



## WHAT WORKS FOR THE POOREST?

Knowledge, Policies  
And Practices  
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# From Dependency to Emancipation

**Building Solidarity  
Through Collective Action**



**Brigitta Bode  
Anowarul Haq  
Saifuddin Ahmed**

By

**Murad Bin Aziz  
Apurba Deb Roy  
Mukti Majumder**

With

**Kamal Kar**

The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not represent in their entirety the views of CARE Bangladesh.

## 1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a recipient of large amounts of foreign aid with the highest concentration of NGOs. It is also home to the largest NGOs in the world (BRAC, *Grameen*, *Asha*). Yet despite the vast amount of financial and human resources that are deployed to alleviate poverty, seasonal hunger (*monga*) continues to be an annual phenomenon in the Northwest of Bangladesh forcing poor rural households to sell assets and incur debts, thereby contributing to a spiral of poverty. The inability of NGOs to mitigate one of the most extreme forms of poverty lies largely in their approaches, which rely not only on heavy external inputs, but view program participants as recipients of hand-outs, ideas and technologies. In fact, it is difficult to find 100 villages in the Northwest of Bangladesh in which people have successfully extricated themselves from hunger, not to mention poverty. Instead, communities continue to face multiple problems – under-employment, seasonal hunger, diarrhea and dysentery, poor education facilities and non-attendance of teachers, failure of state entitlement schemes, exploitation of the poorest households, and so on. This paper discusses an approach that enables communities and the local state to address the multiple causes of poverty and social exclusion. This approach is different from mainstream approaches in that it depends on insiders' capacities, strengths, and the collective pursuit to exit poverty. Fundamental to the approach is also the notion that sustainability of poverty alleviation initiatives can only be achieved if the work is institutionalized within the local state.

Development interventions that seek to "raise voice and ensure representation of the poorest men and women" must work towards people's self-respect, their capacity to find their own solutions using local resources and opportunities, and their ability to foster and practice forms of public cooperation and engagement in the political arena. The latter are fundamental to the democratic process. Nijeder Janyia Nijera (henceforth Nijera) works through a development approach that addresses the multiple causes and symptoms of extreme poverty, including hunger, through a community led approach.<sup>1</sup> It builds upon the strengths and capacities of the poorest women and men and their strong wish to overcome poverty and hunger, and it draws upon people's desire for pride and self-respect.

Nijera's community led approach works with women and men to analyze their life conditions – hunger, forms of dependency and exploitation, open defecation, access to natural resources – and considers ways to collectively (including the better off) change the conditions. It is a development process that engages men and women from all socio-economic and religious groups, in dialogic practice, analysis, planning and action, emphasizing poverty alleviation. The approach has the potential to lead to greater agency amongst the poor and lower middle classes, improved social relations amongst members of various socio-economic and religious backgrounds, and ultimately a structural transformation at the hamlet, village and union levels.

## 2. Building Solidarity

### Spatial Strategy

Nijera works through a unique spatial, with a team of action researchers and community facilitators working initially in a single hamlet, which over time becomes the center of an

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex 1 for Nijera's vision and mission statements.

expanding network of initiatives fanning out into surrounding communities, referred to as clusters.<sup>2</sup> The spreading-out of community led initiatives to adjacent hamlets, a process that is phased, is supported by local leaders from the main hamlets and staff. As analysis, planning, and collective initiatives unfold, new local leaders emerge and move the process forward. Initially, this work remains limited to leaders' own communities, but once successes are shared and discussed with neighboring residents through large community events and community visits to observe the changes first hand, nearby communities actively seek to engage in the process. Their participation, in turn, sets in motion actions through which new leaders emerge in their own communities. In this way, the approach has a cascading effect.

### CLTS as an Entry Point

A powerful entry point to initiate a community led process is Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS), an activity that engages the entire community in sanitation work and has the potential to benefit a large number of households. Community analyses indicate annual household expenditures of approximately Tk. 1,500 to treat diarrhea and dysentery related illnesses and annual losses of up to 20 work days.<sup>3</sup> CLTS is a) non-political and relatively class neutral; b) easy to accomplish; c) brings considerable benefit to a community – a visibly cleaner hamlet – in a relatively short period of time; d) develops collaboration and community effort; and e) instills a sense of collective accomplishment and pride.

