



Exploring the impact of community solidarity building approach in addressing social discrimination

shree working paper



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Working paper

November 2012

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shiree

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October 2011

The Extreme Poverty Research Group (EPRG) develops and disseminates knowledge about the nature of extreme poverty and the effectiveness of measures to address it. It initiates and oversees research and brings together a mix of thinkers and practitioners to actively feed knowledge into practice through interventions taking place in real time. It is an evolving forum for the shiree family to both design and share research findings.

The data used in this publication comes from the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest Programme (www.shiree.org), an initiative established by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to help 1 million people lift themselves out of extreme poverty. The views expressed here are entirely those of the author(s). The paper has been peer reviewed by colleagues in either the Chars Livelihood Programme (CLP), the UNDP Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) and BRAC's Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction – Targeting the Ultra Poor (CFPR-TUP) programmes – all part of the DFID/UKaid extreme poverty portfolio in Bangladesh.

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1. Introduction

Mutual understanding and a sense of community solidarity reduces discrimination, inequality, disparity and collision whilst uniting people to build a more mature society that does not exclude anyone from social benefits. Strong social cohesion can enable people to have more social capital that ensures empowerment and reduces community vulnerability. An integrated approach for building community solidarity has therefore become mandatory so that people can gain their acceptability within the society, build their confidence and access their rights.

With this in mind CARE-Bangladesh are implementing a project titled 'Social and Economic Transformation of the Ultra-poor' (SETU) in the north-western part of Bangladesh assisted by SHIREE and funded by DFID. SETU believes that changes in the poverty situation are not a standalone matter; rather they require a combination of social inclusion, economic empowerment, pro-poor governance, and learning and influencing that works to graduate extreme poor households out of poverty.

SETU believes that a collaborated effort towards community empowerment will promote economies of scale to ensure a more equitable society where people will gain economic freedom, social inclusion and political empowerment. Exclusion of the poor and extreme-poor from their society makes them more deprived as they are unable to access social benefits. This is why social inclusion and cohesion have become the point of emphasis in this project. Once social inclusion is ensured it creates the opportunity for exchanging views and ensuring cooperation for all members of the community.

The facilitation of the project activities has contributed to enhance collective solidarity within working communities and extremely poor are significantly less 'stigmatized'. Instead they are considered as an 'integral' part of their communities, which has increased their confidence to challenge frontiers of poverty. The holistic approach of SETU has impacted on economic uplift of the targeted extremely poor households.

This paper aims to explore how SETU is building community solidarity in its working areas and how this solidarity is addressing social discriminations at the community levels.

2. Background

2.1. Literature review

Conventional economic development theory has assumed that poverty alleviation will occur with economic growth. However, the marginalized have often not been found to benefit from economic growth. This draws into question views that poverty alleviation

will occur as a corollary to growth, and instead greater income inequality has often been found to result. Shah and Shah's (2004) example of poverty among tribal people in South West Madhya Pradesh found that India's policy of agricultural growth as a focus for poverty reduction discriminated against certain agro-climatic conditions, regions and natural resources, as well as socio-economic identities and political groups. Mainstream development activities that do not reach these groups, and corruption in service delivery strata, have marginalized the poorest still further. India's scheduled tribes have the highest levels of poverty and deprivation of any social group, partly due to difficulties in accessing government services (Mehta, 2005).

According to DFID (2005), social inclusion focuses on the social relations of power, social institutions and networks and their contents and practices that result in exacerbating poverty. Using research evidence from rural Tanzania, Cleaver (2005) finds that the poorest cannot construct social capital for their benefit due to their lack of 'able-bodiedness', limiting relationships with kin and wider social circles, and their inability to articulate and be influential within public spheres. Again, social exclusion is therefore wedded to the concept of social protection of marginalized and vulnerable groups (Conway and Norton, 2002).

Sen (Sen, n.d.) discusses how vulnerability is caused by social and political exclusion within Bangladesh society, and argues that the persistent explicit and hidden social and political inequalities, based on gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion, race, remain essentially unaddressed. This highlights significant inadequacies in human rights practice and governance.

Thorp et al. (2005) found that social exclusion occurs during the formation of economic and social support groups amongst the poor. They analysed the formation of groups in several different developing countries as a route out of chronic poverty, finding that, frequently, when poor people form groups with the potential to empower and raise their incomes, the chronically poor are excluded. This may be a significant factor in the chronic poor's inability to escape their poverty.

The community groups perform a political function that is of primary importance in helping to overcome marginalisation and social exclusion. The disadvantage of the chronic poor is that they lack assets to contribute to the group in terms of education, capital, labour, social status etc. In addition, the poorest often lack access to social networks that are essential to the success of the groups and therefore are less attractive as potential group members. It is difficult to find community groups which the extreme-poor can engage with for the benefit or betterment.

The solution to social exclusion is frequently seen as obtaining social power. Connell (1987) defines social power as "the ability to impose a definition of the situation, to set

the terms in which events are understood and issues discussed, to formulate ideals and define morality, in short, to assert hegemony". This social power of the poor does not evolve from society automatically. Instead it requires some deliberate efforts that can lead those people to have a standpoint and give a definition to something. This ability to assert hegemony is what Connell (1987) described as empowerment. However to Afshar (1998) empowerment is understood to encompass not only 'power over' (subordination), but also other forms of power, including 'power to' (access to resources and services), 'power with' (group power) and 'power from within' (spiritual power).

