

IDS Working Paper 200

**Making rights work for the poor: Nijera Kori and the
construction of “collective capabilities” in rural Bangladesh**

Naila Kabeer

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INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
Brighton, Sussex BN1 9RE
ENGLAND

Summary

Whilst there is a formal commitment to rights in Bangladesh, spelt out in its constitution, its legal framework and its ratification of various international conventions on rights, the reality for its citizens is one of violations as much as the observance of rights. For the poor, in particular, who rely for their survival on relationships which position them as dependent on more powerful patrons, there is little prospect of demanding justice. The NGO sector in Bangladesh has sought to compensate for various deficits which characterise the lives of poor and marginalised groups. However, few attempt to directly address the “rights deficit”. One of the few to do so exception is Nijera Kori whose strategy is to build the capacity of the poor to mobilise in defence of their rights and in pursuit of justice. Its focus therefore is on “collective” rather than individual capabilities. The paper concludes by drawing out what Nijera Kori’s experience tells us about processes of social change and its challenge to the linear logic that characterises donor agency approaches to accountability.

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Preface

This paper was prepared for the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability (Citizenship DRC), an international research partnership dedicated to exploring the new forms of citizenship which are needed to make rights real for poor people. The Citizenship DRC's programme emphasises collaborative work across national, institutional and disciplinary boundaries, adopting an approach that combines research, capacity building, dissemination and policy influence.

The Citizenship DRC brings together over 50 researchers from research institutions and civil society groups based in Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Mexico, Nigeria, South Africa and the UK. It is coordinated in the UK by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS); in Bangladesh by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BLDS); in Brazil by the Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (CEBRAP); in India by the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA); in Mexico by the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (IISUNAM); in Nigeria by the Theatre for Development Centre at Ahmadu Bello University (TFDC) and in South Africa by the Centre for Southern African Studies/School of Government of the University of the Western Cape (UWC).

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For more information, please see the Citizenship DRC website: www.ids.ac.uk/drc-citizen/

1 Introduction

1.1 NGOs and citizenship in Bangladesh: "markets" and "movements"

In an earlier paper produced to explore the theme of "inclusive" citizenship for the Development Research Centre on citizenship, participation and accountability, issues of identity and agency, institutions and access, and associations and collective action were identified as central components for a research programme on this theme (Kabeer 2002). How people define themselves, and are defined by others, is relevant to citizenship as practice because of its implications for their capacity to act as citizens. Institutions, and the relationships of power, access and exclusion that they embody are relevant because they determine the terms on which people participate in their societies and gain access to the resources they need to live their lives with dignity. And finally, while individual agency may be a central aspect of claiming rights and observing duties, history tells us it has been the collective struggles of those who have been denied full citizenship status that have driven processes of transformation towards more inclusive definitions and practices.

This paper returns to these themes through an examination of the vision and practices of a non-governmental organisation in Bangladesh which defines itself as working to make rights real for the poor through building their capacity for collective action. It has been estimated that there are around 22 000 NGOs in Bangladesh, that around 80 per cent of its villages have some form of NGO presence and that around 35 per cent of the country's population directly benefit from their activities (Thornton *et al.* 2000). In a country of 130 million people, this suggests an astonishing outreach. However, although references are frequently made to "the NGO sector", they vary considerably in the notions of citizenship which explicitly or implicitly inform the way they work, with some seeking to mimic "markets" in their approach while others operate as surrogate "movements".

A recent review of some of the larger NGOs in Bangladesh makes this point. In terms of similarities, the NGOs included in the study, like other NGOs in Bangladesh are partly or mainly dependent on external funding, subscribe to poverty reduction as their main goal and the empowerment of the poor through group-related activities as the main means for realising this goal (Thornton *et al.* 2000). However, there was considerable diversity in their interpretation of empowerment and their strategies for achieving it. The review suggested that there were four "ideal types" of organisations in the Bangladesh context.

The first were organisations largely concerned with microfinance. These put their emphasis on the economic dimensions of empowerment through the provision of financial services for groups of poor people with a view to enterprise development, market access and economic accumulation. Buro Tangail was cited as an example of this approach. The second focused on social services, such as health, education and so on, which promoted the human capital of the poor. They were exemplified by BRAC (the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee). A third ideal type, exemplified by RDRS (Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services), were "social development organisations" which combined economic and social service provision with attention to the political dimensions of empowerment.

The fourth type were the “social mobilisation organisations” which emphasised “political empowerment” through challenging power structures and promoting rights. As the review pointed out: ‘this type of organisation appreciates the economic dimension to empowerment but believes that the only effective way of bringing change is through socio-political processes’ (Thornton *et al.* 2000: 7). This paper is about Nijera Kori (NK), the organisation that was cited by the review as an example of this approach. There are in fact not many organisations in Bangladesh today that represent this approach, making NK somewhat unique within the NGO community.

Nijera Kori was founded in the mid-1970s by an expatriate professional woman in response to the distress of the many destitute rural women who flooded into Dhaka city during the 1974 famine. In this early phase, NK was a relief-oriented initiative, providing food, shelter and income-generating skills to women in distress. When its founder left Bangladesh, the organisation ceased to function. However, in 1979, the primarily female staff of CUSO’s (the Canadian University Services Organisation) Women’s Programme, dissatisfied with its welfarist stance on gender issues, broke away from CUSO and revived the defunct NK, this time as an organisation which addressed the needs of poor, rural women from a more developmental perspective.

A further change of direction took place in 1980 when a number of field organisers broke away from BRAC and joined Nijera Kori. Here too, the cause of dissatisfaction related to programmatic concerns, in this case with BRAC’s gradual move away from a primary focus on raising awareness and building the organisations of the poor to an increasing stress on service delivery functions, a move that was happening across the NGO sector during that period. The disaffected staff took with them a very different understanding of the developmental problems of Bangladesh, one which has since shaped the history and evolution of NK. Thus while strictly speaking, NK has been in existence since 1976, the organisation I will be discussing in this paper really came into existence in 1980.

The emphasis on social mobilisation which continues to characterise NK today was once more widespread amongst NGOs in Bangladesh. A recent evaluation of the sector by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1998) suggested that the change largely took place in response to national factors, namely the imposition of military rule between 1976 and 1991 and its curtailment of mobilisation activities by NGOs. However, the agenda of “social mobilisation” with its stress on egalitarianism and social justice was also displaced at the international level. The ascendancy of the neo-liberal agenda within the donor community in general had very direct ramifications for development policies within highly aid-dependent countries like Bangladesh. It was associated with a sustained critique of the “rent-seeking” state, a consequent turn by the major donor agencies to private initiatives, including those of “civil society”, and a preoccupation with issues of efficiency and financial sustainability. The nascent NGO-led microcredit movement in Bangladesh, with its stress on building a bottom-up “*paisa* capitalism”, appeared ideally suited to this new ideology. The 1980s, therefore, saw a donor-funded expansion of the NGO sector in Bangladesh accompanied by a shift away from the politics of mobilisation towards greater professionalisation and a stress on market participation as the route to empowerment.

NK was an exception to this general trend. It maintained its independence from the overall shift in ideology by avoiding funds from bilateral donors and multilateral lending agencies, which were actively promoting a service delivery function among NGOs. It worked instead in partnership with smaller international non-governmental organisations (such as War on Want in the UK) which shared its vision and goals and were prepared to provide funds without expecting the organisation to change direction. While this meant that NK operated on a shoe-string budget, compared to many of the better known NGOs, and did not expand to the same extent, it was also able to remain faithful to its original vision of collective struggle. However, in recent years, it has accepted financial support from a major bilateral donor in the form of DFID. This partly reflects the drying up of funds to many of the international NGOs that had supported it in the past, but also the greater prominence given to rights-based approaches to development within the wider donor community (Eyben 2003a).

NK thus represents an organisation that defined its agenda from its inception in terms of building the *collective capabilities* of poor women and men to claim their rights as citizens rather than as clients, customers, consumers, beneficiaries, users, welfare dependents or any of the other “identities” ascribed to the poor by conventional development projects (Cornwall 2000). There are clearly lessons to be drawn from its experience regarding the challenge of making rights real. The aim of this paper is to try and distil some of these lessons. It draws on a variety of published and unpublished sources, including NK’s own annual reports. It also draws on the author’s long-standing personal knowledge of the organisation and its members as well as a brief period of fieldwork carried out in a number of NK areas in 2000. The paper is *not* intended as any kind of rigorous evaluation of the organisation. The data available do not allow for that. But they do permit a reflection on the experiences of an organisation which was founded to promote the rights of the poor a decade or so before a rights-based approach achieved its current prominence in the international development discourse. However, before analysing this experience, the rest of this section of the paper spells out a conceptual framework within which to locate its understanding of processes of empowerment.

1.2 Conceptualising empowerment: from individual achievement to structural transformation

There are a number of different approaches in the social sciences to the concepts of power and empowerment, both of which are central to NK’s understanding of itself as an organisation for social transformation. For the purposes of my analysis, I will draw on an earlier paper on this topic which suggested that power related to the ability to make strategic life choices and to participate in the processes of decision-making which help to frame such choices (Kabeer 1999; 2001a). Empowerment then referred to processes of change by which those who have been denied the capacity to make these choices become enabled to do so. These changes can occur in a number of different, but interrelated dimensions, each of which contributes, and benefits from, changes in the others.

Resources represent the pre-conditions for making *real* choice, in other words, choices in the presence of alternatives. They can take the form of conventional economic resources, such as land, jobs, equipment, assets and finance. They also include “human” resources: those embodied in the human being which contribute to his or her capacity to exercise choice. These include their analytical and practical skills, knowledge, creativity, imagination and wisdom as well as the more conventionally recognised forms of human capital, such as education and training. And finally, resources can be social in nature, encompassing the networks, connections and associations through which people may seek to satisfy their need for belonging or use as ways of improving their situation and life chances.

Resources are distributed in society through a variety of different institutions which make up the wider context in which choices are made: family and household; kinship and community; markets and the economy; and, of course, the state in all its different manifestations. They are consequently distributed according to the different principles (e.g. norms, claims, entitlements, rights, “rational” choice), different identities (household head; mother; child; tenant; clan member; wage labour; client; consumer, etc.) and through the variety of social relationships (patron-client relationships; criminal gangs; family-based relationships; informal market transactions; formal contractual transactions: public sector delivery) which operate in these different institutional domains. Asymmetries in the ways in which these different sets of rules, norms and practices are articulated with each other and rooted within the overall organisation of a society make up the deeper structures of inequality within a given context.

One effect of these institutionalised inequalities is that the *terms of access* to resources vary considerably for different individuals and groups as well as the extent of access. They may entail highly demeaning forms of relationships or exploitative conditions of work or they may be achieved in ways which promote dignity and a sense of self- and social worth. A concern with poverty alleviation generally focuses on increasing the access of the poor to economic resources. A concern with empowerment entails an additional concern with the *terms* on which access is gained.

The second dimension of power relates to *agency*: the ability to define and act on one’s goals. Agency can take a variety of different forms. It may take the form of observable actions undertaken individually or collectively: decision-making, bargaining, negotiation, protest, resistance, struggle, repression and so on. However, it also refers to the meanings, motivations and purpose which people bring to their activity, their *sense* of agency and why they do what they do. Agency can be exercised in positive ways to achieve certain goals; this is agency in the sense of “the power to”. Equally, however, agency can also be used in a more negative way to exercise “power over” others, curtailing their capacity to define their goals and act on them. Such power rests in the kind of institutional structures described above and the unequal terms on which they distribute valued forms of resources and recognition.

Resources and agency together constitute what Amartya Sen refers to as “capabilities”, the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving valued ways of “being and doing” (Sen 1992: 40). Because empowerment has to be seen as an on-going process of “becoming empowered”, it is difficult to predict an “end-state” to the process. However, what people are able to achieve at a particular moment in time constitutes the conditions from which they will exercise agency in the future. Thus

“achievements” have to be assessed for their transformatory potential: do they open up new possibilities for action or do they foreclose on existing ones?

The model of social change implied by this view of empowerment encompasses change in a number of different dimensions of experience – (Chen and Mahmud (1995) suggest the cognitive, behavioural, material, relational and the perceptual as examples of these dimensions) – and in a number of different institutional domains (families, community and civil society; markets and state). However, these different kinds of changes are likely to interact with each other. Changes at the level of the individual can lead on to demands for institutional change; changes in the legal or political system expand individual capabilities; changes within the market place lead to changes in intra-household relations; changes in state policies restructure the terms of access to the market. It is this possibility for synergies and interactions between different kinds of change, sometimes negative, sometimes positive, which makes it difficult for any organisation with an empowerment agenda to manage or predict how the process will unfold.

The different categories of NGOs that we discussed earlier can be analysed within the framework of analysis suggested by this conceptualisation of empowerment (Figure 1.1). These organisations have very different understandings of the nature of the problem they are working with and hence the kind of strategy necessary to address it. Some clearly take the view that providing economic resources (e.g. microfinance) or social services (e.g. education) to individuals or groups will address the main barriers to their fuller participation as citizens of their societies. Others take a more structural view of the problem and seek to bring about a more radical transformation of society by challenging institutionalised aspects of social inequality and, through them, its “deep” structures.

Clearly the extent to which different organisations do serve to empower the poor will reflect the meaning they give to the idea of empowerment, the extent to which their strategies are appropriate to their goals and the kind of capacity they bring to bear in carrying them out. It will also depend on the resilience of the structures of inequality that they are seeking to transform and the extent to which these structures can be altered by the approach the organisation has taken.

Within this framework, NK can be positioned as an organisation that takes a structural view of inequality, that seeks to promote collective, rather than individual, processes of change through the promotion of collective, rather than individual, capabilities and action. The context in which it is working is described in the next section of the paper since this helps to explain the approach that it has taken to bring about change. Section 3 examines what it has achieved as well as what it has failed to achieve while Section 4 reflects on what both sets of outcomes tell us about processes of empowerment and social change in a country like Bangladesh and the challenge they present to conventional ways of “doing” development. The paper then returns to the notion of citizenship which is embodied in Nijera Kori’s practice.