Total sanitation – open defecation free communities and hygienic practices – considerably reduces the incidence of cholera, dysentery, and diarrhea, enabling communities to save precious and scarce household resources, leading to relatively quick and lasting economic returns. Further, CLTS, a no-subsidy approach, at the core of which lies collective action, leads to new forms of public engagement.<sup>4</sup> The approach can create a platform, so to speak, to build solidarity, encourage forms of collective action, and ultimately engage communities in development processes that lead to broader social change.<sup>5</sup>

CLTS can contribute to crucial changes in the overall hamlet environment. Generally, the village atmosphere is anti-poor, with elites and the better off marginalizing the poorest households during social events and important decision making processes. There is little belief that the poorest can meaningfully contribute to any activity, let alone the development process and the transformation of local society. This attitude has resulted in a general despondency amongst the poorest households, who feel

**Nijeder Janiya Nijera  
(We, for Ourselves)**

*Staff Number:* 42

*Operating Area:*  
8 unions in 5 districts (Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha and Chittagong)

*Coverage (so far):*  
35,000 (7000 HH)

*Project Duration:*  
Since October 2004

*Donor:*  
DfID up to 09/2006  
CARE Bangladesh from 10/2006

<sup>2</sup> The Social Development Unit has developed a para (hamlet) typology through which staff identify the poorest communities within each locality and initiate the community led process. For a detailed discussion of this typology see CARE, Social Development Unit, 2005a.

<sup>3</sup> The daily wage rate for an agricultural day laborer in the Northwest of Bangladesh, depending on the location specific crop cycle and the associated demand for workers, ranges from Tk. 50-80 (men) and Tk. 25-50 (women).

<sup>4</sup> See Kar, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> See Kanji, et. al. 2006.

unwelcome, disrespected, and isolated. CLTS has the potential to break this cycle, as the poorest households take the lead in sanitation work and through 100 percent sanitation gain respect and social standing for their efforts and hard work within and beyond the community.

### Emerging Leaders

As the CLTS process unfolds, “natural leaders” (NLs) emerge. These are individuals, men and women from different socio-economic groups, with commitment and enthusiasm, who take the lead in planned activities. The characteristics of these women and men include: inspirational, dynamic, willing to help others with advise and labor, and in some instances, charismatic. *Nijera* invests considerable resource to build capacity of these emerging natural leaders through workshops and field visits. Frequently these capacity building events also involve locally elected members, alongside front line and senior CARE staff. Such interactions enable communities, elected officials, and staff to learn from each other and provide support to one another within and across clusters to plan and engage in new, contextually specific activities. Equally important, this collective process has allowed for the continuous emergence of ideas and spontaneous spreading to nearby communities and other clusters.

An important dimension to the residential workshops (these are generally attended by 40-50 people) from all *Nijera* clusters have been the interactions of the poorest men and women with those from better off groups, different religious backgrounds (Hindu / Muslims), and elected representatives. Stepping out of their communities, unions, and districts, into a more neutral setting to analyze the causes of hunger, poverty, social exclusion, and lack of governance, enables people to suspend – and ultimately question – their assumptions about ‘the other’ and begin to engage in a productive and meaningful debate. This dialogic process coupled with the successes of key initiatives such as CLTS, fighting hunger, increasing wages, etc. has a transformative effect on individuals.

Disadvantaged men and women have commented that through these workshops they gain courage to articulate concerns and ideas and interact more confidently with people of different economic backgrounds, including locally elected and regional government officials. Women and men from better off households re-consider their notions about “the poor” and begin to change the ways in which they engage with poorer households on a day-to-day basis. For instance, interviews with poor and better off women and men revealed that the better off now invite the poor to attend social functions as guests, rather than as servants and are more respectful of poorer men and women’s views and opinions.<sup>6</sup> Table 1, below, outlines the relational changes within communities and the processes through which development initiatives are taken up. The impact of successful initiatives contribute to a more enabling environment, in which dialogue and collective action have the potential to become socially embedded processes.

These workshops take place at a project level (with natural leaders from all clusters) as well as cluster wise. They are designed to channel the energy, enthusiasm, and momentum that has been created through the community led process and build solidarity amongst NLs from within each cluster and across clusters. Presently, natural leaders from each cluster are forming local organizations to address specific issues in their localities, e.g. ‘fair wages’, infrastructure, abolishing hunger. This collective of

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<sup>6</sup> See Kanji, et.al., 2006.

natural leaders, mostly from the poorest strata of society, enables greater bargaining power vis-à-vis local government, as chairmen and members cannot ignore the resources and people that NLs can mobilize. The NL organizations are designed to become a part of the local government system. For example, elected members are now working with natural leaders to identify the poorest households for distribution of entitlement schemes and natural leaders are replacing non-active standing committee members.