The literature shows that for the poor to benefit from economic growth, social discrimination needs to be addressed. Although Mehta (2005) and Shah and Shah (2004) noted that something more needs to be done to ensure the extreme poor benefit from economic growth, they did not identify what this should be. This paper will try to explore this further.

As many have suggested, formation of community groups can be one way to channel resources and ensure that the poor benefit economically. However these community groups cannot provide the solution unless they are pro-poor. Although this was noted by Thorp et.al (2005), it was not elaborated how community groups could be formed with the participation of both poor and non-poor. This would involve the poor being given a platform to raise their voice and the non-poor to work for the poor in a collaborative approach. Thorp et al (Ibid) also failed to mention the social returns of these groups are and to what extent they can address social problematic issues, especially the social discrimination.

2.2. Socio-economic context of northwest Bangladesh

Though for the last few years the country has been experiencing steady growth (more than 6%), it has failed to address income inequality. A huge proportion of the countries work force is suffering from unemployment as there are limited income opportunities, especially for the extreme poor who are mostly dependent on agricultural labor which is not secure for the year round. Lack of industrialization is one of the major reasons for leaving many of its people under employment in the agricultural sector.

Bangladesh has a massive number of surplus labourers in agriculture. Unfortunately the wage rate in this sector is not high enough to pull them up from the threshold level of poverty. Almost 60 per cent of the rural labor force, where extreme-poverty is concentrated, is engaged in agriculture. If this massive labor force goes underpaid, they will never be able to graduate from poverty when there is increasing livelihood expenditure (Rahman, 2013).

Extremely poor people are unable to meet basic needs and achieve sustainable livelihood security because they lack capabilities and assets and have limited or no access to resources, markets and services. They are therefore unable to engage in capital and asset accumulation or other forms of risk mitigation. Social inequalities play out in different forms of exploitation, dependence, discrimination and marginalization for different gender, class, ethnicity and religion-based population groups. The highly inequitable distribution of key resources such as land and ponds in rural areas means that the extreme poor are dependent on various forms of exploitative relationships, often involving misuses of power and rights violations, with more powerful actors to meet basic survival needs.

The prevailing patriarchal value system of Bangladeshi society means that gender-based discrimination is particularly strong, with markedly negative implications for the social and economic status of women in general, and female-headed households in particular. Dowry and wage discrimination, which stem from patriarchal systems, are major causes of financial crisis for extremely poor households. Extremely poor people, and women from these households in particular, tend to be excluded from participating in social events and decision-making processes at all levels. The participation and voice of the extreme poor and poor in the decision-making processes of government and civil society institutions are limited due to constraints of opportunity and capacity, and societal norms that support class and gender based differences. Thus the systems and procedures for ensuring accountability of government institutions and service providers are weak or lacking, leading to problems of corruption and abuse of rights and responsibilities by those in power. This is compounded by the absence of policies and practical initiatives to facilitate and promote the active participation of the extreme poor in the development process.

The context of north-west Bangladesh is graver than this. From many aspects, the socio-economic context here is different from the other parts of the country. In northwest of Bangladesh, poverty is underpinned by the lack of regional economic development, a backward agrarian economy, with 60 percent of households earning their livelihoods through agriculture-related activities, and a high incidence of landlessness (over 40 percent). Here, seasonal hunger (*monga*), symptomatic of poverty, is an annual phenomena that occurs in the lean season, the last stages of the gestation period of rice, when all food supplies and cash have been exhausted, forcing the sale of assets and indebtedness, and leading the household to spiral into poverty. *Monga* is experienced by lower middle, poor, and extreme poor households, and coping strategies involve cutting back protein based foods (e.g. fish and eggs) to one meal on alternate days.

Extreme poverty is also an outcome of disenfranchisement and thereby the loss of social claims. The psychological effects of this 'social exclusion' are profound and give

rise to hopelessness and resignation. In this context, achieving impacts that transform the lives of the poor and marginalized, requires a process through which their marginalization (or social poverty), an integral part of the 'human condition' of the poor in Bangladesh, can be addressed, so that gains in the economic realm can be sustained.

Due to absence of industrialization, people here have a very limited scope for year round working opportunities. As the majority of people here are dependent on agricultural wage labor, they need to pass idle time in the lean period when there is no work available in the agricultural fields. People term this seasonal unemployment as *monga*. As the north-west is very rural there is limited scope for alternative income generation opportunities and people are forced to seasonally migrate to urban areas.

The World Food Programme (WFP) (2002) vulnerability maps show 38 of the 62 upazilas of the northwest region as having high levels (defined as 35-55% of the population) of extreme poverty and 27 as being highly food insecure. The northwest region suffers from a lack of economic development, a high incidence of landlessness (over 40%) and a pre-modern agrarian economy in which 60% of households earn their livelihoods through agriculture related activities. Agricultural wage rates are low here compared with other parts of the country, and the discriminatory wage giving practices in the region have an additional impact on the female agricultural labors.