Figure 1.1 Assessing the impact of organisational intervention



2 Nijera Kori: context, vision and goals

2.1 The "structures of inequality" in Bangladesh: the context of Nijera Kori

At the formal level at least, there is no dearth of rights in Bangladesh. The constitution of Bangladesh, promulgated in 1972, reflected the ideals of its liberation struggle and embodied the principles of democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism. It has since been amended 13 times, largely to accommodate shifting political realities. Today only the commitment to democracy and nationalism remains intact. However, the constitution continues to uphold universal human rights, including the fundamental right to life and personal liberty, privacy, equality and non-discrimination, freedom of movement, religion, expression, thought and conscience and property. It provides that any existing law inconsistent with these rights will be considered void and no new law can be enacted which contravenes fundamental rights. It also provides a specific right to enforce fundamental rights through petition to the Supreme Court.

In addition to fundamental rights, the constitution also contains fundamental principles of state policy which address the need for the state to ensure the availability of food, shelter, employment and education for all its citizens. Although these are stated to be non-justiciable, the constitution also provides that they should be fundamental to the governance of Bangladesh, applied in the laws and a guide to constitutional and legal interpretation. As Dunn *et al.* argue, these impose a positive duty upon the State to

take action to improve the socio-economic and cultural life of citizens. The net effect of these various provisions is 'a strong Constitutional commitment, coupled with clear international legal obligations, to protect human rights' (Dunn *et al.* 2000: 11).

The reality, however, bears very little relation to these constitutional provisions. Instead it is characterised by various forms of inclusion and exclusion in relation to these rights which reflect the material resources available to individuals and the social networks they are able to draw on. Certain individuals and groups systematically enjoy far more rights and privileges than others, and indeed often at the expense of these others. These problems of inequality and exclusion can in turn be traced to the workings of the key institutions of the society through which valued resources are distributed and recognition is given to individuals and groups within the social hierarchy.

The problems begin with flaws in the way in which rights and citizenship are defined within the constitution itself. Despite its apparent commitment to the principle of equal rights, in practice, the constitution allows the principle to be suspended for certain categories of individuals (women, children and religious minorities, in particular), thus creating inequalities within the very definition of formal citizenship. These inequalities in definition are then compounded by the existence of various laws which are either outmoded or in conflict with constitutional rights, particularly those related to national security as well as personal laws entrenching gender and religious discrimination (Dunn *et al.* 2000). Other laws are simply not enforced. In some cases, this reflects apathy and indifference on the part of the state and its judiciary; in other cases, it reflects inadequacies in the apparatus of enforcement; and in yet others, the deliberate machinations of powerful vested interests in the society. Furthermore, lack of clarity makes any attempt at enforcement fraught with difficulty and conflict. Appendix 1, which describes the situation with respect to land rights, provides some insight into why the poor find it so difficult to claim those minimal rights to land which are guaranteed by the state.

Along with flaws in the legal definition of rights, the legal system offers uncertain recourse to justice. More troubling than the delays, costs, inefficiency and cumbersome procedures that contribute to this uncertainty is the fact that justice can be bought and sold: cases can be dismissed, prolonged or delayed for the right price. Indeed, the use of false litigation is frequently resorted to by powerful groups and individuals to secure their own interests. The chance of getting justice is random at best for most citizens, but it is particularly remote for those without resources, position or networks.

The precarious status of citizenship rights in Bangladesh has been compounded by the absence of any interest on the part of successive regimes in rectifying the situation. Despite the shift from military rule to democracy in 1991, the process of democratic transition is far from complete: 'The workings of government are marked by their politically partisan nature and lack of transparency and accountability, repressive legislation remains in place, law enforcement and governance remains prone to political influence, and political participation – particularly of women, the poor, the minorities and disadvantaged groups – remains weak' (Dunn *et al.* 2000: 8).

State actors do not only fail to protect the rights of citizens, they actively contribute to their violation. The extensive controls over the allocation of valued resources exercised by state officials at all levels have

given rise to widespread rent-seeking and corruption. Unable to pay the necessary bribes, mobilise the necessary contacts or exercise the necessary clout, it is the poor who go without water and power, receive poor quality services in health and education, are harassed by the police and the law courts at the instigation of the rich and left isolated when government contracts for infrastructure and embankments are diverted or misspent.

The weakness and unpredictability of the institutions of state and market has meant that there is widespread reliance at every level of society on patron-client relationships, often rooted in family and kinship networks, to gain any form of access. The poor however tend to be either excluded from these networks or only able to participate on extremely asymmetrical terms which deprive them of voice and agency and reduce them to the status of highly dependent clients.

2.2 Nijera Kori: analysis, vision and goals

The flawed functioning of the government and legal system can thus be traced to a wider social system which breeds inequalities and promotes systematic violations of the rule of law (Adnan 1997; Christensen 1999; Sidiqqi 2000; Rahman and Islam 2002; Wood 2000; Dunn *et al.* 2000). NK's own analysis of the context in which it works was first spelt out in a self-evaluation carried out within a year of its inception (Ahmed 1982) and subsequently elaborated in its annual reports. It singles out three interacting sets of factors as centrally implicated in the disenfranchisement of the poor:

- In *economic* terms, the poor relied on the direct or indirect sale of their labour power to meet their basic needs. However, the absence of any assets to fall back on meant that they entered the market place on highly asymmetrical terms, unable to bargain over the terms on which they sold their labour or the products of their labour. They were forced to accept the terms they were offered even if these barely covered their ability to reproduce themselves on a daily basis.
- In *social* terms, the poor were kept in their place by highly unequal relationships of class and gender within which their subordinate status was explained – and legitimated – as naturally determined, divinely ordained or attributable to individual fault, fate or failure. Lack of access to even basic education meant that many were unaware of their minimum legal rights while lack of exposure to alternative values and ideas, to alternative “ways of being and doing”, prevented them from questioning the status quo.
- In *political* terms, they had little voice in the collective structures of decision-making which governed the distribution of resources and the scope for action within the community. This was true at the informal level where powerful sections of village society traditionally dominated the *shalish*, the informal councils which settled disputes at the local level. It was also true at the level of local government. The delivery of state programmes intended for the poor was dominated by those who were drawn from, or had close connections to, the rural elite and who used these programmes to build up their own networks, rewarding old supporters and attracting new ones. It goes without saying that there was very little participation by the poor in national processes of decision-making.

From the outset, therefore, NK defined the problem of poverty not simply in terms of lack of resources but also in terms of lack of voice, agency and organisation; not simply as the manifestation of individual want but also of underlying systemic causes. This analysis explains a number of key aspects of NK's philosophy and strategy. It explains, first of all, the nature of its vision and goals: 'to establish an exploitation-free society by changing the present system of social exploitation with the aim of emancipation of working class people' (Nijera Kori 1999).

Secondly, it explains its holistic approach. It believes that the struggle to transform the underlying structures of inequality, injustice and exclusion must be carried out in all spheres of life (economic, social and political) and at all levels, starting with the individual and extending to the local, the national and, more recently, the international. Implicit in this approach is the view that economic, social and political rights are indivisible, that each is necessary to the attainment of the other.

Thirdly, NK is committed to the view that the struggle for a more just society must encompass all sections of the disenfranchised, women as well as men. Consequently, it has transformed itself from its earlier incarnation as a mainly urban, welfare-oriented project, run by women for women, to a radical, mainly rural organisation of men and women working with both women and men. Gender inequality remains an integral aspect of NK's analysis and strategy but it believes that gender relations are not inherently antagonistic and that men can be persuaded to become women's allies in the struggle against patriarchal oppression on the basis of their shared suffering, more immediately as a family, and more generally as a class. Indeed, without the support of the men from their families and from their class, women from landless households are likely to find their own struggles for resources and recognition not just more difficult, but perhaps impossible.

NK's analysis of the problematic status of rights in Bangladesh explains its emphasis on the values of solidarity, self-reliance and collective action rather than those of individual prosperity or personal empowerment. The concentration of power among a privileged few and the pervasiveness of patron-client relationships in securing any form of access for the rest of society has served to fragment and isolate the poor along vertical lines and to prevent the emergence of horizontal, class-based solidarities which could challenge these hierarchies. NK sees its role as providing a countervailing force to these tendencies by consciously building the organisational capacity of the poor so that they can mobilise to defend and claim their rights.

Finally, its emphasis on self-reliance also explains why NK has consistently and firmly rejected a service delivery role and remained one of the only non-governmental organisations in the country to resist the widespread "turn to credit" by the mid-1980s. Its opposition to a service delivery role for non-governmental organisations reflects its fear that such roles can create new forms of dependency between such organisations and their constituencies, diverting the energies of both from the larger goals of attacking the structural roots of power and democratising the state.

3 Nijera Kori: structure, culture and strategy

3.1 Structure, culture and process

The structure and culture of NK reflects its attempt to internalise the values and principles which it seeks to promote among its marginalised constituency. The stress is on democracy, accountability and transparency. There is an overall General Body to which the organisation is accountable, which approves the appointment of its coordinator and oversees its annual plans. The organisation has had the same coordinator since 1980 when she joined the organisation as a part of the disaffected group that left BRAC. While this partly reflects a desire for continuity on the part of the governing body, it is also a recognition of the special role of the co-ordinator in an organisation like NK, given its engagement in social mobilisation and its frequent confrontations with powerful vested interests at different levels of society. The present coordinator has been able to use her prominence in various civil society forums and networks to build support for Nijera Kori's activities and to defend the interests of its staff and constituency in situations of conflict.

Organisational activity is conducted at a number of different levels: the centre located in Dhaka, the divisional level, the "area" and the sub-centre which is where field workers are based. There are provisions for democratic decision-making through coordination committees at each level. The key strategic decision-making body for the organisation as a whole is a central convention which meets every alternate year. In the interim year, decisions are taken or modified by central council meetings where all staff are represented. The entire staff at both field and central levels participates in strategic decision-making, both directly and through these elected representatives. All officials with decision-making responsibilities, with the exception of the coordinator, are elected to the relevant levels and committees. There is provision for an additional woman member if no woman is on any of the elected committees, but this has rarely proved necessary.

However, internal democracy within NK is not simply a matter of election and representation but also of active participation in the various levels of decision-making. The review of "big" NGOs in Bangladesh cited earlier pointed out that one of the features distinguishing mobilising organisations like NK from service delivery organisations was the frequency with which their members met. Box 3.1, which summarises the various meetings which feature in the organisation's internal processes (and hence does not include meetings with its landless constituency), bears out this point.

The frequency of face-to-face meetings is seen as an important means through which its staff acquire a sense of "belonging" to the organisation, establish trust amongst themselves and develop a stake in organisational goals. Decision-making, reporting and internal learning operate as closely intertwined processes within the organisation. Minutes of meetings, periodic activity reports and reports of visits across the organisation are maintained in written form so that there is a constant flow of information throughout the organisation, both vertically, from centre to field and back to the centre, and horizontally, across sub-centres, area and divisional levels.

Box 3.1 The internal organisation of Nijera Kori

- Programme organisers are based at sub-centre level. They meet on a weekly basis to reflect on their performance over the week, share problems, discuss performance and make plans for the coming period. Organisers maintain files for each of the groups they are working with so that continuity is maintained in relationships with groups even if the organiser is transferred.
- 2–3 day area-level meetings are held each month. Individual organisers within an area submit a written activity report for the month and discuss their own performances and problems in the field. Individual and area-level activities are decided at these meetings. One day is kept aside for study and learning, based on current newspaper articles, reports, books and periodicals which have been recommended by the trainers.
- 2 day meetings are held by the divisional committee every second month. Office holders at area and divisional levels review the entire division's performance against the objectives and targets of the annual plan and make adjustments where necessary. Recommendations which have implications beyond the division are sent on to the central team which either makes a decision itself or takes it up at the executive committee.
- 2–3 day quarterly meetings are held by the executive committee. Four divisional chairs and seven central committee members, including the coordinator, meet to review the entire programme. The divisions give their reports, identify and discuss key issues and decide on new strategic directions. The administrative decisions for the organisation are taken here. Proceedings are circulated for discussion at divisional and area level meetings.
- Annual 3 day conventions are held at the divisional level. All staff of the division conduct a review of divisional and area performance, check achievements against targets and prepare a report on divisional activities for the entire year.
- 4 day central convention meets every second year. This is the highest decision-making body in NK. All NK staff members are present, including the accountants, administrators and support staff. During the convention, each division presents a report for the past year and reviews policies and guidelines in the light of any changed circumstances. An annual report, which synthesises the quarterly reports of each division and hence provides an overview of the organisation's activities and achievements over the past year, is presented for discussion at this convention along with an annual plan and budget. Staff members at the convention also elect representatives to different levels. Thus, area staff elect the area chair; divisional staff elect the divisional officials and the entire body of staff elect the central organiser and two co-organisers, the central trainer and central co-trainers. The only non-elected members in the decision-making structure are the co-ordinator and the team of accountants.
- 4 day council meetings are held every alternate year. Here, every five NK staff members are represented by an elected councillor. This is thus a smaller forum than the biennial convention and allows for more in-depth analysis and evaluation than is possible in the larger forum. The annual report for the year in question is presented at this meeting. Any changes to decisions or policies taken at these biennial council meetings have to be approved at the next convention.
- Finally, an extended meeting of the executive committee and all elected representatives can be convened if any unanticipated issues or unplanned changes need to be discussed and decisions made at the relevant level.

However, despite many years in the field, NK faces a conundrum which it has yet to resolve. Its ability to realise its goals depends critically on the quality of its workers: it expects them to live among, and interact closely with, the poor and landless who are the organisation's constituency and it expects them to demonstrate a level of dedication, commitment, courage and "people" skills that goes well beyond the requirements of other more professionalised NGOs in Bangladesh. However, the organisation cannot provide higher or even equivalent levels of pay, benefits and working conditions in return. Were it to do so, it would widen the social and economic distance between its workers and its landless constituency, jeopardising the relationship of mutuality on which interactions between the two are based. This is particularly the case today when salaries in the NGO sector often outstrip salaries earned by equally qualified employees in the public sector.