Table 1. Emerging Leadership

Empowerment of poor men and women	Extent of Impact	Changes / Outcome
A. Emerging local leadership amongst the poor	400 NLs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergence of natural leaders (NLs) through successes of CLTS has redefined the meaning of development outcome-oriented leadership in the community; 60 percent of NLs have earned broad support cutting across religious, political, gender, class, ethnic boundaries</li> <li>• Emergence of outcome-oriented leadership has created space for community experts to excel and flourish (community engineers, consultants to neighboring communities, chilli, vine potato)</li> <li>• Local leaders facilitate analysis of the causes of poverty with the community using participatory visual methods and encourage and mobilize collective action to overcome poverty</li> <li>• Emergence of a large number of collective pro-poor activities</li> <li>• Engagement in evolving mechanisms of community monitoring</li> <li>• Local leaders spread activities to other hamlets</li> <li>• Local leaders begin to bridge the gap between community and local government and state bureaucracy</li> <li>• Informal local leaders being to constitute a force in local development recognized by local government</li> <li>• Local leaders organize cultural events (drama, folk songs – all locally innovated) to share methods and activities</li> </ul>

### Beyond CLTS

During the CLTS process, the poorest men and women analyze the causes of hunger, exploitation, dependency relations, and examine their natural resources and available economic opportunities. Each of the clusters of communities in which Nijera works has taken its own path to development. Examples include: 1) increases in wage rates and collective fish cultivation (*Mankira, Dinajpur*); 2) abolishing hunger by using local resources and indigenous knowledge (*Jalagari, Gaibandha*); 3) income generating activities for women (*Mostapur, Rangpur*); 4) reducing physical isolation through collective construction of infrastructure (a bamboo bridge) and an education initiative (*Adhikari, Dinajpur*); 5) controlled grazing leading to better resource use (a third cropping cycle) and a 'save the forest initiative' (*Patyia, Chittagong* district).

In *Jalagari* (*Gaibandha* district), widowed, divorced, abandoned, and landless women, who were socially excluded and unable to find enough work to maintain a most basic standard of well being, emerged as a force and have successfully driven the initiative to abolish hunger in their community. A significant change in *Jalagari* and nearby communities is the gradual disappearance of extreme poverty – seasonal hunger, social exclusion from - or servitude at social events, poor diet and health, and lack of adequate clothing.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of the *Jalagari* and *Mankira* initiatives see Kanji, et.al. 2006.

Seasonal hunger, widespread in the Northwest of Bangladesh, is a social phenomenon that is prevalent amongst poor women-headed households. It forces individuals into multi-dimensional exploitative relations that reduce social standing and lead to forms of exclusion within the larger community. The combination of the social stigmatization associated with extreme poverty and a poor diet throughout most of the year, with periods of hunger, leads to poor health and reduced psychological well being. Hunger and poor diet are fundamental issues that have to be addressed. The absence of hunger and improvements in food security throughout the year allows individuals to gain (self)-respect and self-confidence and extricate themselves from the unequal relations that perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Table 2 points to the important changes that are emerging as a result of groups within communities fighting hunger:

Table 2. Fighting Hunger

Community Led Collective Initiative	Extent of Impact	Changes / Outcome
<b>Abolishing seasonal Hunger (Monga)</b>	80 hamlets / 1,600 hh / 8,000 people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective preparation for food insecurity season (all clusters)</li> <li>• Indigenous technology and knowledge revived to mitigate hunger (all clusters)</li> <li>• Collective savings of \$10,000 by the poorest households in 100 hamlets (all clusters)</li> <li>• Household food security increased (all clusters – 1<sup>st</sup> spread hamlets)</li> <li>• Advanced sale of labor for food reduced (<i>Mankira</i> – main hamlet and 4 spread-out)</li> <li>• Borrowing high interest loans from money lenders and credit NGOs reduced (all)</li> <li>• Distress sale of assets (livestock and other household items) reduced (main hamlet and 1 spread-out)</li> <li>• Dependency on landlords, elites, NGOs reduced (all clusters – main hamlets)</li> <li>• Increased bargaining power vis-à-vis landlords (for higher wages) (Main hamlets – <i>Mankira</i> and <i>Jalagari</i>)</li> <li>• Increased respect for the poorest households (all clusters – all hamlets)</li> <li>• Reduction in social exclusion (all clusters – all hamlets)</li> <li>• Increased self-confidence and respect for abandoned, divorced and widowed women (all clusters – main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread)</li> <li>• Overall Improvement in health (all hamlets)</li> <li>• Reduction in quarrels, arguments, and violence against women ( all clusters - main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread)</li> <li>• Better clothing for the poorest men and women (main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread)</li> <li>• Cumulative savings of rice approximating 8 tons of in 80 hamlets to mitigate hunger</li> </ul>

In *Mankira* (*Dinajpur* district), the majority of natural leaders are Hindu agricultural day laborers, initially supported by one local Muslim landlord. Through bargaining techniques and carefully structured tactics, more than 500 men and women in several hamlets have been able to achieve considerable increases in wages and have been able to nearly abolish the exploitative practice of *dadon* (advanced wages).<sup>8</sup> Table 3 points to the changes that have resulted from the increased wage initiative.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the process through which these wage increases took place see CARE, 2005 and Kanji, et.al. 2006.