The north-west region is comparatively more vulnerable to and affected by seasonal disasters like flood, tornado, drought etc. These natural threats also hamper the economic and social life of the people. Disasters frequently damage the crop land and displace people from their dwellings. The area also has very limited natural resources through which people can earn their livelihood. During our FGD discussions with the community people we found that due to this absence of natural resources, people were unable to secure their livelihood.

Having no other options, people become dependent on loans from Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) and local money lenders. These loans are often not economically and socially viable for them as they often struggle to repay with the additional huge interest. The desperate situation often forces the extreme poor to become involved in advance labor selling which is always under paid, or are forced to engage their children in child labour.

2.3. Overview of SETU

In the contexts noted in the above sections, the purpose of the Social and Economic Transformation of the Ultra-poor (SETU) project is to "...empower the women and men of 40,000 extreme poor and poor households in Northwest Bangladesh to collectively address the causes of their economic, social and political exclusion". The project's

design and implementation reflect CARE Bangladesh's understanding of extreme poverty as powerlessness based on recognition of the ways in which the extreme poor are trapped in a set of unequal power relations and are unable to overcome the barriers that prevent the fulfillment of their needs and rights to achieve secure and sustainable livelihoods.

SETU defines social exclusion as a condition where some people cannot take part in social affairs and thus cannot raise their voice in or contribute to the decision making process due to their lack of social, economic and political empowerment. Social inclusion is the exact opposite side of this scenario. SETU aims to ensure the participation of all people from every strata of society in social affairs with mutual understanding and a sense of dignity for all. In this circumstance, all the people will have the scope to explore and prove their potential.

SETU believes that this inclusion will create social solidarity which will result in people extending their help to those in need. This sense of cooperation will influence extreme-poor people to be proactive in working for their own benefit and also for the benefit of society. They will have more scopes to be involved in social affairs and will be able to speak out for their rights and responsibilities, which will allow them to gain access to social resources. As a result discrimination within the society will reduce.

The SETU project's theory of change, or graduation model, for transforming the economic, social and political relations causing poverty and extreme poverty, accordingly involves:

- Making the poor powerful by promoting better access to, and use of, resources and services, including markets and employment opportunities (economic empowerment);
- Making power work for the poor by facilitating the creation of spaces for the poorest to participate in local government and development processes (political empowerment); and
- Altering social relationships to address exclusion and marginalisation and reduce exploitation by, and dependence on, others (social empowerment).

These economic, social and political dimensions of empowerment are drawn as the major axes on Figure 1 which provides a graphical representation of the SETU graduation model. The three horizontal axes define the gradually expanding pool of capabilities and freedoms of the project's extreme poor target population. The expected characteristics of the target group at the three, five and seven year intervals of the proposed project lifespan are represented by the shaded ovals on Figure 1. These flow charts present a summary of the changes that the project is designed to

deliver over its seven year implementation period to ensure the sustainable graduation of 40,000 extreme poor households out of poverty by 2015. The project is working to implement this theory of change through the delivery of outputs relating to social inclusion, economic empowerment, pro-poor governance and learning and influencing by means of a community-led development approach.

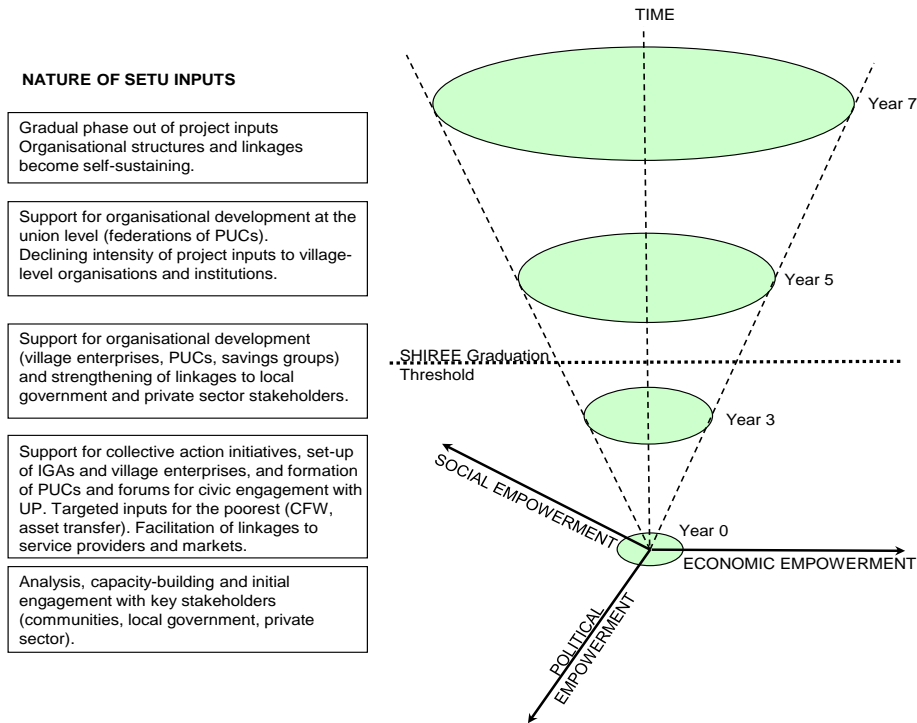


Figure: 1

The SETU project activities' overall goal is to strengthen the relationships of the extreme poor among themselves and with the wider community and other stakeholders. The community led approach is structured around processes of community mobilization, local leadership development, pro-poor organizational development of community groups, and economic empowerment. The emergence of common interests and issues across communities offers the opportunity for future federating and raising these issues for higher level attention.