The first cohort of workers in NK was mainly made up of student activists who had been politicised in the movement for national liberation in 1971. Nijera Kori provided them the opportunity to work with a radical agenda in the countryside at a time when the left parties had begun to disintegrate into factional groupings. They brought with them a level of commitment to social justice and a willingness to live their personal lives accordingly which NK has not been able to take for granted in later cohorts of workers. Instead, it has to construct its "agents for change" out of new recruits through its own strategy for building staff capacity, a process that remains slow and uneven, given that salary levels paid by other NGOs contribute to a higher rate of turnover among recent cohorts than earlier ones.

Training forms a central core in this process of construction. New recruits are given some preliminary orientation and then sent to the field to learn on the job. They are assessed over the course of the year and at the end of it, only those with the necessary potential are offered permanent contracts. Training remains an aspect of staff development on an on-going basis. A pool of trainers are selected from the field and so have first-hand knowledge and experience of conditions in the field. They are then given further training in a range of development issues, including their social and gender dimensions, in order to equip them to take leadership in this aspect of the organisation's work.

NK also attaches a great deal of value to the cultural dimensions of its training programme and has staff with specific responsibility for developing its cultural materials at every level of the organisation. This is not only because cultural activities liven up its training courses, but also because, as one trainer pointed out to me: 'we want to create a different kind of person. And to be a different kind of person, you need cultural change' (Fieldwork, Char Jabbar 2000).

3.2 Organisational strategy: group formation and development

At the heart of NK's strategy to promote social justice is the promotion of the organisational capacity of the poor. Extensive discussions in the field during its early years led it to define its constituency as those men and women who depended primarily on their own physical labour to earn a living but exercised little control over the terms on which it was exchanged: wage workers, sharecroppers and marginal farmers, artisans, rickshaw pullers, barbers, blacksmiths, potters and so on (Nijera Kori 2000).

The process of group formation in a new village begins with participatory analysis carried out by programme organisers with the local population in order to identify its constituency within that village. Each organiser oversees around 15–20 groups, with around 16–30 members each. Male and female groups are formed separately. Once a number of groups have started to function in a village, the process tends to become self-sustaining, as other households from neighbouring areas or villages come forward themselves to form their own groups.

All groups are required to save on a weekly basis. This is intended to reduce their members' vulnerability in times of crisis and their dependence on usurious forms of credit. NK encourages its groups to save their money in bank accounts, partly to ensure that their money is safe but also to familiarise them with bank procedures. Each group elects a leader, secretary and cashier on the basis of perceived commitments or ability. They are responsible for the day-to-day running of the group and serve as the link between the group members and the local NK office. If they have the necessary aptitude and commitment, they tend to evolve as group leaders over time.

Meetings are held by the groups at village, area and divisional levels to discuss organisational matters, review achievements, identify problems and decide future directions. The elected representatives to the various committees visit other villages and working areas to evaluate each other's performance and exchange experiences. Weekly group meetings are used to discuss group and village activities and to formulate plans for the coming weeks as well as to discuss and analyse issues that range from their personal lives to broader questions of political economy and culture. Minutes are kept of group meetings.

As with its staff, so with its groups, training plays a central role in NK's activities. Elected members of groups are provided with different levels of training as their group matures and are responsible for disseminating the information, skills and ideas learnt to the rest of their group. NK's approach to training was strongly influenced by the pedagogic approach developed by Paulo Freire, but its methods and content have been "indigenised" over the years to reflect the specificities of the local context. As with staff training, group training also draws on a variety of methods. Here too, cultural activities, such as songs, stories, theatre and role plays are used to communicate new ideas through innovative and accessible means. The song reported in Box 3.2 is a typical example of the combination of folk image and political message which makes up the NK musical repertoire. Dramas enacting recognisable situations from everyday life are carried out for the wider village community and used to win broader understanding and support for NK's work.

Training fulfils a variety of different functions in the development of group organisation. It provides members with information about their rights and entitlements as well as practical skills for income-generating purposes. It also provides them with the opportunity to reflect and analyse their individual situation and its relationship to the collective problems of the poor. It gives them exposure to some of the theoretical explanations which locate the roots of these problems in the deeper structures of class, gender and social organisation. And it helps to build an alternative grass-roots leadership among the poor.

Box 3.2 The song of the duck and the civet cat

The duck lays the eggs,
But the civet cat eats them,
Do you hear, brother,
Do you understand, brother,
Do you know what that means?

In a village is a poor farmer,
His name is Kala Mia,
He toils all day in the fields
To grow food for people,
But his son cries with hunger,
And the money lender laughs.

In the dark of the night,
The weaver buys his thread.
He weaves his saris,
But the rich buy
Foreign chiffon saris.
Oh, brother: the market for his labour
Is destroyed by the import of luxury goods.

In both dry and rainy season,
We fill the boat with fish,
But the traders and the brokers
Siphon off the profit
Now in our broken boats,
The nets lie torn.
And we hear the voice of misfortune.

Parents say,
An educated son will never lie,
Don't ever tell a lie!
But society says,
It is not wise to tell the truth,
It is unwise to tell the truth.
Now lies have become mixed with truth ,
There is falsehood everywhere,
Lies win admiration,
Oh brother! Lies win admiration.
To break this reign of falsehood,
We will fight,
Oh brother, if we cannot banish the darkness of the night,
Will we ever see the sun again?

A simple classificatory system is used to monitor group development over time. The “primary” category is made up of relatively new groups who are in the process of becoming organised, developing basic levels of awareness, building up the group savings fund, learning to keep accounts and to get into the habit of regular attendance at their weekly meetings. When groups move beyond their individual concerns and show a willingness to act on behalf of all members of their class within an area, irrespective of whether they are group members or not, they are re-classified as “secondary level” groups. As they begin to manage themselves, calling their own meetings and initiating their own collective actions, they are reclassified as “higher level” groups. Members of these groups are able to analyse national and global issues and relate them to their own situation. They are regarded as local level leaders, they participate in national rallies, they are more likely to use their savings for the benefit of the community and they fight to ensure collective access to local resources.

Once village level organisation has been put in place, NK promotes a process of phased federation at village, area and then at thana level. The thana committee is currently the highest federated committee in NK. It holds an annual convention to evaluate the preceding years’ activities, discuss problems of a regional nature and elect representatives to group decision-making bodies at the different levels. NK follows a process for partial withdrawal as groups progress to secondary and then to higher levels. However, it remains involved in planning and executing projects which cover larger areas and which require mediation and advocacy at local, regional and national levels such as government administration, the courts and the police.

The growing maturity and independence of many of NK’s groups helps to reduce the staff workloads. Maturer groups not only initiate and manage their own meetings, they also take on the role of motivating other landless households in their own and neighbouring villages to become members of NK. In addition, the growth of a “critical mass” of organised groups in an area can generate a dynamic of its own so that other landless sections may take the initiative themselves to approach NK staff or group members for help in organising themselves.

4 Activities and achievements

4.1 Promoting the livelihood activities of the very poor

Currently, NK has a total of 8 622 groups in around 37 thanas in the country. This translates into over 180,000 members, half of whom are women (*Annual Report 2002*). A study carried out by Ali et al. (1998) based on a small, randomly selected sample of Nijera Kori members found that they had an average per capita monthly income of Tk. 245. Given the rural poverty line of Tk. 399, around 90 per cent of NK households were below the poverty line while 65 per cent earned around half of the poverty line income, an indicator of extreme poverty. A third of NK groups had no homestead land at all, another indicator of extreme poverty. 44 per cent had no access to any cultivable land while 75 per cent had access to less than 16 decimals of land.

If the results reported by Ali *et al.* hold for other NK areas, they suggest that the bulk of NK groups are drawn from the ranks of the poor, with a sizeable percentage from the ranks of the extreme poor.¹ This is precisely the section of the population that has been increasingly excluded from participation in the activities of other NGOs as the latter turned increasingly to the provision of microfinance services. The very poor generally do not earn incomes regularly enough to meet the rigid weekly repayment schedules practised by most microfinance organisations and often get into deeper debt as a result.

However, NK does not provide any direct material resources or services to these groups. We therefore need to understand what kinds of “benefits” it *does* offer in order to understand why it has managed to attract a membership drawn from the very poorest sections of society. Although the review of “big” NGOs cited earlier classified NK as an example of organisations that put the emphasis largely on political and social issues to the neglect of the economic ones, this is somewhat misleading. What sets NK apart from other NGOs is not so much the *absence* of attention to economic issues, but the way in which it addresses them. Indeed, given the conditions of extreme poverty which characterise its membership and the precariousness of their livelihoods, their capacity to challenge social injustice is likely to be seriously constrained without some improvement in their resource base.

One economic activity promoted by NK relates to group saving programme noted earlier. However, the programme is geared to the self-generation and self-management of funds for collective enterprise among group members rather than to individual economic accumulation. Group savings are often invested in collective assets to improve productivity of livelihoods, most commonly in agriculture. These have included the purchase of power tillers for the collective use of group members, the mortgaging in of land for cultivation; the leasing in of ponds for fish cultivation; the purchase of shallow irrigation machines (tube well) to use for own cultivation but also to sell water. The earnings from these various investments are shared equally by group members.

Analysis by Ali *et al.* (1998) suggests that the programme has succeeded in generating some tangible benefits at the household level (see Tables 1 to 6 in Appendix 3). For instance, while NK households were largely from the ranks of the extreme poor, they found that NK members’ households had marginally higher levels of income than the control group of poor non-NK households. Per capita monthly income in NK households was 245 takas compared to Tk. 230 in non-NK households. While this could partly reflect NK’s failure to reach the very poorest of poor households, the study provides additional evidence to suggest that it also represented achievements associated with membership of NK. While the number of members per household did not differ a great deal between NK and non-NK households, NK households had more earners per household: 43 per cent of NK households had more than one earner compared to just 20 per cent of non-NK households. One major reason for this difference was that women in NK households were more likely to be economically active: 36 per cent compared to 24 per cent. As Ali *et al.*

¹ The “extreme poor” in Bangladesh have been identified as agricultural labourers earning around 3757 takas per capita per annum in 1994 and owning an average of 15 decimals of land. They made up around 23 per cent of rural households (Rahman *et al.* 1998).

note, 'the greater participation of NK women in economic activities in most cases stemmed from group initiatives or savings' (Ali *et al.* 1998: 35).

The study also found that while NK households were less likely to own homestead land than other poor households – 32 per cent compared to 28 per cent – they were more likely to have some access to cultivable land: 56 per cent compared to 22 per cent of the control group. Again, this difference appeared to reflect achievements associated with membership of NK rather than NK's failure to reach those with no land at all. Ali *et al.* point out that while 36 per cent of khas land distributed in the area had been allotted by the government to NK members, compared to 63.7 per cent of it to non-NK members, NK members were more likely to have effective possession of their land through successful resistance to the predatory efforts of local elites. The study also found that 75 per cent of NK households who had been able to claim the government khas land to which they were entitled cultivated it on a collective basis. Collective cultivation was non-existent among other poor households in the area.

Membership of NK groups was also found by the study to be associated with improvements in the security of household livelihoods. This was evident in their responses to crisis: NK household members were less likely than non-NK members to migrate out of the village in search of a job during the lean season, less likely to have to borrow or sell off household assets and far more likely to cope by diversifying into an alternative economic activity. Finally, by encouraging their group members to save with the formal banking system, NK had eased their access to mainstream sources of finance as opposed to reliance on NGOs or on informal sources, such as money-lenders. Ali *et al.* found that 54 per cent of NK members had taken out loans, of whom 41 per cent had borrowed primarily from formal credit facilities, the most important being government banks. By contrast, 42 per cent of non-NK members had taken out a loan, of whom around 67 per cent had utilised a formal credit facilities, the most important being an NGO (57 per cent). As far as informal credit sources were concerned, NK largely relied on their own collective savings followed by loans from relatives while non-NK members relied mainly on relatives and money lenders. One result of these differing patterns of borrowing was that 22 per cent of non-NK members reported having to sell off an asset at some stage to repay a loan compared with just 10 per cent of NK households.

However, important as these economic improvements might have been for poor households, they are unlikely to constitute the main explanation why such households join and stay with NK, given the amount of time taken up in weekly meetings and various additional activities that group members are encouraged to engage in, most of which do not result in any direct improvements in their incomes and many of which carry a certain degree of risk. Consequently, it is likely to be some of the other changes associated with NK membership that explain its appeal for the poor.

4.2 Redefining "personhood"

One of these changes relates to how individual members define themselves and their place in society. We noted earlier the importance of ideological factors in NK's analysis of poverty and inequality in Bangladesh: the problem of "collective inaction" on the part of the poor was seen to reflect resignation to

what appear to be the invincible forces ranged against them, an unwillingness to challenge these forces and thereby risk what little security they might have had and the fact that many simply do not know, or believe, that they had any rights. For poor rural women, in particular, whose identities have been shaped by the intersection of class and gender ideologies and for whom alternative ways of “being and doing” did not appear to belong to the realm of possibility, the sense of powerlessness was often very deep-rooted.

Consequently, despite a highly structuralist analysis of inequality and exploitation, NK’s strategy for social change takes the individual as its starting point, using various kinds of training and social interaction to strengthen his or her reflective and analytical capacity and to foster his or her willingness to question unjust norms and challenge unjust practices. The impacts of its efforts have been documented in a number of studies (Ali *et al.* 1998; Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1998). Some of these have been of the more conventional kind reported in relation to many NGO activities in Bangladesh. For instance a study by a Dutch evaluation team noted the higher levels of awareness demonstrated by NK members about such social issues as health, sanitation and family planning compared to other poor households within the same area. The study by Ali *et al.* (*op. cit.*) provides evidence that this awareness translated into practice. It found that the NK members were more likely to have hygienic “pit latrines” while other poor households in the same area were more likely to use less hygienic alternatives. Their children were more likely to attend both primary and secondary school than the children from other poor households. Furthermore, and in contrast to these other households, there was no evidence of gender discrimination in schooling among children from the NK group. Full immunisation rates for children under five were also much higher for NK households, but here there was evidence of gender discrimination among both groups.

