with the world beyond the *para*. Building on this potential represents an interesting challenge for future CARE programming.

Box 2. The series

1. Institutions and Rights
2. Social Capital in a Rural Community
3. Securing Access to Water Bodies
4. Land Policy and Administration
5. The Changing Role of Women
6. How Farmers Learn
7. Gender Roles and Relations

Full versions of these papers will be posted at <http://www.carebd.org/publication.html>.

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