3. Research rationale and methodology

For SETU, this research is imperative because it believes that changes in poverty situation are not a standalone matter, rather a combination of social inclusion, economic empowerment, pro-poor governance, and learning and influencing that work to graduate extreme poor households out of poverty. The research: a) will produce a lessons learned document on the impact of community solidarity building

approach on reducing social discrimination and b) will sum up inquiries on how effective social inclusions is happening through community solidarity building approach of SETU.

Again, CARE-Bangladesh's theory of change identifies the following three inter-related and mutually reinforcing domains that speak to economic, social and political dimensions of empowerment. Making the poor powerful through better access to, and use of resources and services, including markets and employment opportunities, making power work for the poor and altering social relationship to address exclusion and marginalization to reduce exploitation are the core components of this theory of change. Together these three domains articulated for impacting extreme poor people capture the requirements for a process of social transformation to foster the economic, social and political empowerment of extremely poor people to achieve their own solution for development.

It is therefore imperative to see how the community driven approach of building solidarity to reduce discrimination is working in the field level and generate some learning to rectify or promote the approach in wider community.

The research has endeavored to answer two major questions:

1. How community solidarity building is being promoted and
2. How this enhanced solidarity is working in addressing social discriminations

The inquiry was carried on in a systematic approach in which qualitative analysis has been used as the major strategy. As understanding social dimensions in a mixed economy of Bangladesh needs a wide and in-depth analysis, a purely qualitative approach was preferred in designing the research as it gives a focused and intensive idea on social issues. Gaining such insight into the hearts and minds of the research participants is best acquired through the use of smaller, highly targeted samples. The two research questions are best answered with the in-depth analysis of the data collected through the qualitative approach.

The below noted steps were followed for conducting this study:

1. Review of the baseline information of the project on existing discriminatory practices
2. Review of how SETU is practicing and promoting collective solidarity building approach among the community people. This review was done through looking at the process documentations of the project.
3. Review of relevant literature

4. Conducting focus group discussions with seven groups of people i.e. two with the most active participants of two Natural Leader Organization (NLO) at Lalmonirhat and Saidpur, two with the EKATA group members at Gaibandha and Nilphamari, one with the action researchers of CARE, who are working with the process facilitation at fields and two with the community people including the project beneficiaries at Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha. The FGDs were conducted with the prepared checklist which were designed to see how SETU is building the community solidarity at the community level and how this increased level of solidarity among people are reducing discrimination at the societies.
5. Exploring and analyzing cases to understand the impact of collective solidarity building process in addressing social discrimination.

The steps have been chosen based on the methods developed by Social Analysis and Learning Team (SALT) of CARE Bangladesh to assess impacts of the interventions. FGD checklists were designed to explore the gradual changes in the community people's lives, that delineate how the collaborated effort of the people evolved from the mutual trust and understanding among them and is contributing to reduce discrimination at the community level.

A team of five members including the research officer, research assistant and three action researchers from CARE-Bangladesh were directly involved in the data collection process in the above mentioned four working areas of SETU.

4. Findings

4.1: Intervention for inclusion and promotion of community solidarity

Taking social, economic and political empowerment as the core, SETU works for the graduation of 40,000 households from extreme poverty. The series of systematic interventions of the project include both the poor and non-poor people in a society. Throughout the interventions, it has been carefully maintained that the aim is to promote inclusion of the extreme poor as this will help enhance community solidarity.

The discussion below will show how at inclusion has been promoted at every stage and how that has impacted on community solidarity building:

4.1.1: Para¹ selection

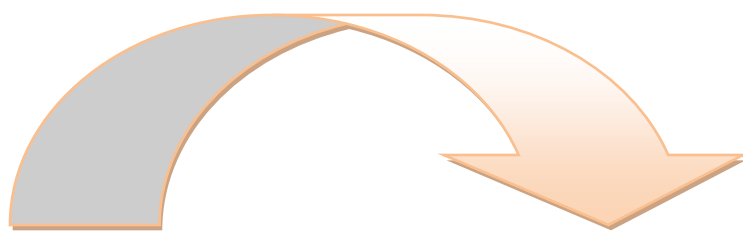
SETU follows a methodical approach in entering the community. It starts with *para* selection with the help of some secondary data collected from the UP and also with some secondary stakeholder consultation. Usually SEU works with the tertiary *paras* which are the poorest in the area. At this very first stage, the important secondary stakeholders are involved with the project and as they take part in this selection process, they start taking ownership of it and this creates the opportunity of getting support from them in future when necessary. Once this *para* selection is done, the project enters the community.

Even at the community level, the initiation of the SETU project is a gradual move within the community where people do not feel that something is imposed on them. Instead the systematic flow of activities makes people feel that they are doing something by themselves for their own benefit. This sense of ownership helps them come forward to form some community groups or platforms to carry forward development activities within their communities.