However, it is the impact associated with what the Dutch study called NK’s “very distinctive approach” to training that was singled out as its distinctive contribution. NK group members told the Dutch team that before they had joined NK, they had been preoccupied with their own individual problems. NK had helped them to make the links between their individual problems and those of the whole society and hence persuaded them of the need to address these wider problems in order to solve their own. The team noted that records of group meetings in three previous months revealed that, along with social issues of the kind conventionally addressed by most development NGOs, NK group members had also discussed the ill effects of chemical fertiliser on the soil, the problem of environmental degradation, the political crisis facing the country at the time, the impact of the recent cyclone, the impact of the growth in fundamentalism and *fatwabaj*² as well as some of the problems created for the rural poor by NGO credit programmes. Footnote this? (During a group meeting I attended in 2000, group members were discussing what was happening in Florida during the 2000 presidential elections in the US). In other words, NK tries to provide its group members with information and analysis that goes beyond their immediate survival needs.

² This is a derogatory term referring to the use of fatwas as weapons against the weak.

The evaluation team commented that the growth in self-confidence, the greater ease in moving outside their homes and in speaking out at public forums reported by women from NK groups were not evident in the testimonies provided by members of groups organised by some of the other NGOs included in their study. The report on NK by Ali *et al.* also notes this phenomenon of the “empowerment of the self” in relation to women: ‘... organisational experiences and exposures have broadened their minds and have contributed to developing their analytical and leadership qualities ... Moreover, the participation of women at different levels of organisational activities and leadership positions have also contributed to raising the social position (of women) ... In one meeting, a female NK group member mentioned ‘Before we even feared talking in front of our husbands, nowadays we do not even fear talking with the magistrate’ (Ali *et al.* 1998: 46).

A study by Christensen (1999) provides other insights into this process of individual transformation. Some of the women he interviewed told him how important it had been for them to be addressed by their own names when they first started attending group meetings. Many had not heard their names spoken for a long time: ‘No one knew the names of poor women. Now they do.’ This strengthening of an individual sense of identity and self-worth was an important step towards the evolution of a more collective identity among NK groups. As another woman he interviewed told him, ‘Earlier, before we joined Nijera Kori, we were afraid. We didn’t even leave our *para* (neighbourhood). Now it is completely different, we move everywhere. We even travel to Comilla (for court cases), we don’t care any longer. Before joining, I felt like an orphan, but not any longer. The group’s unity gives me strength. Now people reckon with me, respect me’ (Christensen 1999: 70).

My own very preliminary field work with NK groups confirmed the importance of some of these changes in the sense of selfhood reported by women. However, it also highlighted some of the ways in which they had also been experienced by men. Here is an account provided by some of the NK male group members about what it had been like for poor people when he had been growing up.

Poor people were afraid to be united at that time. They were worried because they had no money, no assets. They didn’t have the perspective that would have allowed them to unite. They didn’t even have that little bit of courage that you must have in order to do something like that. They were afraid because they thought that if they challenged someone who was rich, they would lose out later because the rich would not help them out. They were scared. And they faced pressure from all directions. And as long as they were afraid like that, there was nothing that they could do.

Now the difference is that those who are powerful in society, those who have money, they can no longer do things in the same way that they used to. A poor person now has a different understanding of things, of themselves and what they can do. And because of that, the rich cannot put pressure on the poor in the way that they used to. The laws that were there before, they are still the same laws. But we didn’t know about them, we didn’t understand what they all meant. And because of that, they could easily just force something on us. In my father’s day, my father was a

farmer, he was not educated . . . but now, I have some education so I understand more about society than he did. And because of that, maybe, if someone tries to trick us, blame us for something or treat us unjustly, we can protest.

4.3 Building solidarity

It is evident from these examples that changes in individual definitions of selfhood shaded seamlessly into more collective notions of selfhood, a recognition of the shared interests of the poor and marginalised. NK has sought to reinforce this sense of collective identity among its group members through a variety of means. While its training programme is important in building up collective consciousness, its savings programme helps to put this into practice. Groups decide for themselves how much members will contribute each week, often adapting the rates agreed to the saving capacity of poorer members. Pressure is not brought to bear on members who fall behind in their contributions and access to savings is allowed if members need it.³ Groups also decide collectively how their savings are to be used and as noted earlier, investment in collective economic enterprises is a commonly reported use of groups' funds.

In addition, however, as groups mature, they also use their funds to support each other. A study by Khan and Khan (2000) found that in some cases, group funds were used to tide an individual member or the entire group through a period of crisis. In other cases, it was used to meet expenses incurred during social movements: for instance, helping out the families of members who have been arrested or sharing their litigation expenses; rebuilding the house of a member that had been burnt by the henchmen of a local landlord during conflicts over land. Group members also raise extra funds from the local community to mount various campaigns and protests.

The effectiveness of the process of building group solidarity is evident from the co-operative nature of the relationships both between group members and between group members and NK staff. This is documented by Mahmud (1999) who contrasts it with the more hierarchical relationships which prevailed between group members and staff of a credit-based NGO included in her study. It is also documented in the review of NGOs in Bangladesh by Thornton *et al.* 2000. They pointed to striking differences between the groups organised by social mobilisation organisations and those organised by organisations engaged in financial service delivery. Groups organised by micro-finance organisations were found to be made up of members from differing social, economic and political backgrounds and had very differing lengths of membership. They were generally more unstable and their membership changed over time. Members appeared to have very limited contact with each other or with the organisation outside of the weekly meetings. Meetings were focused purely on the collection and distribution of money and often referred to as "collection meetings" by NGO staff as well as members: 'During the actual samity (group) meetings, members arrive at different times, make whatever transactions they have to and leave. There is no need to sit together since there is nothing really to discuss' (Thornton *et al.* 2000: 11).

³ The practice both of democratic decision-making by group members as to both contributions and utilisation and open and flexible access to their savings are in sharp contrast to the inflexible and closed practices of many microcredit organisations.

This was in considerable contrast to experiences of those groups which had been organised around the goal of social mobilisation (of which NK groups had been cited as the clearest example). 'Most of these samities (groups) had recorded minutes of their meetings and the range of issues discussed was very wide . . . The samity may also meet outside of the established timings if circumstances require. In these types of samities, the role of the fieldworkers is very distinct. The fieldworker is not a "collector", but a brother or sister, and their main role is one of advising and supporting the samity' (Thornton *et al.* 2000: 11). As a result, members of samities organised by organisations like NK 'have a stronger sense of belonging to the group, and a greater set of common goals and values. For many the samity has become a central reference point in their lives'.

My own discussions with a group of NK women, some of whom also belonged to Grameen Bank groups, provided an opportunity to explore what these different forms of membership meant to the women in question. I asked them why they chose to belong to both Grameen Bank and Nijera Kori groups, given that it required them to attend *two* sets of group meetings a week and that there were no obvious material benefits from NK membership. This elicited the following responses.

We are all poor people. For us to get hold of three or four thousand takas at one time is not easy. That is why we are members of Grameen Bank. If we get a loan of five thousand takas, we can then go and get some material to work our looms. We can go and buy thread and other things. Then we work this investment for a year, and we can make a good profit. Say, on a five thousand taka loan, you get ten thousand takas back. With that, we can pay back the instalments, we can buy food, we are able to improve our situation. But with Nijera Kori, we have savings when we need it. That is something. And we are united. No one can stop us. If someone comes to beat one of us, we all sort out the matter together. Grameen would not have done this for us. They give us loans and take them back. That is what they are concerned about. That is what keeps them busy.

With Grameen Bank, it is like this, my relationship to them is based on the loans. Even if someone has died in your family, you have to pay your installment. That is the agreement you reach with them when you join. They say, 'Even if you have a dead body in the house, you have to pay the instalment. On that basis, if you are willing to take the loan, then you take it'. As to how we might change our ideas, how we can be given a way to think about how we might improve ourselves, this is not something that they do. With Nijera Kori our money stays with us. They don't give us money but they give us good advice. How we can improve our lives, or what will be good for us in order to create a better future for ourselves. We were ignorant before, now we have become wise.

Being in a Grameen samity brings you one kind of benefit, and you get something else from being a member of a Nijera Kori samity. They give you knowledge, Say, if my husband throws me out, if he threatens me with divorce, even though I want to stay with him, then I will come to the samity. Then they will definitely do something to help me, surely they will. And these ideas were not part of our thinking . . . If someone comes to the Nijera Kori samity, and informs people about an

event like this, they will protest. Grameen people will not do that. They won't come. With them the relationship is based on loans.

What I am saying is, Nijera Kori is there to help you to improve your situation, to make the area a better place, to make sure that no-one can cheat you.

Clearly, while Grameen Bank offered its members the possibility of improving their livelihoods and generating an economic surplus, membership of NK was valued as a source of savings, of new ideas, of new ways of looking at their lives and of solidarity in times of trouble from groups and from its staff.

4.4 Mobilising the collective capabilities of the poor

The sense of solidarity and greater analytical capacity built up in the process of group formation provides the foundations on which NK members are able to engage in collective action to challenge the manifestations of social injustice in their lives. Some of the issues around which they organise are relevant across the country, aspects of its social structures: manifestations of gender subordination, for instance, or corruption of local officials. Others are local to particular areas. Table 7 provides a summary of the issues on which NK has mobilised in recent years.

Collective action takes different forms of co-operation and contestation, depending on the context. It can take the form of group members interceding with individuals, a violent husband or local landlord, who is perceived to have acted unfairly. It can involve “*gheraos*”, the practice of surrounding public officials in their offices until they have conceded to group demands for remedial action. It can take the form of participation in national rallies and protests. In addition, of course, it can take the form of outright, and sometimes violent, confrontation when landless groups defend themselves against attacks by the lathials (paid musclemen) of powerful landlords. One general point to make is that NK has sought to promote cross-gender solidarity around various forms of collective action, discouraging the distinction between “men’s issues” and “women’s issues”. That its efforts have met with at least partial success is evident from Table 8. A discussion of some different examples of transformative forms of collective action, categorised as economic, social and political action, are discussed next.

4.4.1 Mobilising for change in the economic sphere

As we noted, NK does not provide any direct economic resources to its group members. However, along with the promotion of group savings, it also seeks to build their collective capabilities to fight for economic resources to which they *are* legally entitled, to make claims on resources to which they *should* be entitled as well as to renegotiate the terms on which they avail themselves of these resources. Indeed, struggles to achieve a fairer distribution of access to the means of production constituted the first point of entry for NK’s activities in the field in its early years. Struggles over economic resources – land, water and wages – remain the most frequent form of collective mobilisation, although the importance of these different resources varies in different areas.

In areas where there is a considerable amounts of khas land to which the landless have a legal entitlement, struggles around land rights have been a key focus of NK group activity. As Appendix 1 illustrated, a important source of the conflict is the confusing plethora of legislation surrounding land rights in Bangladesh. This confusion has not only allowed local power-holders to evade legislation aimed at curtailing the size of their holdings, but also to seize government khas land and water bodies to which the landless are legally entitled. Table 9 provides some idea of the extent to which NK groups have been successful in realising their legal entitlement to khas land. Box 4.1 provides an example of the way in which the organisational capacity of the poor is translated into practical gains through collective action over land.

Box 4.1 Solidarity in action: struggles over land

We came across an example of group solidarity in action when we attended the meeting of a male group Char Jabbar in Noakhali. Its members came from various neighbouring districts. They had come to the area around eight years ago when they had lost their land and livelihoods through river erosion. They had started cultivating the newly formed char area and had put into process their application for land title about two years ago when they had joined NK. However, in the past year or so, a number of industrialists from Maijdee town had, with connivance of the local land registration officials, obtained a lease for this land with the intention of using it for export-oriented industrial shrimp farming, despite the provision of the land distribution policy that it should go to the landless and despite the fact the process of registration had been begun.

In anticipation of attacks from the industrialists, the divisional organiser of NK moved into the area to offer some protection. He was then arrested on a false case lodged by one of the industrialists as a prelude to sending in their lathials to destroy the harvest and seize the land. NK groups, who knew which areas the industrialists were likely to go to in order to hire lathials, pre-empted this move by contacting the lathial groups themselves and persuading them not to allow themselves to be hired to fight against their fellow landless. NK organisers also contacted one of the more influential industrialists in Maijdee town to persuade the others to avoid violence. In response to NK action, the high court issued an injunction to prevent any industrialists from entering the char in question and the district office is no longer issuing leases for shrimp farming. However it continues illegally.

Source: author's field interviews, 2000.

The example in Box 4.1 also signals an important change that has occurred in the nature of land struggles in Bangladesh. In the past, such struggles were generally conducted against landed interests within the rural economy. Recently, however, with economic liberalisation and the opening up of the economy, the industrial farming of shrimps for export has emerged as a profitable new area of economic activity. Local entrepreneurs in the southern coastal regions of Bangladesh where the industry is largely located, have become increasingly active in the illegal occupation of khas land, often using violent means, with a view to transforming it from agricultural use to shrimp farming. The threat presented by this new industry to the

livelihoods and rights of the poor and to an already fragile environment makes it one of the more adverse impacts of globalisation for the local economy. It has taken NK from collective action at the local level to participation in global efforts to mobilise against industrial shrimp production.

Elsewhere in the country, the focus of collective action has been on wages rather than land. Achievements on this front have varied according to the local economy as well as variations in the institutional arrangements governing wage entitlements. The absence of a legally-enforced minimum wage in the agricultural sector means that agricultural wages are set in the market place and respond to local market forces, generally increasing during the harvest period when the labour market is tight but falling in the slack season. While there may have been local norms and beliefs about what constituted just returns to waged labour, these have been weakened by the monetisation of the economy and the emergence of a large and growing pool of landless labour. The leverage that individual wage labourers can bring to bear on their employers in such a context is clearly likely to be limited. While their bargaining power may be strengthened through collective action as members of NK groups, the evidence on this is inconclusive.