Table 3. Collective Bargaining

Community Led Collective Initiative	Extent of Impact	Changes / Outcomes
<b>Wage Increases</b>	580 people from 7 para ( <i>Mankira</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's wages now at par with men's wages in agriculture</li> <li>• Women's wage increase is 66% and men's 20%</li> <li>• Better clothing for women and men</li> <li>• Hunger reduced</li> <li>• Increased respect</li> <li>• Men-women relations improved</li> <li>• Laborers united within and amongst nearby hamlets</li> <li>• Collective bargaining and strategizing</li> <li>• Shift in perception around women's productivity as day laborers (as compared to men)</li> <li>• Women's contribution to household income and control over resources increased</li> </ul>

### Abolishing Extreme Poverty

In all of the communities that Nijera has worked for more than 18 months, there has been considerable upward class mobility of extreme poor and poor households. (See Annex 2 for a pictorial illustration of these changes in Jalagari, Gaibandha). A combination of factors have contributed to these changes: 100 percent sanitation has reduced the medical expenses and work days lost, collective coping strategies to abolish hunger, and collective engagement to take advantage of all available natural resources and opportunities. Further, women (who tend to make up the majority of extreme poor households) have commented that they now have better clothing, an improved diet, are able to access medical facilities (rather than the local village doctor), and overall enjoy better health and well being. These factors (clothing, diet, overall well being) are important in shaping the ways that 'the extreme poor' are perceived by the larger community.

In Jalagari (Gaibanda), an area that faces frequent flooding, and where *kartiker monga* (hunger period in October) is prevalent amongst the poorest households, women and men from the extreme poor and poor categories have collectively cultivated more than 3,000 *gach alu* (vine potatoes) to mitigate the hunger period.<sup>9</sup> They have also adopted the old tradition of *mushtir chal* (a fistful of rice), where a fistful of rice is set aside from each meal in order to stockpile a sufficient amount for each upcoming monga period. To earn additional income, the men and women of Jalagari have also engaged in various income generating activities (rice processing, vegetable trading, rickshaw pulling, etc.) and the women have collectively negotiated favorable leases with landowners to a pond for fish culture and land for ginger cultivation.

### Breaking the Cycle of Dependency

In the past two years Nijera has created a process whereby women and men from the poorest segments of society are increasingly engaged in multiple social and political fields representing their interests and pressing for collective advancement. Table 4, below, describes the changes that are taking hold and points to the emergence of democratic opportunities for disadvantaged groups: a) improved social relations between individuals and groups across class and religious backgrounds, b) solidarity amongst the poor within and between communities, c) increased voice, representation,

<sup>9</sup> *Gach alu* is a traditional *monga* food that is harvested during October. The men and women from Jalagari have been able to sell *gach alu* at Tk 10 – Tk 15 per kg.

and inclusion in state funded development initiatives, and d) reduced gender stratification within communities and beyond.

Table 4. Empowerment

Empowerment of Poor Women and Men Initiative	Number of HH and People / or hamlets	Changes / Outcomes
A. Increases in collaborative activities between rich and poor	At least 40 incidents of collaboration between rich and poor (covering at least 2,200 HHs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rich households donate land and bamboo for community led total sanitation (all clusters)</li> <li>Rich households donate blankets to mitigate cold winter in NW (<i>Mankira</i>)</li> <li>Rich households make available natural resources (land and water bodies) for income generation activities for the poor (<i>Mankira, Jalagari</i>)</li> <li>Rich households sponsor lunch for community celebration (<i>Mankira</i>)</li> <li>Rich households sponsor and provide resources for IGAs (<i>Mankira, Mostapur, Paytia,</i></li> <li>Rich assist the poor to negotiate with other government agencies (<i>Mankira, Jalagari</i>)</li> </ul>
B. Increased solidarity amongst poor men and women within and between para	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>200 HH</li> <li>500 HH</li> <li>150 HH</li> <li>7,000 HH</li> <li>1,600 HH</li> <li>580 HH</li> <li>All hamlets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collective alternative agriculture (<i>Jalagari, Mankira,</i>)</li> <li>Collective savings of rice &amp; money (all clusters)</li> <li>Collective off-farm IGAs (all clusters)</li> <li>Collective elimination of open defecation (all clusters)</li> <li>Collective elimination of hunger (most clusters)</li> <li>Collective bargaining for better wages (<i>Mankira, Jalagari</i>)</li> <li>Collective analysis of the causes of poverty, and planning and action to overcome these (all clusters)</li> </ul>
C. Increased pressure on elected bodies and state bureaucracy to improve governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 hamlet</li> <li>40 hamlets</li> <li>1 union</li> <li>2 unions</li> <li>1 union-1 ward</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community collectively challenge institutionalized corruption within the state system (<i>Mankira</i>)</li> <li>Establishing participatory mechanisms for the distribution of state entitlement scheme to the poor (all clusters)</li> <li>Natural leaders are invited by local government to serve as members in formal local governance forums (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>Local government is compelled to provide access to resources earmarked for the poor (<i>Botlagari, Mankira</i>)</li> <li>Local government is compelled to control musclemen (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> </ul>
D. Increases in women's participation in public dialogue, collective planning and action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Main hamlets</li> <li>Main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread</li> <li>Main hamlets</li> <li>Main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poor women, especially abandoned, divorced and widowed, are being consulted in decision making processes at village level (all clusters – main hamlets)</li> <li>Poor women are successfully demanding services from government service providers (all clusters)</li> <li>Poor women are invited as resource persons in neighboring para to initiate collective actions (all clusters - main hamlets)</li> <li>Poorest are now invited as guest in formal functions, rather than as servants</li> </ul>
E. Women's 'Purda' has reduced and their social standing increased	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread</li> <li>Main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread</li> <li>Main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread</li> <li>Main hamlets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women succeed in accomplishing collective actions (CLTS, fighting hunger, etc) and are establishing their capability and strength and changing the mindset of men (<i>Jalagari, Mankira</i>)</li> <li>Women are more visible in public spaces in para and villages and have greater interactions with men from within and outside communities (all clusters – main para)</li> <li>Women are more confident in public discussion and have greater belief in their ability to transform the world around them (all clusters – main para)</li> <li>Women assert their authority and seniority within the para (all clusters – main clusters)</li> </ul>
F. Women and men collectively challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 hamlets</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Middlemen's use of deceptive techniques have been collectively challenged and corrected (<i>Jalagari</i>)</li> </ul>