However, from the very beginning SETU tries to involve all types of people from the community in the meetings and it is emphasized that the participation and opinion from all are mandatory to give their activities sustainability. Though almost all the project activities are targeted for the poor, the aggregated benefit goes to the community and in achieving the targets, cooperation from all the people is mandatory. For an example, the FGD findings show that in a community meeting at Mohodipur Union of Gaibandha, it was found that three households had been displaced from their houses due to river erosion and had come to that *para* where they started living in tents. Seeing this, one of the villagers who had a large amount of land, donated them some land temporarily for their living.

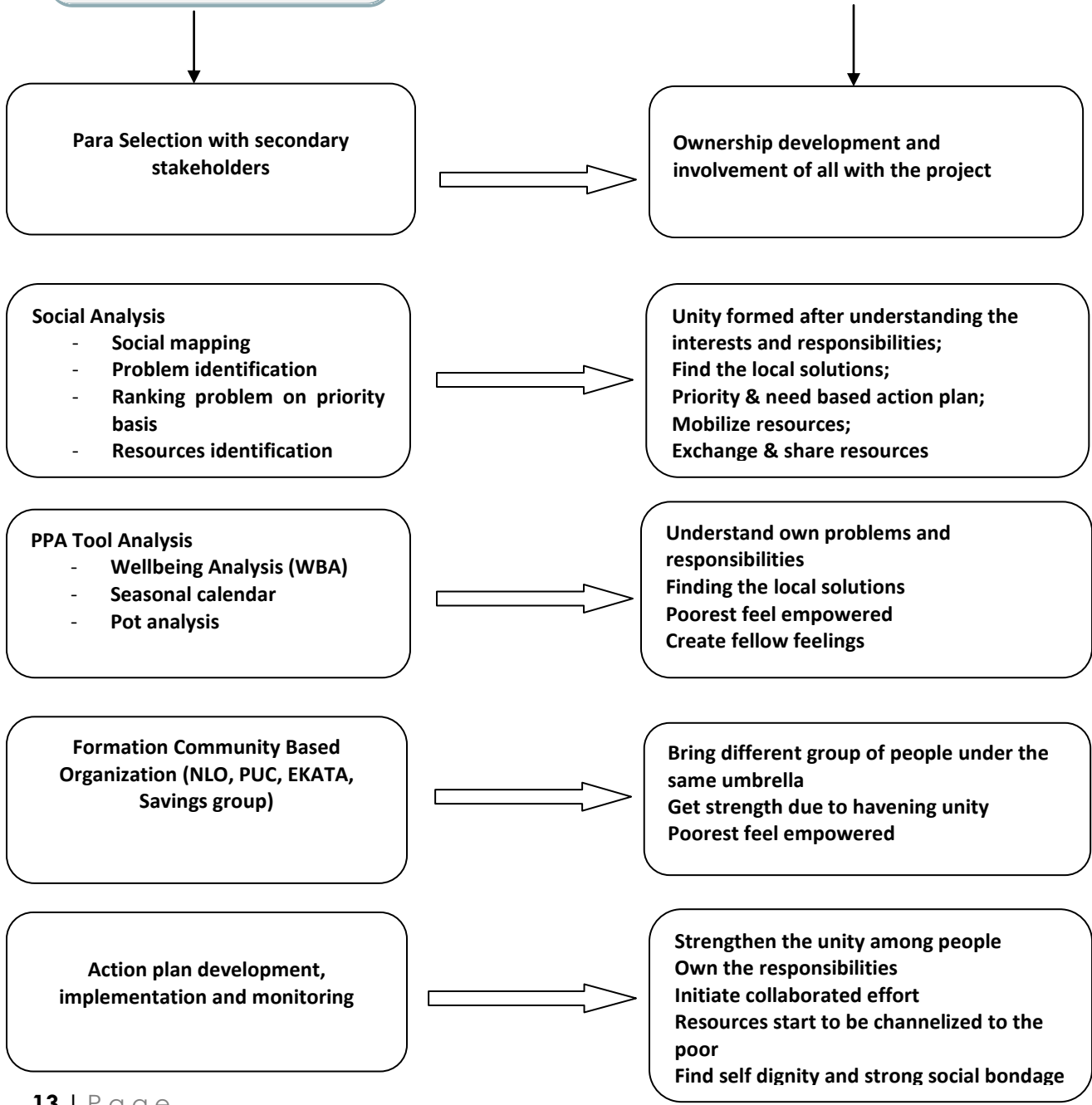
The diagram below shows the flow of SETU activities and how these contribute to community solidarity building:

¹ Cluster of some household and a unit of a village



SETU Interventions to promote inclusion

Impact on Community Solidarity Buildup



4.1.2: Social Analysis:

A number of social analyses are conducted with the participation of all the people of the community. Those analyses are described below:

Social mapping: With the participation of all, social analysis is carried out to make people more conscious of their situation and facilitate a common understanding and consensus on addressing targeted social problems. To do this the community people sit and develop a social map of their own community. In this map, they indicate everything within their community. This depiction of the community helps them visualize and conceptualize the risk and resources of their community.