On the one hand, Ali *et al.* (1998) report a number of victorious wage struggles in Bagatipara where their study was located. Box 4.2 documents the tactics used in one case. Estimates from their study suggest that over half of NK members had set their own wages, compared to 11 per cent of non-NK members while around 23 per cent of NK members reported wage negotiations with employers compared to only 16 per cent of non-NK members. The study concluded that ‘the participation of NK members in wage determination is much more direct and greater than that of non-NK villagers. NK members have the experience of wage movements which reflect their greater awareness on economic rights and stronger bargaining power . . . The higher wage resulting from these movements must have led to greater income not only of the NK members but in general of all the rural wage workers of the locality’ (Ali *et al.* 1998: 69).

Christensen (1999) provides another example from one of his study areas where NK group members were successful in raising wages during the low season by organising a boycott during the busy season (see Box 4.2). This received the support of landless non-members as well as members. However, he notes that this was a prosperous area where there were alternative avenues of employment to which the landless could resort during the strike. In his second study area, there were few local opportunities and men from landless households often had to migrate outside for work. Here, he noted, negotiations around wages were out of the question. I also found this to be the case during field work in a village in a part of Tangail district which was under water for half the year so that local employment opportunities were highly seasonal and there was a great deal of male out-migration, originally to other localities, but more recently to the Middle East and Malaysia. The resulting fluctuations in group membership have made this one of NK’s less active areas.

Struggles over remuneration take a different form when they relate to entitlements in the context of state-provided safety-net measures. Here NK groups appear to have been more consistently successful in ensuring fair treatment. It is common for government officials and contractors on government-funded road construction projects or projects involving earth work, such as food-for-work, to pay workers less

than the stipulated wages. By holding demonstrations, “gheraoing” responsible officials and going on strike, NK members have been able to obtain their due as well as to negotiate increased rates of remuneration. As Rao and Hashemi (1999) note, such actions have ‘have far-reaching implications in terms of increasing group solidarity as well as exhibiting the power of organisation to other poor people as well as the rural elite (Rao and Hashemi 1999: 28).

Box 4.2 Solidarity in action: struggles over wages

Wages in DM village in Comilla, as elsewhere, used to be settled individually with employers, each person’s chances of employment depended on what they were willing to work for, compared to others. Competition between labourers led to the undercutting of wage levels to the minimum possible, given local labour markets. In 1991, NK groups began a boycott and their members refused to work for less than the agricultural minimum wage (then 40 takas a day). All negotiations around wages had to be settled collectively. Anyone who was found accepting lower wages was punished in various ways. Some played on their sense of shame; they were avoided or snubbed. Others involved exclusion, e.g. from information about economic opportunities. Although NK members did not constitute a majority of the workforce in DM village, there was implicit co-operation by other landless workers who perceived commonality of interests with their action. The boycott resulted in higher wages, even during the low season.

In 1997, in Nurpur Malanchi, the NK village committee decided to organise a strike of agricultural labourers to demand an increase in daily wages. At that time, workers received 4 kg of rice for every 40 kg harvested. As a result of NK group action, even agricultural labourers who were not involved with NK participated in the strike. To break the strike, the landlords tried to recruit labourers from adjacent villages but NK members resisted the strike breakers. The landlords also attempted to resort to force but this also failed. In the end, they gave in to the workers’ demands.

Sources: Christensen (1999); Ali et al. (1998).

4.4.2 Mobilising for change in the social sphere

Collective action around social issues by NK and its groups relate to attempts to bring about change in the sphere of family and community as well as in the realm of civil society and state. Within the community, NK groups have questioned the impartiality of the shalish, the informal institution which provides justice at the village level. (e.g. Khan and Khan 2000; Christensen 1999; Rao and Hashemi 1999). Traditionally, it is the shalish which is responsible for adjudicating disputes or punishing misdemeanours within the village community. However, it is widely recognised as an institution which is dominated by the more powerful sections of the village who use the authority it confers to discipline, punish and dispossess the weak. Its judgements have almost invariably favoured men over women, the wealthy over the poor and members of the religious majority over those of minorities. Few belonging to subordinate groups have dared to challenge its judgements in the past because of their fear of the consequences.

This appears to be changing in areas where NK groups are strong (see Table 10 in Appendix 3). NK members are now often invited to participate in shalishes and thus ensure that the interests of the poor are respected. Moreover, in many villages, they have set up their own shalishes to settle disputes, thus providing a parallel structure of jurisdiction. Poorer individuals and households, both from NK groups as well as outside them, often opt to bypass the village shalish and turn instead to the NK group shalish procedures. Where the group shalish does not arrive at a resolution, the dispute is taken to the NK Village Committee which is supposed to have the final say in group disputes as well as on matters of importance at the village level. In one of the areas studied by Christensen, around 90 per cent of shalishes were organised by NK groups, suggesting that confidence in the NK shalish procedure to dispense justice extended considerably beyond its group members. NK shalish often overturned the verdict of the village shalish (Khan and Khan 1999) or came to the aid of those who had been unfairly treated. Table 5 (Appendix 3) provides some information on shalish-related activities in the past three years.

A second area of transformative collective action in the social sphere relates to gender relations, both within the household and in the wider society. Indeed, after economic struggles, gender-related violations of rights constituted the most frequent cause of collective action (see Table 7 in Appendix 3). Such violations included verbal marital repudiation, polygamy, child marriage, dowry and violence against women. Where violations of women's rights occur within the family, they are addressed through group action, such as threat of ostracism or resort to group shalish. According to Christensen, the collective pressure put by NK group members on violent husbands or those who seek *talak* (verbal repudiation of a spouse) and on parents who demand dowry to marry off their sons may be leading to important changes in what is perceived as acceptable norms of behaviour. However, he emphasises that it is the knowledge of the law provided by NK, and the recourse that the law can provide, that often provides the catalyst: 'What is important to acknowledge . . . is that this change in social norms is directly linked to women's greater acknowledgement of their *rights*. They have learnt that there are rules beyond the jurisdiction of their kin and the village shalish that recognise rural poor women and protect them. The language of the law allows them to invoke the law to their advantage in family conflicts as well as in village struggles' (Christensen 1999: 55).

The study by Ali *et al.* offers some estimates of changes in gender relations within the household as well as community level (see Tables 11 to 13 in Appendix 3). It suggests, first of all, that NK women were much more likely to participate in intra-household decision-making than non-NK women: 77 per cent participated in decisions related to family expenditures, 44 per cent in decisions related to investment, 53 per cent in decisions related to children's education and 47 per cent in decisions related to family planning. The equivalent figures for non-NK women were 66 per cent, 40 per cent, 45 per cent 2 per cent and 13 per cent respectively.⁴ The study also noted that many more NK households reported marriages

⁴ There are also references to changes in women's decision-making power in various NK annual reports, presumably based on observations by field staff.

without dowries than non-NK households and many more non-NK households reported male household members refusing marriage because of lack of dowry than NK households (Table 15, Appendix 3). In addition, far fewer men from NK households reported polygamous marriages. Where divorces took place among NK members, these were more likely to be legal. Far fewer women from NK households reported domestic violence. However, the study pointed out that despite lower incidence of domestic violence among NK members, levels of violence remained unacceptably high: 42 per cent of female NK members reported domestic violence compared with 82 per cent of non-NK members.

Finally, the report noted that NK women were more likely to take action against violations of their rights than non-members: thus, two of the six women reporting polygamous marriages among NK households had taken action compared to none of the 21 women from non-NK households; more than half of the 25 women from NK households who had experienced domestic violence had taken action compared to 2 out of the 40 from non-NK households. Such actions included pressure upon rural elites to ensure that women's rights were respected during shalish hearings; filing cases with courts of law; and public mobilisation and signature campaigns to ensure fair trials etc. However, the report also noted that NK groups only dealt with violations of women's rights which had been made public. It was likely that many incidents of domestic violence still went unreported. If this is the case, it suggests that NK's women members may enjoy greater protection at the level of the community than do those who are not members, but violence within the home may still go unchallenged.

NK's stance on gender issues has brought its group members into direct conflict with local mullahs who seek to use fatwas to give their pronouncements the sanction of religion, often in the context of village shalish proceedings (see Table 7). Since mullahs rely on village elites for the security of their livelihoods, their pronouncements are rarely impartial. Fatwas usually concern issues of morality and tend to be directed against women, although they may also implicate men.

Box 4.3 Fatwas and law in Bangladesh

Fatwas provide legal decisions on different issues relating to Muslim life on the basis of injunctions and guidance of the Holy Quran and the Sunnah or Hadith. In the early period of Islam, those who were erudites of the Islamic theology were endowed with the designation of Mufti or the one that dispenses fatwa. They provided clarification on laws; adjudication or trial was done by the Quazis. In later times in some Muslim countries the arrangement was replaced by state laws so that there was one unified set of legal practices. Section 504 of Bangladesh Penal Code provides, if anyone willingly offends another or instigates such activities and as a result of such action the victim loses peace of mind the offender and instigator shall be liable to two years simple or rigorous imprisonment or fine or both together. The recent High Court judgement ruled that fatwas do not have the status of law in Bangladesh. On appeal from religious fundamentalist groups, the matter has now gone to the Full Bench of the Supreme Court.

Source: Star Magazine, 2 March 2001.

Here again, NK training and group activities have helped their members to challenge the (mis)use of religious authority to uphold class and gender privilege. NK members told the Dutch evaluation team cited earlier that whereas previously they had been regarded as largely irrelevant by the rural elite, they were now accorded greater respect. Local religious leaders were now more circumspect in their interpretations of religious law because they knew that they were dealing with a more informed and aware population. Group members in turn knew that not everything that the mullahs claimed in the name of religion had the sanction of religious texts. 'They feel they have become more knowledgeable and therefore more powerful than before' (Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1998). Knowledge as power had also had other more concrete achievements: NK staff members we spoke to maintained that there had been few fatwas or attacks on NGO workers or group members by religious fundamentalists in areas where NK or other social mobilisation groups were active.

The examples cited earlier of NK groups taking action to assert their entitlements to legally-set wage norms on government food-for-work programmes can be seen as part of a wider movement on the part of the organisation to hold the public sector accountable to its poorer constituency. My field interviews with NK group members suggested that not only were they aware of their *rights* as citizens, but also of their *contributions* as citizens. They saw the variety of indirect taxes and tolls that they had to pay – to purchase certain essential goods, to use bridges and public highways,⁵ to sell their wares in the market place – as their contribution to the public budget and hence as the basis of their entitlement to a share of public resources as well as to greater accountability on the part of government servants.

The demand for greater accountability has led NK groups to take collective action against those who are officially responsible for ensuring service delivery. Case studies of such actions can be found in most studies or reports on Nijera Kori and also came up during my brief period of field work:

- In Dilduar, the women's group we visited told us that they had mounted a campaign against the local hospital where one of their members had failed to receive proper treatment. Moreover, once they had been apprised of their rights, they had started to refuse to pay the illicit fees routinely charged by health officials.
- In Shagatha, the NK groups surrounded the local hospital after one of their members had been mistreated. They were joined by many non-group members who had also suffered at the hands of hospital staff in the past. A number of hospital staff were transferred as a result of their actions (Rao and Hashemi 1999).
- Also in Shagata, NK groups had sought to obtain compensation from the railway department for poor groups whose land it had acquired to build railways. Legal proceedings had been instituted towards this end (Khan and Khan 2000; Rao and Hashemi 1999).

⁵ I witnessed an example of this when we went to visit Char Hajirhaat and had to cross a shallow river. We loaded our motorbikes onto a small ferry for which we paid a fee. A woman, with a basket of vegetables on her head, obviously on her way to the nearest market, chose to wade across the river. She was still charged 2 takas, probably a sizeable chunk of her earnings. 'God made the river', she observed, 'but the government takes the credit'.

- In Bagatipara, NK members had taken on the local police administration for the right to use power crushers to make molasses (Ali *et al.* 1998).
- In Char Jabbar, NK groups told me that they had successfully pressured the local administration to locate the newly constructed cyclone shelter so that it could be accessed by the landless in the char area.

Accountability is also ensured through informal monitoring by NK groups. The distribution of Vulnerable Group Feeding cards and other relief programmes which are administered by union councils are now monitored by NK groups in areas in which they are active (Ali *et al.* 1998; Rao and Hashemi 1999; Khan and Khan 2000). In addition, NK group members participate in various official and unofficial committees to ensure that the interests of the poor are represented. Tables 14 and 15 (Appendix 3) provide some estimates of their involvement. Such committees include:

- bazaar committees which had often neglected the interests of small traders in the past
- school governing boards to ensure that teachers attend school regularly and that children from poor families receive their entitlement to text books, wheat etc.
- development project committees to ensure that the voices of the poor are heard when projects are planned and implemented in an area
- sugar cane purchase committees to ensure that the interest of poorer cane producers were protected
- committees made up of a cross-section of concerned citizens formed to deal with issues which are area-wide (resistance to shrimp farming, railway compensation, preserving open access and protecting water bodies).

Along with demanding greater accountability from government officials, NK groups have also found themselves defending the interests of the poor in relation to other NGOs, particularly those involved in the delivery of credit. NK has always taken a hostile stance to NGO credit programmes. This is partly ideological. NK believes that such programmes have served to transform organisations which started out protecting the interests of the poor into organisations that simply lend money and collect debts, in the process replacing older dependency relationships with moneylenders by new dependency ones with NGO staff. This has diverted energy from attempts to tackle the underlying structures of oppression in favour of attempts which focused on individualised symptoms.