exploitative practices of middlemen and landlords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 hamlets</li> <li>• Main hamlets and 1<sup>st</sup> spread</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploitative advance labor sales have been reduced (<i>Mankira</i> cluster)</li> <li>• Reduction on dependence of exploitative moneylenders and credit NGOS</li> </ul>
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### 3. Pro-poor Participatory Local Governance

#### Local Governance in rural Bangladesh

There are roughly 4,500 Union Parishads, the lowest unit of locally elected government. Union Parishads consist of 12 elected members (9 men and 3 women) and 1 elected chairman. At the local level, the UP has a significant role in awarding contracts for the management of local markets and bazaars, in the management of local infrastructure, and in the distribution of relief goods. But it only has very limited capacity to raise revenue and the UPs interface with poor households – roughly half of the population – within its locality tends to be limited around the distribution of vulnerable group development funds (VGD and VGF), and rations in time of crisis (floods).

The population at large only has a limited understanding of the functions that the UP is supposed to perform, is rarely consulted in the course of its deliberations, and has learnt not to expect very much on their behalf. Elected members themselves are only partially aware of their formally prescribed responsibilities, and in many cases lack the skills and resources required to discharge those functions of which they are aware. The Chairman enjoys a relatively powerful position and often takes decisions which are formally the prerogative of the UP as a whole in conjunction with a small inner circle of associates, from which women members, in particular, are likely to be excluded. The practice of husbands representing women members in meetings and taking charge of the resources (VGD / VGF and other relief funds) that are earmarked for women members is common.

Vote purchasing has taken hold in many unions across the country, with election candidates for chairman and member positions distributing funds to local elites in key geographic areas, where their constituency is weak or non-existent. These funds are then offered by the elite's supporters to poor men and women for a commitment to vote for the candidate, whose monies are distributed. The elected chairman and members, in collusion with informal elites, recover these costs, by participating in selling judgments (in local dispute arbitration) to the highest bidder. In some cases, this may lead to false charges and extortion.

#### Institutionalizing the Approach - Involving Local Government

In October 2005 – one year into the project – *Nijera* began to work with elected members in each locality and initiated a pilot in a new locality – *Botlagari* union – where CARE's governance programs had worked earlier. In all existing *Nijera* clusters, the work of NLs has now extended to cover nearly the entire ward, and collective action has attracted the attention of locally elected government – the Union Parishad. In *Botlagari* union, unlike the other clusters, where elected members were drawn into the process later, staff worked with elected members from the very beginning of the process, beginning with the identification of the poorest communities in each ward. Here, staff initiated the CLTS process in 9 hamlets across the union's 9 administrative wards. Some council members pro-actively supported the work through facilitation and negotiations for needed resources.

Realizing that neither a UP member / chairman nor the council is able to mobilize the resources (labor and materials) that natural leaders and community members are able to

raise collectively, some elected officials expressed a keen interest and wanted to participate in the development process. Initially, they channeled state funded entitlements (food) to the poorest households in consultation with natural leaders and during the past six months, some members and chairmen actively started to support key initiatives. Further, in the initial clusters, few members and chairmen have facilitated access to state-owned natural resources (land and ponds) and in *Botlagari*, the council is changing the ways in which it interacts with its constituents (see Table 5 below). Successful collective initiatives have brought to the fore the gaps and weaknesses of local government and, in particular, draw attention to elected officials who are not doing their jobs, or worse, are counter-productive to the larger pursuit of poverty alleviation.