Problem identification: After developing the social map of the community, people discuss the existing problems of their community. With facilitation by the project staff they list down all the problems they have, which are then ranked on a priority basis. Usually in these poor communities, the problem that affects everyone indiscriminately and in a very serious way takes the top place in the priority list and usually this is the issue of sanitation. It was previously thought that the absence of a proper sanitation system is the problem of the poor but after the group discussions the people come to realize that the entire community suffers as a result of open defecation. Through this process, the community people become united and come to a consensus in addressing these problems.

Resource identification: For addressing the problems, they then begin to identify any appropriate resources they have within the community. At this stage, the sense of volunteerism and donations has grown among the people and the resource owners become proactive in providing their support from the resources they have. At this stage, some of the resources are channeled to the poor from the non-poor or wealthy people, starting a trend of cooperation and collaboration.

4.1.3: Participatory Poverty Analysis

The Participatory Poverty Analysis (PPA) also has some stages where community people take a lead role in understanding the underlying causes and the impacts of their poverty.

Wellbeing analysis: At this stage, the community takes part in participatory wellbeing analysis which categorizes all the households of that particular community into groups as per their socio-economic status. Finally after assessing everyone's status, they prepare the list of extreme poor, poor, middle class and rich households. Here they agree that these selected extreme poor should get support from the rest of the community so that they can come out of their situation. This acknowledgement creates a sense of responsibility among the better off to provide their support to the people in need. At the same time, the extreme poor people also come to realize their own ways of

overcoming the problem. As a result of this process, mutual understanding between them increases.

Seasonal calendar preparation: The participants then prepare the seasonal calendar which visualizes the amount of work available at various stages throughout the year. This enables them to identify the time of the year when they remain workless for which they need to find some solution. Often they come up with the idea of collecting and preserving *mushti chal*² which they can use during that period when they do not have any work. They realize that this collection of rice (*mushti chal*) can help them survive during those crucial seasons. With this approach, the community people, in a cooperative way, start collecting rice for meeting the demand of that shock. By saving in this way they gain a sense of empowerment and comfort in the knowledge that rather than struggling with the external help of a loan, they now can meet their future demand by targeting the upcoming crucial period.

Pot analysis: At this stage of poverty pot analysis, the extreme-poor people sit together and identify the ways they earn money the ways in which they spend it. They often are surprised by some unnecessary expenses they have which they earlier did not realize, and become resolved to not waste money in the same way in future. For example, one FGD with the natural leaders at Nilphamary noted that in their community, people used to gamble without knowing its severe impact on them. The pot analysis picked up the issue and the participants saw that by gambling many people are losing a good amount of money on a daily basis. Once the realization came, the villagers took the decision not to allow any kind of gambling in their locality.

4.1.4: Formation of community based groups

During these analysis processes, some community groups are formed with the proactive participation of the people. These groups are Natural Leaders' Organisations (NLOs), Para Unnayan Committees (PUCs)³, EKATA⁴, Savings Group⁵ etc. After being included in these groups, and often the leadership of them, the poor people feel empowered which pushes them to be proactive in taking and leading different actions for the wellbeing of the community. By being involved in these activities in a proactive way, the poor people gain acceptance in the society, which increases their social dignity and value. In addition, as these groups are formed with people of different socio-economic status, strong linkages and mutual recognition are developed among them as well.

² Handful of rice

³ A committee committed to take part in any development activity in the *para*

⁴ A committee formed by the women discuss and solve social issues and problems

⁵ A committee that saves cash or kind for meeting the demand during any shock

These community groups work closely with the UPs, by helping them plan, implement and monitor the development interventions at the unions. The presence of NLs as the representatives of the poor at the UP standing committees has also added a new dimension as they work like a pressure group for the UP. They advocate for the poor and try to influence the UPs to be more pro-poor, which leads to an increased amount of government resources being allocated to the poor. Thus the presence of the community group representatives at UP activities makes the UPs more transparent and accountable.

In one of the FGDs conducted with the NLO of *Lalmonirhat*, the participants noted that they are now motivated to help themselves to ensure their betterment and wellbeing. They said that this was possible through collaboration and cooperation. The majority of people here want to live in a more congenial and friendly environment where everyone extends help to others. They are sure that if they can work in cooperation, it will not be difficult for them to overcome poverty. With this spirit the poor members of the community are able to come to the front line of the society, where they are not neglected rather respected and evaluated.

4.1.5: Community Action Plan (CAP) development, implementation and monitoring

At the final stage, the community people develop the Community Action Plan (CAP) which is evolved from the analysis they have done already. In this CAP, they also divide the roles and responsibilities which are welcomed by every assigned individual. As sanitation is usually seen as a major problem for them, many communities take the assignment of covering the entire community under complete sanitation naming the programme as 'Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS)'.

People from every stages of the community extend their support in accomplishing these activities when the Natural Leaders take the role of facilitation. Proper and sufficient sensitization helps them accomplish the assignment very promptly and easily. This achievement makes them realize how through collaborated efforts in very difficult tasks can be easily completed. This success makes the accomplisher more confident on their potentialities and they also gain the faith and confidence of other people.