However, its opposition is also based on practical experience. The proliferation of micro-credit based NGOs, some with a national presence and some degree of public accountability, and others entirely local with little or no accountability, together with the drive for loan disbursement and repayment has given rise to various kinds of “bad practice” on the part of NGO staff seeking to prevent loan default, including threats of police action to potential defaulters or the sale of their possessions (Montgomery 1996). Since it is the poorest sections who are least able to maintain the strict repayment regime required by most of these NGOs, they are most likely to suffer from such actions. NK group members have both witnessed, and themselves suffered from, such strong-arm tactics and have taken action to resist them (‘protesting

micro-credit malpractice' is a specific category in NK's documentation of collective action by its groups. see Table 7, Appendix 3)

Finally, collective actions undertaken by NK have often generated concrete social benefits for themselves and for the community. The finding reported by Ali *et al.* (1998) that NK members were far more likely to go to the hospital and to qualified practitioners than other poor households in the study area suggests a greater self-confidence on their part to avail themselves of government facilities. NK groups in Dilduar told me that doctors in the areas were less likely to demand illicit fees since their campaign against such practices. In some areas, NK groups have mounted their own initiatives to ensure social provision. Many of the *char* areas do not have adequate schools. Groups there have used their own funds and mobilised local resources, including voluntary teachers, to start their own schools. They have subsequently applied for government registration since this gives them formal recognition as well as entitling them to receive government support.⁶

4.4.3 Mobilising for change in the political sphere

While much of what NK does is political in nature, actual participation in the formal political domain is a more recent phenomenon. The organisation has had to decide where to channel its energies and it has chosen to do so in struggles over resources and services within local decision-making bodies which are closest to its membership, which deal with matters they are most likely to understand the consequences of and which impinge most directly on their lives. This included sporadic involvements with local elections. However, by the late 1980s, it had become clear that its strategy of fielding one or two candidates at a time for union elections was having very little impact. NK groups began to discuss the need to have a more systematic presence in local election campaigns. The decision was taken to either put up more than one member in any union or else to go into alliance with other pro-poor candidates in areas where it was not strong enough to put forward its own candidates.

In their comparative analysis, Ali *et al.* (1998) provide some evidence of higher levels of political awareness among NK members relative to poor non-members from the same area. In particular, NK members were less likely to have voted in the national elections according to the *mattaabars'* (rural elite's) wishes and more likely to have voted along political party lines. NK women were less likely to vote according to husbands' wishes than non-NK women in national elections (25 per cent compared to 55 per cent) and even less likely in local elections (5 per cent). The other striking difference related to political mobilisation. While similar percentages of men engaged in political mobilisation (around 56 per cent for NK members and 52 per cent for non-NK), NK women's involvement in political mobilisation, while lower than the men's, was much higher than non-NK women (32 per cent compared to 4 per cent).

Westergaard and Hossain (2002) provide a case study of NK's approach to politics at the local level. The study was located in South Khulna where NK group organisation had become highly politicised as a

⁶ According to the *Annual Report* for 1999–2000, 16 primary schools (with 5299 students), 6 adult education centres (619 students) and 4 junior high schools (with 1164 students) had been initiated in this way by NK groups.

result of various conflicts with local entrepreneurs over industrial shrimp cultivation (see Appendix 2). At the time of the study, NK members were reclaiming land which had been illegally possessed by landgrabbers. They did not expect the same degree of conflict this time around, because the landowners now acknowledged the strong position of the movement.

NK had encouraged group members to put up candidates for membership of the union parishad in the 1992 local elections. All group members contributed towards election expenses. The chairman of the union council, a post which carried considerable political weight in the community, had decided to run again for it. He was a “middle peasant” opposed to industrial shrimp cultivation and supportive of the landless. He sought to align himself during the election with some of the other candidates running for membership posts, including the two put forward by NK.

The election outcomes were successful for the NK groups, not only because their candidates got elected but also because the chairman and many middle peasants had supported them through the election alliance. While the chairman and other middle peasants had also benefited from the alliance, Westergaard and Hossain make the point that ‘the fact that the middle-class candidates sought the alliances of the poor groups’ members is one indication that the poor had become a local power factor to be reckoned with. It was not a question of who was using whom, but rather an alliance to their mutual advantage’ (Westergaard and Hossain 2002: 224). It is also worth noting that NK members believed that their political affiliation was to NK and that it functioned as their “party”.

In the more recent 1997–98 local elections, NK fielded 130 candidates, of whom 58 were elected (35 men and 23 women). NK workers organised public meetings in a number of thanas to provide public education on the nature of union councils, the role of union members and what constituents could expect from their local representatives. NK group members were also mobilising in the run-up to recent national elections which were held after the fieldwork period. They were disseminating information about the platforms of various candidates among the local electorate and questioning them in public meetings on what they intend to do for the poor. In a number of localities, they set up watchdog committees to monitor and coordinate elections at the local level in order to resist attempts by political parties to buy votes from villagers. NK group members I interviewed in Char Jabbar offered the fact that they no longer “sold” their votes as an indicator of their greater political awareness. Local MPs attended a meeting organised by NK groups in order to explain their position to group members. This was the first time that MPs had made themselves available to such a constituency.

4.5 Advocacy, activism and alliances: beyond group mobilisation

The direct presence and “voice” exercised by NK group members is strongest at the local (thana) level. It gets progressively weaker at higher levels so that it is largely absent in national level politics which in any case appear distant and remote to the everyday realities of the rural poor and beyond their sphere of influence. The organisation has sought to compensate for this absence by building strategic coalitions with other sections of civil society, some around specific issues, others on a more sustained basis. However, its activism at these higher levels remains rooted in its activism at the grass-roots level.

For instance, resistance to local power structures have brought NK members into direct confrontation with local elites and made legal activism an important corollary of NK's struggles in other spheres (see Table 16, Appendix 3). According to NK organisers, while rural elites continue to rely on armed *lathials* (muscle-men) to undermine the collective struggles of the poor, they are increasingly resorting to the use of false litigation and police harassment to achieve the same ends.⁷ There can be up to five or ten false cases lodged at any one time against individual group members. If a case is lost, this will entail imprisonment for the individual. Cases against NK members are most often lost in the district magistrates courts which are notoriously more susceptible to undue influence and bribery. However, NK has won every appeal it has taken to the higher courts.

Such encounters with the legal system impose various kinds of costs on NK and on its members, regardless of how they turn out. A great deal of time is wasted fighting false arrests. There are also financial costs: earnings foregone and additional costs of food and transportation. Financial insecurity is exacerbated if an NK member is imprisoned for any length of time. Added to all these, there are legal fees to be paid.

These costs are met in a number of different ways. NK groups generally contribute part of their savings towards meeting such costs for their members and also raise funds locally for specific purposes. Where this is not sufficient, groups apply to NK head office for legal and financial support through their committee structure. These central legal support funds used to be made up of contributions by staff of 1 per cent of their salaries. However, NK has recently started to earmark part of its budget for this purpose.

NK also provides other forms of vital support to its members in the form of legal services and mediation with the administration and police. To ensure support from wider sections of civil society in the districts in which its groups are active, NK has a policy of building networks with groups of lawyers, journalists, teachers and other influential citizens in the district towns. It draws on these networks for advice, publicity and various other forms of support for its staff and group members. NK has its own network of local lawyers to whom it pays a subsidised fee. Relationships with these lawyers have been built up over time and they provide NK with crucial support at district level since most socially committed lawyers also play a leadership role in these towns.

NK staff and members have also themselves initiated legal action, much of it related to land rights, but also including other social and economic issues. NK groups have initiated cases against perpetrators of violence against women, including rape and dowry-related murder, against corrupt officials on public work programmes and to challenge the issue of fatwas which promote the violation of rights, particularly women's rights.

⁷ There are likely to be a number of reasons for this. One is that economic growth and diversification of livelihood opportunities in the countryside means that the poor are less dependent on the patronage of the wealthy than before so that the latter can no longer count on a captive pool of dependent labourers. This constitutes an important part of the explanation that NK group members gave me. However, the other is that in areas where there has been social mobilisation of the poor, the numbers willing to be hired to intimidate other poor people are likely to be less (see, for instance, Box 4.1).

Much of this activity is carried out at district level. At the national level, land reform has been an important area for NK advocacy. It was one of the NGOs to testify to the Land Reform Commission. This was set up by the government to reassess land legislation and resulted in the 1984 Land Reform Act. NK has supported recent initiatives by ALRD (the Association for Land Reform and Development) and ADAB (the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh) for reform of land administration, most recently putting pressure on the Asian Development Bank to take a more participatory approach in its attempt to tackle the problem.

Nijera Kori was active in opposing the Flood Action Plan (FAP) at both the grass-roots level through its group members and through various civil society organisations at local, national and international level. This was a proposed 10 billion dollar project to build infrastructures, such as embankments, to provide flood protection. Opposition to it was based on concerns about its environmental as well as structural soundness, the absence and inadequacy of impact assessment carried out and the fact that there had been no real consultation at any level.

The extent of social mobilization against the proposed project led to the issue being taken up in the European Parliament where activists, planners and members of the EU demanded a moratorium on all construction components of FAP. The FAP coordination office and the Master Plan office have since been wound down and a new Water and Resources Planning Organisation has been set up in order to oversee all planning in the water sector. As a result of lobbying by NGOs, greater people's participation has been made central to all planning; there is now greater emphasis on social and environmental impacts in place of the early pre-occupation with structural issues; and priority is being given to the domestic use and safe supply of water in current planning in contrast with past practice of equating water projects with production-centred irrigation projects.

NK has also been active on other environmental issues as well but it is probably best known for its campaign against industrial shrimp production on grounds of human rights and environmental sustainability. Export-oriented industrial shrimp farming began in the southern coastal areas in which NK had long been active. NK joined in the local resistance to this new form of production when its investigations through its group members established that such resistance was justified (see Appendix 2 for a summary of NK's case against industrial shrimp production). As noted earlier, the profitability of this new industry has given rise to various forms of land-grabbing tactics by local industrialists. Organised resistance by farmers, supported by NK and its groups, led to re-appropriation of land in around a hundred villages and reversion of land use to agriculture. Shrimp production has largely been stopped in these villages.

However, the illegal occupation by shrimp entrepreneurs of khas land continues and NK is now at the forefront of resistance to the spread of industrial shrimp production across the coastal belt of Noakhali and Khulna. The movement has resulted in important victories for NK groups. However, it has also had costs. Resistance to the landgrabbers and their lathials have resulted in a number of fatalities. One of these was Korunamayee, a landless woman in the Khulna area who has now become an international

symbol of resistance to industrial shrimp farming. Her death anniversary is observed in countries across the world where similar struggles are being waged.

NK has taken its campaign against industrial shrimp production to the national level to lobby government officials and donors to support policies which are not destructive of the environment and of the livelihoods of the poor. It argues that if the industrial farming of shrimp is considered essential to the country's export earnings, it should be restricted to areas which have no agricultural use; that it should be banned from fragile ecological zones, and that fishing communities' access to water bodies should not be jeopardised. It has worked with BELA (the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association) to initiate a number of public interest litigations against the government for non-compliance of its own policy of distribution of khas land among the landless and to prevent it from reneging on its declaration of a shrimp-free zone in Polder 22 (polders are land reclaimed from the sea). Public interest litigation is being increasingly seen by NK as a way of multiplying the effectiveness of collective actions at the local level.

At the global level, NK is part of a network linking people of the producing countries and consumer countries, including Sweden, Ecuador, Britain, Honduras, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and India. NK is now a direct partner and one of the constituting organizations of ISA-Net (Industrial Shrimp Action Network). This consists of lawyers, scientists, researchers and activists from both north and south who work in consumer campaigns in the north and support local action in the south, lobbying with the major organisations giving support to the industry, including the World Aquaculture Society, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

5 Non-linear processes of social change: learning from the NK experience

5.1 Understanding social change

An overview of NK's activities and achievements over the period of its existence suggests processes of social change which are very different from the linear, unidirectional and predictable model of change that dominates mainstream development practice and is exemplified by logical framework analysis. Within this framework, development interventions are seen as providing "inputs" which will be translated into "outputs" which contribute to outcomes which will feed into the purpose and goals of the intervention. Development programmes are required to indicate in advance what these various transformations will be, their likely magnitude and the pace at which they will occur so that "indicators of progress" can be put in place from the very outset.

Clearly, such analysis concentrates the mind on the alternative use of scarce resources by drawing attention to the different trajectories of "outputs", "outcomes" and "impacts" that can be achieved with a given set of resources. However, it is premised on a model of change that makes more sense for some forms of intervention than others: those that are limited in scope and deal with the production or distribution of tangible goods and services. In the case of a food-for-work project, for instance, there is

some degree of certainty that providing a poor person with a daily ration of food in return for a days worth of work will contribute to his or her ability to eat that day. There is no such certainty about the relationship between the daily, weekly and annual activities undertaken by NK and the outcomes it is able to achieve.

In terms of the conceptual framework sketched out in Section 1, NK's activities are geared to providing certain intangible resources that are intended to transform the consciousness and agency of its members in a certain direction. Given that changes in human consciousness and human agency cannot be "managed" in discrete, linear and predictable stages, there is no guaranteed relationship between NK's "inputs" (its staff, its training efforts), its "outputs" (groups formation, training activities), desired outcomes (sense of collectivity; social mobilisation) and overall goal (the realisation of rights), nor is there any certainty about the direction and pace at which these changes might occur.

NK's ability to translate its "inputs" into "outcomes" of various kinds depends more than other more conventional forms of interventions on conditions that are beyond its control. This can be illustrated by revisiting some of the examples of change discussed in this paper. These changes can be seen as representing various "moments" in the on-going flow of social change that NK's activities bring about. Some of these are "anticipated effects" in the sense that they bear out some prior hypothesis about "cause-and-effect" subscribed to by the organisation. Thus, given the capacity at its disposal, NK has an approximate idea about the number of male and female groups it will be able to form in the coming year, how often these groups will meet, how many will be trained and at what level. These are within its domain of influence and represent the direct effects of its efforts.

However, NK does not see itself as a training organisation but a mobilising one. Training is intended as a means through which the poor are empowered to take collective action in defence of their rights rather than an end in itself. This is a far less easy process to manage or predict. NK organisers may influence how groups analyse their situation and define their goals and priorities, but the issues around which groups choose to mobilise, the pace at which they mobilise, the methods they use to mobilise and, even more significantly, the extent to which they achieve the goals which motivated their mobilisation cannot be determined in advance by NK because they do not depend on NK's efforts alone.