Table 5. Institutionalization of the community led approach

Empowerment of poor men and women	Extent of Impact	Changes / Outcome
G. Institutionalization of community led approach in local governance		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The mindset of elected people's representatives has shifted from 'my constituency or my ward – my vote bank' to 'our special union – our people'</li> <li>• The above-mentioned shift in mindset alongside the mechanism of community led development initiatives encourages a wider tax base and pro-poor development focus (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• In one UP, UP members work hand in hand with the NLs in their respective wards (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• Local government insist on women members participation rather than their husbands (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• In one UP, elected members have been empowered by the chairman to lead community led initiatives (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• Some members of the eight unions are compelled to work through a pro-poor approach and monitor the outcome</li> <li>• The gap between elected members and the poor has been reduced (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• Members have a solid understanding of the socio- economic dimensions of their own constituencies (most wards and <i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• Members' and local governments' image have been transformed to reflecting their new roles (most wards and <i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• Members and chairmen are assisting the poor to access resources (all wards and <i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• Members and chairmen are holding themselves publicly accountable in regular public assemblies (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• Local tax collection is channeled into local development initiatives (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> <li>• UP has started to initiate a participatory bottom up plan (<i>Botlagari</i>)</li> </ul>

In *Botlagari*, many members initially remained silent and failed to contribute to the initiatives that were unfolding in their respective wards. Here, *Nijera* organized a self-evaluation and assessment workshop of local initiatives in each ward to better understand the contributions of locally elected members. The lessons from this workshop and *Nijera's* work with other UP councils were clear:

- Neither member or chairman can empower the poor or initiate collective action without the close support and collaboration of natural leaders
- Natural leaders' enthusiasm, efficiency and effectiveness increases manifold with the support from UP members
- Systematic analysis of each member's contribution highlighted those who were not providing any kind of support

- All UPs can mobilize vast local natural resources and initiate development activities with the support of natural leaders, rather than limit their activities to the distribution of food rations and sanitary ring slabs
- In at least 4 of the 8 UPs there are examples of natural resources utilization (land, roadside, ponds) by poor households on a collective basis which has created opportunities for hundreds of households
- Elected members cannot be a public servants and cut throat businessmen, if they wish to contribute to the alleviation of poverty and more accountable local government; they must dedicate time to the development process
- Being part of an initiative that spans several unions and involves a large number of elected members creates opportunities for learning and, at the same time, peer pressure to change one's way of working.

The Botlagari UP, much like all other UPs in Bangladesh, used to engage in development work based on the central government's allocations (mostly VGD, VGF, pension, and other relief distribution), but now the council has developed a vision to create a hunger and poverty free union. All members have created lists of the poorest households (by hamlet) in their wards and are using these to create access to khas lands and ponds, canal side fellow land for vegetable production, collective leasing of land from elites. Elected members are actively negotiating this processes.

Interested and pro-active elected members from all Nijera unions have formed a monitoring team with members regularly visiting each other to see their respective work. These cross visits, at the core of which lies learning and sharing, as well as critique if work is not proceeding, have created a team dynamic between members from different unions and districts. Through this exposure, team members have gained a sound understanding of the community led process and its potential and many have become ardent advocates for the approach and often engage newer members in debates around various development approaches and thinking.

#### **4. Challenges and Opportunities**

Collective action is spreading to nearby communities in all localities, and in each of the five initial locations the activities have now spread across entire administrative wards (10-15 hamlets), with natural leaders emerging and supporting the process. Unlike other development models that scale up project activities through staff initiatives creating a dependency on external agencies, *Nijera* has consciously attempted to promote an extension process which is determined by the communities, with spontaneity and context specific issues (depletion of forests, hunger, health issues around water contamination, etc.) as driving forces. This, of course, does not mean that the approach works without challenges. The project has had to ensure: a) good facilitation and analysis skills of staff, b) intensive capacity building of emerging leaders (from civil society and local government), c) a conducive organizational culture: different work hours for staff, devolved decision making, space for reflection, dialogue and learning, team building, and flexible bureaucratic procedures.

Scaling up and institutionalizing the process within the locality, including the local state, requires careful strategizing. Geographically spreading the CLTS approach is relatively easy, creating a conducive environment to address larger development issues within and across communities. Yet deepening the approach across communities by working alongside natural leaders demands careful consideration of the seasonality of work, the

many demands and (implicit) restrictions placed on women, reactions of key actors to the development process, and so on. It is not always easy for individuals and groups to create the initial 'space' and acceptance within communities for women to participate in the community led process and for natural leaders to address forms of resistance. There is also the danger of elites trying to capture the community led process or block activities, necessitating that natural leaders are organized and supported by locally elected members to withstand the pressures that negative minded elites may create.