The inspiration gained from the successful accomplishment of this activity pushes the community people to implement the other activities of the CAP gradually. After every six months, they review their CAP and adopt a new one and it is in this way, with the collaborative effort of the community people, that development activities are run.

4.2: Reduction of discrimination

Though the discriminatory practices started changing with the spread of education and increased level of awareness, some dominance of the power holders and hierarchical

power structures continued to remain in the society. The poor marginal people are kept submissive and mute in public forum in such a way that they become frustrated and tired of suppressing their views and opinion. However after building up a rapport and mutual trust between these poor and non-poor groups, they subdued people acquire the room to speak out and express their feelings. However this is not homogenous and total success also depends on some other factors that SETU has not been able to address so far entirely. The positive thing though is that the process has started to change and community people have started getting the benefit from it as the FGD findings show.

After a series of discussion and analysis sessions with the community people and consecutive community led interventions, people understand that for their common interest, they can maximise the output if they are united and work accordingly for the benefit of all. Increased level of social acceptance creates more opportunity for the ultra-poor in accessing resources as well. Providing economic opportunities and ensuring access to resources for the ultra-poor is one of the major ways to reduce the gap between the poor and rich. That is why, other than the direct cooperation of the non-poor to the poor, the community people also look into the ways of accessing the government resources like *khas*⁶ land for cultivation by the poor people. The community groups especially the NLO and the local elites liaise with the government authority for the allocation of some *khas* land for the landless extreme poor people.

Box-1: Khas land using provision:

At Botlagari union of Nilphamari district, the *khas* land was captured and used by the elites and the influential people. However with the facilitation of one of the Natural leaders' Organisations (NLOs), the UP allocated the *khas* land to the extreme poor people. By cultivating the land the extreme poor are now trying to uplift their economic solvency and get out of poverty. This initiative has had a tremendous impact by changing the livelihood status of twenty two households of that area. This initiative has also become a reference point and inspiration for other UPs. Those twenty two households are cultivating three *bigha* (close to one acre) of *khas* land year round in a cooperative way.

SETU is trying to facilitate similar type of action in all its working areas as in all the unions of the project there are some *khas* land under the local government. Here more

⁶ Government owned fallow land

facilitation, mobilization and local level advocacy are essential so that the local governments agree to allocate the land for the use of the extreme poor.

The community groups like the NLO, EKATA and Savings Group have become the change agents at the communities. They initiate different activities and contribute to challenge discrimination in a collaborative way within the communities. Here the contribution of Savings Groups in fighting *monga*, in stopping advance labour selling and avoiding the usury system is noteworthy. Earlier in a particular period of the year, people used to have no work and therefore had no income. In that circumstance, they used to sell their labor in advance or take a loan with high interest to get some money for daily expenses. Here they payment of advance labour was usually much less than the usual payment. Now people can take loans with no interest from their savings group where they have deposited money throughout the year and so do not need to go for advance labour selling or borrowing money at a high interest rate.

The community people at Gaibandha reported in the FGD that they all deposit ten taka in a month in their Savings Group. In every *monga* period, 8-10 people who are in severe economic crisis take a loan from that deposited money. People find it very easy and beneficial for them as it has prevented them being dependent on others and as they are taking loan from their own deposited money, they do not lose their social dignity.

Some of the key changes in community level

Situation before intervention

1. Extreme poor people did not raise their voice in community decision making process
2. Appropriate people often were missed from the Social Safety Net Programme
3. Extreme poor people did not have access to different standing committees of UP
4. UP budgets did not focus much on the benefit of the extreme poor
5. Women did not have any platform to talk about their rights
6. Extreme poor people were not invited in the social rituals. If someone were asked to go, it is only for work, in return of which, they were supplied the meal

Community Solidarity
Building by SETU

Situation after intervention

1. Extreme poor people are raising their voice in community decision making process
2. Process has been established to select appropriate people for Social Safety Net Programme
3. Extreme poor people (NLs) have access to different standing committees of UP
4. UP budgets focus on the benefit of the extreme poor
5. Women have a platform (EKATA) to talk about their rights and thus raise their voice
6. Extreme poor people participate and are invited in community events and social

The collaborative efforts for bringing social change benefit community people in many ways. The Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) initiative in particular shows people how easily they can bring a change in the society if they are united, initiating feelings of community solidarity starts. After some awareness raising and mobilisation sessions, the increased knowledge within the community helps them retain a peaceful environment where people usually do not quarrel and fight with each other on trivial issues as they did previously. The tendency for cooperation means that rather than engaging in

disputes, they prefer to discuss and try to come to a consensus. For any extreme situation, they seek the help of the Union Parishad member.

The EKATA group participants noted a significant change in women mobility at their locality. Halima, one of the FGD participants, pointed that the members of her in-law's house do not restrict her from going out. Previously, the participants said, they could not go beyond the houses of even the relatives. However after a few days of being involved with EKATA group, the scenario has changed. The husbands know that their wives are involved in different social activities that widely contribute to the development of the community. That is why the husbands do not restrict their movement and instead some of the husbands are actually encouraging their wives who now frequently move to the UP, other government offices, neighbouring villages etc. where they find necessity. This freedom of movement has also impacted the society as well. It has enabled women to get involved in the community for the betterment of others and thus the society has got some more change makers and female leaders in the community levels.