It is similarly difficult to predict in advance many of the changes that NK anticipates will result from its efforts: how many groups will graduate to a higher level in a given year; how many group members will be elected to various formal and informal committees or to local government positions; how many false cases against group members will be dismissed by the court. The incidence and pace at which these changes occur will reflect a variety of different factors: the judgements made by different groups, the strength of their leadership, the appropriateness of their actions and, even more significantly, the nature of constraints and opportunities which make up the particular context in which collective action takes place.

In addition, there are various unanticipated effects which would still constitute part and parcel of the intended processes of social change initiated by NK. They reflect the fact that social mobilisation of the kind that NK is engaged in is an open-ended process where certain anticipated achievements may help to open up the possibility, and provide the leverage, for other unanticipated achievements. For instance,

women may start out challenging the taboo about being heard in the public domain by appearing in group dramas along with men, one of the routine cultural activities carried out by NK, and then find that the self-confidence they have gained operating in the public domain over time allows them to consider standing for local elections. These are secondary effects that occur over time in response to the direct effects of NK's work.

In addition, there are spillover effects into the wider community. NK's own reports, from the secondary literature and my own field work provides examples of collective action taken by NK groups on behalf of non-group members who were perceived to have suffered from some form of indignity, insult or injustice. This extension of solidarity and collective action beyond the boundaries of the group can be seen as a spill-over effect resulting from purposive action by NK and its groups. Other spill-over effects, changes in the "intermediate" structures of constraint, came about as the secondary effect of NK's prolonged presence and activities in an area. They included:

- an overall increase in wages in areas where NK groups have engaged in successful collective bargaining;
- reduction of illicit payments to health officials and reduction in other forms of public sector corruption;
- more regular attendance by teachers when NK members become members of school committees;
- construction of schools in areas where they did not exist and their registration with the government;
- demonstration of the power of the organised poor to other poor people as well as to local elites;
- reducing the incidence of dowry, violence against women and other practices which reinforce the subordination of women;
- reducing the use of religion to discriminate against women and making certain areas fatwa-free;
- reforming the informal delivery of justice and instituting alternative mechanisms of delivery which are not loaded in favour of the elite;
- promoting pro-poor membership of local government structures; and
- resistance to industrial shrimp production in order to protect the environment and poor people's livelihoods.

However, bringing about change at a particular moment in time is just one aspect of the challenge that NK faces. *Sustaining* these changes over time is another, and perhaps more difficult, aspect of this challenge. The achievements and impacts discussed above have not occurred uniformly across its different groups and areas of work. Nor do they display a linear trajectory over time. In some areas, the pace of change has accelerated as the number of groups have achieved "critical mass". In others, however, high levels of activity and engagement in an earlier period have given way to apparent apathy and inactivity (Rao and Hashemi 1999; Christensen 1999). We have noted some of the more positive sources of "non-linearity" in the process of change above. They are products of the interaction between changing consciousness/agency and underlying constraints. Understanding these negative "non-linearities" is

equally important for the insights into provides into the resilience of structures and the limits to the changes that can be brought about by any single organisation.

Some of the unevenness of impact reflects variations in the political economy in particular areas and the particular power configurations which characterise it. An example of how this operates can be found in the study of the 1992 elections cited earlier (Westergaard and Hossain 2002). It documents how dominant and competing groups joined together in the face of the threat represented by candidates put up by landless groups organised by an advocacy NGO and with the help of armed men, ensured that the NGO members were not able to vote. The local administration and deputy commissioner sided with the local elite.

The extent to which the local configuration of power is dominated by a few powerful landlords rather than many smaller ones, the degree of factionalism which characterises it and the ease with which NK groups can get justice from the higher courts in Dhaka rather than the more corrupt district magistrates' courts are all factors which affect the capacity of the landless to mobilise on a sustained basis. These are conventional political economy factors. In addition, Rao and Hashemi (1999) suggest that NK groups tend to be weaker in areas where there are a lot of other NGOs in operation, particularly those distributing credit, since such activity undermines collective mobilisation on the part of the poor. My own fieldwork suggests the difficulties of organising in areas like Dilduar which are flooded for half of the year, where local employment opportunities were scarce and where male outmigration is frequent and increasingly taking on an international character. Impact may also vary with local context in that some issues generate far greater activism than others. Struggles over control of khas land is not merely a bread-and-butter issue for dispossessed groups, but also a matter of life-and-death. Resistance to local money-lenders, on the other hand, or exposure of corrupt government officials has led to more incremental forms of change and less dramatic forms of group activity.

Unevenness of impact can also reflect some of the fall-out from the organisation's strategy. The very poverty of its members mean that most are earning subsistence incomes where a single day's loss of income translates into a day without food (Rao and Hashemi 1999). In situations where landless groups have been struggling for many years without much success, where many have had to face arrest and even imprisonment, it is not surprising that individuals leave and groups become demoralised. Christensen (1999) cites the example of one of NK's most effective group leaders in his study area who dropped out of NK after spending a year in gaol and subsequently incorporated himself into the local patronage system.

The fact that NK does not offer any immediate material benefits, that it requires poor people to break with past relationships of dependency on patrons and to stand up for themselves, often at some personal and economic cost, can have contradictory implications for who joins its groups and who stays within them. On the one hand, it can lead to a process of self-selection into NK membership, in that it is unlikely to have a great deal of appeal for the better off sections of society. On the other hand, the absence of immediate economic gains may discourage the longer term participation of the very poor, particularly if NK groups membership jeopardises precarious survival strategies which depend on

maintaining the patronage of powerful sections of village society. It is worth noting that in their evaluation of NK, Khan and Khan (2000) suggest more attention could be paid by NK to addressing some of the basic economic dimensions of poverty, for instance, literacy and numeracy skills, better utilisation of savings and a strong emphasis on the rights of the poor to local government services as a way of maintaining their involvement.

Finally, unevenness in sustaining social change reflects the unpredictability of the “human” factor in development. The individuals who join NK groups display self-interested forms of behaviour like anyone else. Some members prove to be disruptive to group solidarity, some women continue to suffer abuse at the hands of their husbands, communal prejudices do not get eradicated overnight, leadership qualities are exercised in different ways by different group leaders, some more democratic, others less so (Rao and Hashemi, op cit). Khan and Khan comment that there is a danger of a “class within a class” emerging within NK groups because of the more developed forms of leadership that have emerged among group members who work on union and thana committees.

There is also the human factor within NK itself. More than other development organisations, organisations like NK rely on the commitment, dedication, hard work and leadership skills of its staff. They also rely on the capacity of the staff to put up with living conditions which do not differentiate them too significantly from those who they work with. Such qualities have to be nurtured carefully over time and even then, the human factor means there is no guarantee of success. What it does mean is that NK needs to constantly invest in staff capacity and ensure that they are provided with the support, human, financial and infrastructural, which they need to carry out their responsibilities to the best of their ability. In an era when NGO workers are often far better paid than government officials, the ability to hold on to good workers by an organisation like NK continues to constitute a real constraint to its activities.

5.2 NK as an agent of social transformation in Bangladesh: operationalising the rights-based approach to development

The non-linearities of the process of change associated with NK’s activities, the unpredictability of its impacts and the difficulties of measuring many of its achievements fit uncomfortably with the model of progressive social change enshrined in mainstream development thinking. This raises a number of questions. Why should public funds, in this case, aid assistance, be invested in organisations which offer such intangible and uncertain returns? And if a case can be made for doing so, how can organisations like NK that promote ‘movements’ rather than “markets” be held accountable for their use of public funds? The answers to these questions spell out the challenge presented by the growing prominence of a rights-based approach within the development community to older ways of thinking about development.

NK differs from most other development NGOs in Bangladesh in that it does not see itself as an alternative provider of financial or social services, compensating for the failures of the state or the market, but as an agent of social change, challenging deep-rooted inequalities within the wider society. It carries out this role through the provision of intangible resources, such as information, ideas and knowledge in

order to build the “collective capabilities” of the poor, their ability to mobilise as rights-bearing citizens on their own behalf. Its ability to achieve its goal partly depends on the efficacy of its own efforts, but also very importantly, on the wider context in which it is working.

Some of the unevenness of its impacts reflects the apparent resilience of some of the structures of constraint that make up the particular context of Bangladesh. Wood (2000) suggests that these structures, generated by the inequitable workings of institutions, constitute a “prison” whose inmates, in order to survive, must accept the prevailing rules and related hierarchies which have been constructed by those who came before them. In the process, he points out, they validate and reproduce the very rules which deliver only arbitrary and discretionary outcomes.

However, before accepting this gloomy prognosis, it should also be noted that there have been a number of changes in the institutional environment of Bangladesh which have been conducive to the project of social mobilisation. Economic growth in recent years has been accompanied by a gradual decline in poverty but a fairly rapid rise in levels of social development (particularly in the field of education) and a diversification of economic opportunities. One result of this is that the poor are no longer as dependent for work on a few powerful landlords as they used to be. Nor are they dependent on them for credit, partly because of their improved earning capacity and partly because of the proliferation of micro-credit organisations. Migration as a source of livelihood has also taken them out of the orbit of local power structures, education has led them to be less acquiescent in the face of local injustices. These changes have combined to weaken earlier patron-client relationships – or at least to provide a greater diversity of such relationships – as poorer sections of rural society are less likely to see an advantage in blind loyalty to powerful elites. The shift away from reliance on *lathials* in the countryside to litigation as a means of containing the struggles of the poor is one symptom of this. In addition, the transition to democracy and the opening up of new opportunities in local political structures have served to bring participation in certain forms of decision-making closer to the ground realities at the local level.

While some of these changes reflect the hidden workings of economy and society, others have been the product of purposive efforts to influence the direction and quality of change by a variety of institutional actors. The thriving NGO sector in Bangladesh has clearly been at the forefront of these efforts, engaging with different sections of the poor in order to build their capacity to participate in these new opportunity spaces and the terms on which they participate. By providing alternative models of social relations, often based on horizontal alliances of the poor in place of earlier hierarchical forms, by disseminating new norms which help to counter older, disempowering ones, NGOs can be credited with helping to democratise the processes of social change.

However, as we said at the outset, NGOs do not constitute a homogenous sector and it is worth reflecting on what their differing visions, goals and strategies might imply for the kind of society that Bangladesh is evolving into. There is clearly a difference between the models of change adhered to by NGOs that focus on individual empowerment, usually economic improvements, of which alternative financial institutions are the obvious example, and empowerment based on collective action which is NK’s model.

These differences in strategic interventions reflect deeper differences in underlying worldviews. One represents the “liberal-equilibrium worldview” which envisions society as made up of members who share the values of possessive individualism and seek to improve their lives through the pursuit of a greater share of material goods. Competition arises because the availability of material goods is finite, but structural conflict is ruled out. Change is viewed in incremental and evolutionary terms, the product of individuals adjusting to new constraints and responding to new opportunities. This is the model which underpins most microfinance interventions, giving rise to a strategy for empowerment which involves ‘individual women negotiating specific formal boundaries of patriarchy’ (Rao and Hashemi 1999: 35)

An alternative worldview, the “critical conflict” perspective is closer to NK’s own. It focuses on structural inequalities in society and seeks to explain how dominance and oppression are maintained. Change is seen to come about as the result of systemic conflict and the goal is to ensure radical transformation of the system itself rather than reforms that leave these inequalities intact. The “conscientising” experience associated with membership of organisations like NK ‘leaves a lasting empowering impression on individual members that continues long after groups may have disbanded [. . .] the rights of the poor may still get trampled but they do not get ignored’ (Rao and Hashemi 1999: 35).

There is a fairly persuasive body of literature to suggest that the individual material resources distributed by various NGOs, such as credit and access to social services, have played an important role in bringing about change in the lives of the poor and marginalised. The nature and scope of social change associated with such interventions have varied. Organisations associated with the market end of the NGO sector, which largely focus on the provision of microfinance services to women, have been found to bring about certain changes in intra-household gender relations but have limited impact on gender relations within the wider community or in the market place (Kabeer 2001b). Others which combine microfinance provision with certain other measures may (as with Grameen Bank) increase women’s ownership of land and other assets while others (such as BRAC) may be associated with higher levels of political awareness and group protests among their members (Hashemi *et al.* 1996)

However, many of these interventions have failed to have much effect on the deeper structures of inequality because they focus on individual accumulation or individual empowerment. While BRAC may work to increase people’s awareness of their rights, unless such information translates into systematic collective action to operationalise those rights, the structures which lead to their denial remain intact. Consequently, the improvements in individual lives brought about by service-oriented NGOs are constantly undermined by various forms of unruly practice on the part of more powerful sections of society.

The government would appear to be the obvious institution to counter these unruly practices. However, widespread corruption and lack of accountability has meant that it is part of the problem rather than the solution (Transparency International 1997). Furthermore, some studies suggest that the ability of NGOs to mobilise around rights to basic services and to build a culture of accountability for these services is often compromised by their own role in service delivery. A recent World Bank report on corruption in Bangladesh made this point, noting that while NGOs can play an important role in

monitoring and checking government corruption, they are likely to be most effective when they do not attempt to combine this watchdog role with participation in government-funded development and service delivery programmes (World Bank 2000: iv). The point is also made by Thornton *et al.* (2000), who note that there is a basic tension between NGO service delivery organisations (whether government funded or not) and their capacity to demand accountability and responsiveness from public sector services. In the health stakeholder committees being established under the Health and Population Sector Programme, organisations that were themselves involved in providing health services alongside government were found to be more diffident and restrained in building an effective “user” committees because such demands for accountability could just as easily be turned on their own service provision.

This is precisely the rationale behind NK’s approach to the organisation of the poor. Its decision from the outset to eschew any form of direct delivery role was informed by its belief, and confirmed by its experience, that it would be better occupied leaving such services to be provided by government and other institutions, and focusing its energies solely on the development of informed demand and social pressure by people (Thornton *et al.* 2000: 35). It has concentrated its efforts on precisely those sections of the society that are excluded from the government’s uneven efforts to improve the lives of citizens as well as service-oriented NGOs which often fail to reach the very poor. And through these efforts, it has attempted to shape the direction of social change through the purposive collective agency of the poor, rather than leaving it to “unintended consequences” of market forces.