The institutionalization of the process within the local state, however, presents the biggest challenge. Union Parishad's tend to be dominated by chairmen and / or factions who use their office for private gains and in some cases they have mobilized voters through financial means and now expect 'returns on their investments' through entitlement distribution and / or adjudication of conflicts. An important strategy of Nijera is to change the attitudes and behavior of elected members and chairmen to bring about the realization that supporting the process will ultimately lead to development outcomes that reduce poverty and, consequently lead to a change in voting patterns (votes that are freely given, rather than purchased). At the same time, the emergence of strong natural leaders presents a 'threat' to elected members, who may fear that they will lose future elections to emerging leaders from the poorer strata.

## **5. Conclusion**

At the heart of community led approach lies the notion that the disadvantaged are not in need of hands-out, ideas and technologies, but that dialogue, analysis, and social action can lead to personal and collective transformations. Using locally available resources, tapping the skills and creativity of people, and taking advantage of opportunities to change the world around them as they see necessary, enables the poorest women and men to gain confidence, (self)-respect and pride. Establishing an open-defecation free environment, where there are less diseases and a visibly cleaner hamlet, creates a momentum that can be drawn upon to engage people in livelihood activities that initially work to reduce the most extreme form of poverty: hunger. Abolishing hunger and creating a more healthy and clean environment, not only has physical implications, but fundamentally transforms peoples' mindset about their own capacities to be agents of change and meaningfully participate in the public realm. The question is: 'should development approaches be designed to improve the livelihoods of a few (targeted) households?' Such development strategies are in our view not only unsustainable, but fail to build upon and nurture the rich tradition of public debate and engagement.<sup>10</sup> Nijera's approach works towards broader social change, where the poorest women and men take lead of the development process and are engaged in transforming the political, social and economic landscape.

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<sup>10</sup> Sen, A. 2006. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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## Annex 1

### Nijera's Vision

Nijera's vision is to “*promote the self-realization of poor rural women and men, to help them articulate their own vision of development, and to strengthen their capacity to act in pursuit of their self-defined goals*”.

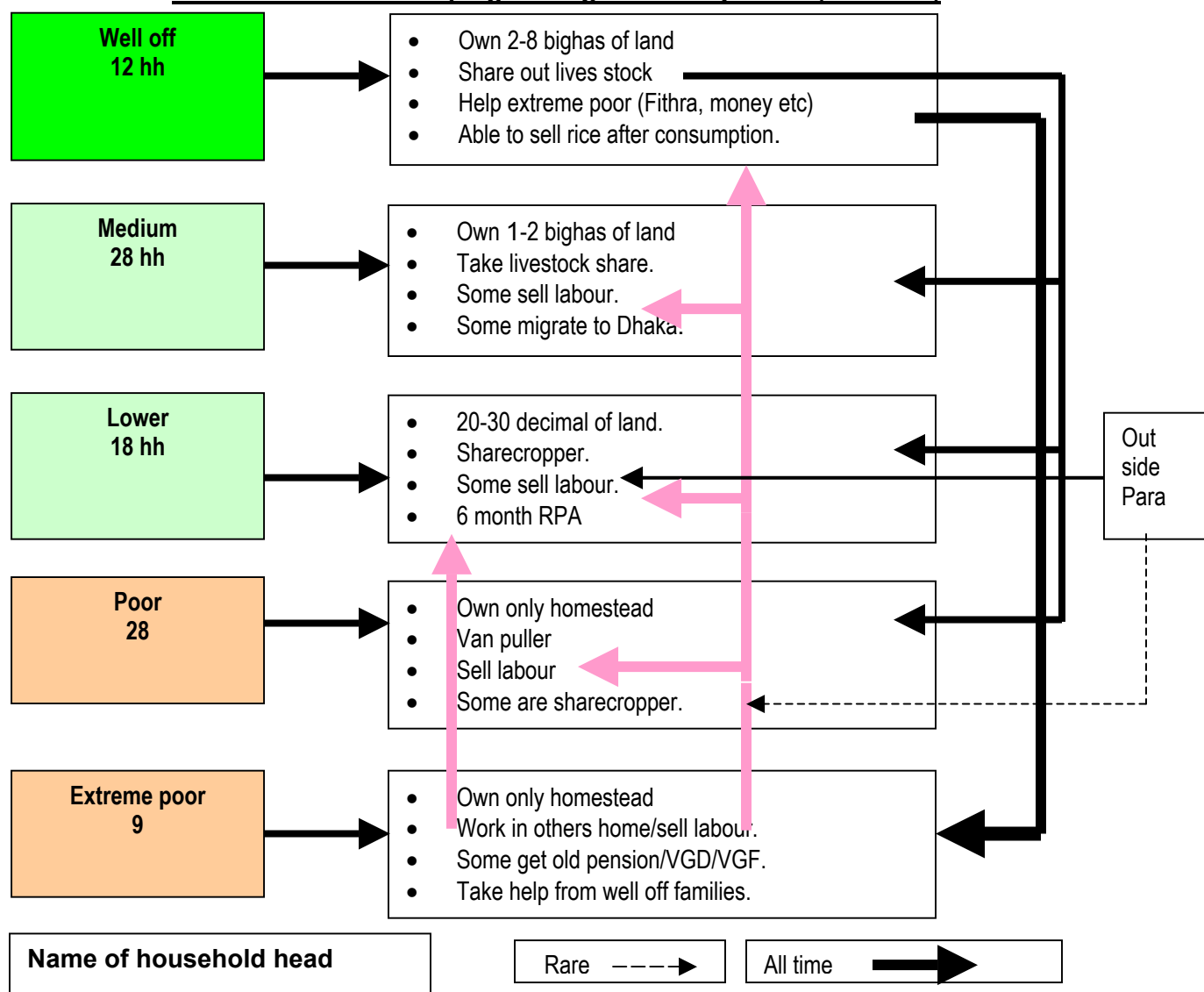
A number of more specific goals <sup>11</sup> include:

1. To work with poor rural women and men, and the communities in which they live, encouraging them to articulate their own experiences of poverty, disempowerment and social exclusion
2. To help them to build their own analysis of power structures and belief systems through which their present situation is reproduced
3. To enable them to identify their own agendas for action
4. To build internal capacity for these agendas to be pursued and for progress to be monitored, providing limited direct and material support where necessary
5. In particular, to help identify ways in which poor people and their allies can negotiate effectively with more powerful local actors in pursuit of their aims
6. To assist the establishment of linkages to external bodies, agencies and service providers whose cooperation is required for the fulfillment of identified goals
7. To build leadership skills amongst various groups within local society with an emphasis on the poorest men and women
8. To assist communities in developing village industries through complementary and supportive activities to build a strong and inter-dependent network of village economies
9. To build capacity of locally elected bodies to institutionalize the community led approach
10. To establish collaborative arrangements with other parts of CARE Bangladesh and with other like-minded development agencies to build capacity in areas we cannot deal with by ourselves
11. To encourage woman to woman and poor to poor learning as the primary mechanism by which successful initiatives are more broadly disseminated
12. To carefully document lessons learned and disseminate these within CARE, and other parties and agencies in Bangladesh, and to the wider international development community.

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<sup>11</sup> Nijera's vision and goal was developed during a three week workshop in August / September 2004. see CARE Bangladesh. 2004. “Workshop on Livelihood Campus Facilitation, Social Development Unit”. Dhaka: CARE Bangladesh. The goals have since been modified to accommodate and respond to community needs and priorities.

### Annex-2 Wealth Grouping – Jalagari - Madhya Para (Oct 2004)



**Well off 12**  
 Maznu, Shaeb  
 Uddin, Quddus,  
 Ahsan, Bablu,  
 Mokbul, Shahin,  
 Malek, A.aziz,  
 Hafizer,  
 Ayub(lal miah)  
 Aynal.

**Medium:28**  
 Mozubur,Samad,  
 Huru,A.Sattar,  
 Joynal  
 Delowar,AHussan,  
 Wayaresh, Rahela,  
 Suna Miah,Raza,  
 Shafiqul Nowsha,  
 Bhula,Hafizer,  
 Kamrul Aysha,  
 Sukhu, Shafi,  
 Shaiful, Thanda,  
 Maynul,  
 Shahajahan, Raza  
 (Answer), Salam,  
 Shahir,Lablu.

**Low 18**  
 Gulzar,  
 Hasan,  
 Jajil, Musta,Khalil,  
 Habibur, Sarawar,  
 Samsul Izer,  
 Chara,Arfan,Bhula  
 , Lalmiah,  
 Nazir,Sukru,Naws  
 ha, Chad Miah,  
 Taklal.

**Poor-28**  
 Kala,Ruhul,Rabiul,  
 Raja Khalifa,  
 Atuwar, Kassem,  
 Suza, Nurulalam,  
 Ynus Hayder,  
 Ziyaru, Mahabub  
 (monsur), Munsur,  
 Monzel, Thanda,  
 Nasir, Rasid,Mintu  
 Sultan,Joynal  
 ,Jaydal, Khaza,  
 Ashraful, Rafikul,  
 Aklasur, shaidul,  
 Basha, Emdadul.

**Extreme Poor-9**  
 Mazeda, Zushna,  
 Amena, Shahida,  
 Sukjan (Mother of  
 Monsur).  
 Rahela  
 Jayda,Rukeya.

## Well- being Grouping .Jalagari Madhyapara , February 2006 (Updated)