The NLOs also have some specific roles in working with the UPs especially for selecting the ultra-poor people for different Safety Net Programmes. These NLOs also act as pressure groups for the UP and help channel the funds from the UP to the extreme poor and for making the UP budget pro-poor. In some of the working areas like Botlagari of Nilphamari and Sharpukur of Lalmonirhat, the NLOs have prepared the list of extreme-poor for the UP.

Most of the NLOs have become an important participant in the decision making process of the UPs. The effectiveness of Natural Leaders through participation in decision making spaces and engagement with local government structures has led to tangible changes for extremely poor communities (CARE-UK, 2012). They work as the spokesmen for the ultra-poor in different platforms and act as a bridge between the service providers and the poor people. Empowerment of these social leaders has its own value created which motivates the other extreme-poor as well.

People are gradually coming out of discriminatory practices, the result of which is an increased level of social strength. The essence of tolerance and respecting others views has enabled some people, especially those from EKATA, to convince some people against the practices of early marriage, dowry and violence against women. Here the example of Ranjana, one of the EKATA group members is noteworthy. When she came to know that without any valid reason her son was going to divorce his wife, she first tried to convince him otherwise but failed. She informed the EKATA group members who then met the son and convinced him not to get a divorce.

The EKATA groups with the help of NLO and UP members have also been able to address the discriminatory wage practices in some of the working areas. The case below elaborates how the EKATA group in one of the working areas became proactive in addressing this discriminatory wage practice:

Box-2: Increase in women's wage and addressing wage discrimination:

At Nilphamari, the issue of discriminatory wage practice was identified in the social analysis and the EKATA group members took it as an agenda of group discussion. It was discussed among all the labour groups of the community and neighbouring community by the EKATA group members. During that time, they discussed this issue with other female labourers in the neighbouring 5 communities. They also asked female laborers of other communities to discuss this issue of women's wages with male labourers and land owners. During their discussions they did a cost benefit analysis in which the importance of wage increment become clear to other labourers and land owners. In that analysis, they tried to assess the extent of discrimination between male and female labor group wages. Then EKATA group arranged a gathering with all labourers, land owners of 5 para with UNO, women affairs officer, Upazilla chairman, vice chairman and local journalists to have a dialogue and discussion about the requirement of increased female wages in agriculture. Then the issue took a wider look with greater network among 9 EKATA groups of the Ramnagar Union of Nilphamari, to have a greater mobilization on this issue of women wage.

The instant result of this movement is that people of Ramnagar union have become well aware of the issue of increasing women's wages. As a result throughout the entire union a large increase occurred in women's wage rates, especially for individual labouring. Now women are getting 100 – 120 taka while before the movement it was about 60 – 70 taka. On the other hand the wage gap between male and female labourer has been reduced to just 30 – 40 taka compared to 70 – 80 taka a day previously, as male labourers get around 140 – 150 taka in a day. Another tremendous change is in group labour selling as earlier, the male group used to get 600 taka for every 33 decimals (1 *Bigha*) and females used to get 400-500 taka for working the same amount of land. Now both male & female groups are getting equal wage i.e. 1200 taka per *bigha*.

5. Conclusion and way forward

Social solidarity is more about mutual trust and understanding among the poor and non-poor community people and the local government bodies that play the most important role for the wellbeing of the grassroots communities. Breaking the existing hierarchical power structure and one dimensional top-down power flow is not an easy task and it takes an extended time when people gradually move towards creating a more enabling environment where everyone becomes free in taking up their roles and responsibilities accordingly and thus, more empowerment of the extreme-poor people can prevail.

Poverty torn people who earlier did not get their space in the society to talk about their basic rights are now even able to participate in the decision making meetings at the Union Parishads. The NLOs in particular have become so empowered that they are working side by side with the local government authorities as they have the support of their community people-both poor and non-poor.

Some examples of social activity accomplishment have made the community groups gain the reliability and faith of other people. The series of discussion, community consultation and participatory social analysis made them more familiar with each other, which later helped them cooperate. At the same time, a positive competition among the people for doing well has started which benefits all the communities.

Some direct help in terms of cash, kind or knowledge and some indirect help especially in helping channel the government resources for the poor of the non-poor to the poor have created a positive impact on the lives of the poor communities. Some Union Parishads have started the provision of open budgeting and taking community feedback on the planning process of the UP. Here, 'breaking the blocks' is being done from both of the parties; community people, after knowing their rights and responsibilities, are raising their voice and thus making their participation effective and on the other hand, the Union Parishads have become open enough to accept the views of the people and incorporate those accordingly. However, some more improvement is essential which SETU has not been able to address till now. After the open budgeting is done, people need to concentrate more on the following up and monitoring of those plans. Some follow up or review meeting should be held where the UP, with the participation of the concerned UP members and local government officials can review the progress of the work they planned.

Now these practices at the community level need to be carried forward so that people become more conscious of the benefits of inclusion of the poor and extreme poor people in their social affairs knowing that they have a lot to contribute for their common betterment. Once it is done, community people will have an improved

environment where unity based strong social solidarity will prevail and the 'have' will come forward to the support of the 'have not' and thus social discriminations will reduce from the society.

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