NK can thus be seen as an organisational manifestation of the rights-based approach to development. It embodies a commitment to transforming the poor from clients to citizens who actively organise in pursuit of their rights and to hold accountable those who are responsible for upholding these rights. It does this by providing information about entitlements and rights, by promoting them in their struggles for justice and protecting them from some of the risks that this entails. It does this also through its own internal processes of participation and accountability and through life styles which do not remove its staff too far away from the world of those they work with. Within the limited area in which it is active, and taking note of the unevenness of the impacts generated by its activities, it could be said that NK has been part of the process of weakening the clientelist relations of domination that characterise Bangladesh society and of expanding the possibilities for political action by the poor (Westergaard and Hossain 2002).

It is unlikely that a neo-liberal approach to development has much room in its vision of economic progress for an organisation like Nijera Kori because its belief in the market as the optimal allocative mechanism for a society goes directly against a commitment to “rights” as a principle of distributive justice. On the other hand, NK can clearly be accommodated within an approach to development that is committed to the principle of rights. The rationale for using public funds to support organisations like Nijera Kori is clearly obvious for public agencies which have such a commitment.

NK has, in the past, relied on international solidarity organisations who were clearly committed to the principle of rights for its support. With the shift to a rights-based approach within a number of bilateral donor agencies, it has become possible for it to also accept support from such agencies. These new relationships between donor agencies like DFID and social mobilisation organisations like NK brings

with it new opportunities for mutual learning but also new challenges. They provide partners to the agreement with the opportunity to appreciate the complex institutional and political dynamics which each much engage in to promote the rights of the poor: for donors, the opportunity to appreciate the imperatives which drive organisations which define their primary accountability as being to the poor constituencies they work with; for organisations like NK, the opportunity to appreciate the constraints of organisations like DFID which are ultimately accountable to their own tax payers. The challenge, however, is find accountability processes which take account of these different imperatives.

The logical framework approach to monitoring progress is clearly inappropriate to this task. First of all, however collaboratively it is put together, it represents a methodology by which funded organisations must adhere to the logic of those of who fund them. The second, and related, problem is that its linear logic is unlikely to capture many of NK's achievements discussed in this paper.

We know about these achievements because of the effort that NK invests in maintaining detailed reports of all its meetings and discussions. Keeping track of change through qualitative reporting mechanisms contributes to its own internal learning processes by helping it to monitor which forms of change gather momentum over time, and which fade away, and why. It also suggests a different way of achieving accountability, one which would capture the processual nature of change and hence the longer time horizons associated with social mobilisation goals.

An attempt to systematise such a new approach to accountability is to be found in the idea of "social auditing" described in Zadek *et al.* (1999). As Eyben (2003b) puts it, 'A social audit identifies the extent to which those with a stake in the matter, all the people associated with or affected by it, believe it is achieving its objectives, if it is living up to its values and if those objectives and values are relevant and appropriate'. It is thus less concerned with measurement of "impact" or "usefulness" and more with building the possibilities for collaboration, often between unequal partners, on the basis of mutual understanding and shared, or at least clearly stated, values (Zadek *et al.* 1999). Its emphasis is on transparency and dialogue. It would build on organisations' existing documentation and reporting procedures in order to develop a process through which they can report on their social performance, account for it, learn from it and be held accountable for it by all their key stakeholders (Zadek *et al.* 1999).

In addition, however, social auditing places the funding agency under the same scrutiny as those it funds, stressing the need for an organisational culture which promotes the respect for rights within itself as well as in other organisations. Social auditing requires all partners to an agreement to decide on indicators for changed behaviour at various intermediary stages of their relationship. These indicators would represent "process" rather than "progress" and would assess the behaviour of all those who are partners to the agreement. This is critical to the credibility of development agencies that espouse qualitative forms of social change, such as those associated with a rights-based approach. As Zadek *et al.* point out, 'Southern institutions are deeply experienced in dealing with "Northern fads", and are quick to explore and identify ambiguity or hypocrisy. At the same time, they are receptive to collaboration and innovation with Northern partners who "walk the talk"'.

Appendix 1 Land rights in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's unique location at the delta of the three major rivers of the sub-continent has resulted in a dynamic system by which land is continually lost or gained as a result of river bank erosion and accretion. Between 1984–93, nearly 87,000 hectares of land was lost, and 50,000 hectares of new char land appeared as a result of these processes. Land survey and settlement provide a means of recording changes in area and characteristics of land, registering deeds and issuing land titles.

Access to land in Bangladesh can be through private or public transfers. However, private transfers tend to be restricted to the non-poor. For the poor, the main source of land rights is through public distribution and they have been given priority in the distribution of khas (unclaimed) land. Settlement operations are intended primarily for the poor who do not have the time or money to mutate land records. Settlement operations result in the Record of Rights. When rights are transferred, the transaction needs to be registered for updating the records. Land administration in Bangladesh thus entails survey and settlement, registration and management of land records. There are problems associated with each of these functions which have contributed to the disenfranchisement of the poor in relation to their land rights.

Land settlement

There have been a number of settlement operations, the procedures of which have contributed to inconsistencies and errors in the recording of rights. These include:

- Creation of the original record of rights by the Cadastral Survey (1888–1940). Many are still accepted as evidence by courts.
- The conducting of the State Acquisition settlement in East Pakistan in 1956–64, within a very short period of time. It concentrated on revising the record-of-rights, but without full-scale correction of existing village maps. Many records were handwritten, leading to large-scale forgeries and tampering. A great deal of khas land ended up allotted to the rich.
- The starting of a Revisional Settlement in 1965–66 to rectify these problems. There are conflicting reports as to how near to full coverage the settlement achieved.
- The launching of a Zonal Settlement operation in 1984 to undertake survey and settlement operations in 22 district headquarters simultaneously. However, budgetary constraints impeded this and the scope of work was reduced to 5 districts. The work is still going on. The World Bank estimates that records of rights for the entire country will be available by 2015–20 by which time their contents will be obsolete.

Land registration

Land registration merely records isolated transactions. It does not prove title, validate the transaction or even give the registration officer the authority to verify the authenticity of the deeds. The absence of a system of simultaneous mutation and registration increases opportunities for producing false deeds for multiple transfers of both private and government khas lands.

Land record management

Some of the confusion in land rights system stems from the production and maintenance of different records for the same piece of land. At present, there are three sources of records:

- Registers kept under the Registration Act, 1908 and maintained by the Ministry of Law.
- Records of rights maintained by the Assistant Commissioner (Land).

- Publication of results of settlement and revisional settlement operations, which is the responsibility of the Directorate of Land Records and Surveys.

This division of responsibilities for producing the initial record of rights and maintaining them over time results in inaccurate and incomplete records which are rarely updated.

Finally, along with denial of access to government khas land because the land has not been surveyed, has been incorrectly surveyed, is under dispute or has been illegally occupied, the poor also face problems of proving their poverty. Definitions of who is landless and qualifies for the purposes of settlement of khas land have undergone many changes over the past decades, breeding further confusion and allowing officials to exercise discretion to the detriment of the poor.

Summarised from Sinha and Toufique (2000).

Appendix 2 Nijera Kori's case against the export shrimp market


The export shrimp industry is a relatively new phenomenon in Bangladesh and is a product of economic liberalisation in the 1980s. It introduces a “mono-culture” approach to fish production as opposed to the more traditional method of fishing in which shrimps flourished in their natural environment along with other species of fish. Although shrimp cultivation is legally restricted to low lands not suitable for agriculture, it has encroached onto the agricultural land of less powerful sections of the rural population, leading to a loss of livelihoods among small and subsistence farmers, landless labourers, sharecroppers and the traditional fishing community.

The export-orientation of the shrimp industry has led to concentration on the production of tiger prawns, which enjoy the greatest demand in world trade. Tiger prawns flourish in saline or brackish water. Unless properly controlled, salinity leads to loss of soil fertility not only in the area where shrimp production is taking place but also, as a result of seepage, into neighbouring areas. It has led to the dying of trees and different forms of vegetation. There have thus been adverse environmental consequences.

It has also affected the diversity of livelihood opportunities, displacing many activities which had contributed to the health and nutrition of families within an area, such as rearing poultry and livestock and the cultivation of oilseeds and pulses. Open water fishing in canal and ponds is no longer possible since all water bodies within a shrimp zone have been taken over by shrimp cultivation.

The quick financial gains offered by the industry, coupled by the need to be competitive in export markets, have attracted unscrupulous businessmen and encouraged unscrupulous business practices. The industry has been characterised by the widespread abuse of human rights. Employment on shrimp farms generally goes to men recruited from outside the area and provided with arms to protect the farms. The existence of these private “armies” has led inevitably to the spread of lawlessness. Local resistance to the shrimp producers has been met with violence, rape and murder.

Cultivated shrimps have been found to be particularly susceptible to viral and other diseases and require heavy dosages of antibiotics and steroids, whose side effects on human beings are not well-known.

The industry in Bangladesh is concentrated in the south-west coastal areas, close to the Sunderbans, the world's largest mangrove forests, and now declared a world heritage site. There are fears that the environmental damage inflicted by the industry will have destructive ications for the Sunderbans.

Appendix 3 Tables 1–19

Table 1 Number of NK groups by gender and division (1999–2000)

| Dhaka Division | | |
|----------------------------|--------|-------|
| Male | Female | Total |
| 422 | 731 | 1153 |
| Rajshahi Division | | |
| Male | Female | Total |
| 1277 | 1671 | 2948 |
| Khulna Division | | |
| Male | Female | Total |
| 528 | 997 | 1525 |
| Chittagong Division | | |
| Male | Female | Total |
| 1615 | 1381 | 2996 |
| Total | | |
| Male | Female | Total |
| 3842 | 4780 | 8622 |

Source: Annual Report (2000).

Table 2 Group committee structure

| Level | 1997–1998 | | | 1998–1999 | | | 1999–2000 | | |
|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------|------------------|--------------------|-------|------------------|--------------------|-------|
| | Present Position | Yearly Achievement | Total | Present Position | Yearly Achievement | Total | Present Position | Yearly Achievement | Total |
| Village Committees | 147 | 05 | 152 | 152 | 22 | 174 | 174 | 07 | 181 |
| Union Committees | 13 | 02 | 15 | 15 | 10 | 25 | 25 | 03 | 28 |
| Area Committees | 24 | - | 24 | 24 | 02 | 26 | 26 | 01 | 27 |
| Thana Committees | 01 | - | 01 | 01 | - | 01 | 01 | 01 | 02 |

Source: Annual Report (2000).

Table 3 Level of maturity of NK groups

| | Year | Present position up to June | | | Yearly achievement | | | Total | | |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------------------------|--------|-------|--------------------|--------|-------|-------|--------|-------|
| | | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total |
| Secondary Level | 1997–1998 | 247 | 224 | 471 | 76 | 57 | 133 | 323 | 281 | 604 |
| | 1998–1999 | 323 | 281 | 604 | 65 | 46 | 111 | 388 | 327 | 715 |
| | 1999–2000 | 388 | 327 | 715 | 46 | 35 | 81 | 434 | 362 | 796 |
| Advanced Level | 1997–1998 | 09 | 02 | 11 | 04 | 03 | 07 | 13 | 05 | 18 |
| | 1998–1999 | 13 | 05 | 18 | 14 | 06 | 20 | 27 | 11 | 38 |
| | 1999–2000 | 27 | 11 | 38 | - | - | - | 27 | 11 | 38 |

Source: Annual Report (2000).

Table 4 Collective action and social movements by NK groups (1998–2000)

| Issues involved | Divisions | | | | Total |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| | Khulna | Dhaka | Rajshahi | Ch'gong | |
| Gender issues (dowry, divorce, polygamy, rape, kidnapping and assault), resistance against fundamentalist forces and the issue of fatwas which attack women's rights. | 49 | 37 | 148 | 56 | 290 |
| Movements against corruption in local government (corrupt legal practices, decisions which undermine the interest of the landless, misappropriation of wheat from food for work and food for education programme, false cases). | 26 | 17 | 62 | 20 | 125 |
| Establishment of rights to local resources, including khas land, water reservoirs and regaining possession of disposed land. | 30 | 26 | 58 | 203 | 317 |
| Environmental issues: resistance to the spread of saline shrimp culture and to the excessive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. | 52 | 28 | 08 | 13 | 101 |
| Resistance to attacks and harassment by local power holders, including eviction of landless, illegal harvesting of their paddy, burning their houses, physical assault etc. | 76 | 36 | 69 | 44 | 225 |
| Protesting micro-credit malpractice | 06 | 07 | 17 | 08 | 38 |
| Fundamentalists/ Fatwabaz | 06 | 06 | 10 | 14 | 36 |
| Wage-related struggles | 22 | 13 | 22 | 26 | 83 |
| Total | 267 | 170 | 394 | 384 | 1215 |

Source: NK Annual Reports.

Table 5 Participation in social movements in Bagatipara

| Category | Nijera Kori member | | | Non-member | | |
|--|--------------------|--------|--------------|------------|--------|-------------|
| | Male | Female | Total | Male | Female | Total |
| Did you participate in a social movement? | 100.0 | 100.0 | 100.0 | 32.8 | 8.0 | 20.0 |
| Nature of social movement: | | | | | | |
| * Against misappropriation of relief goods by thana officials | 24.0 | 24.0 | 24.0 | 4.0 | 0.0 | 2.0 |
| * Movement for khas land | 96.0 | 80.0 | 88.0 | 4.0 | 40. | 4.0 |
| * Demand for compensation for land appropriated by government. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| * For providing employment in the lean season | 12.0 | 0.0 | 6.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| * For wage increase for agricultural workers | 20.0 | 10.0 | 15.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| * Against violence against women | | | | | | |
| * For right to use power crusher for making molasses | 44.0 | 20.0 | 32.0 | 0.0 | 4.4 | 2.2 |
| * Road construction | 52.0 | 44.0 | 48.0 | 4.0 | 0.0 | 2.0 |
| | 24.0 | 44.0 | 34.0 | 8.0 | 00.0 | 4.0 |

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 6 Khas land distribution since 1980

| Year | Acres of land | No. of families | Status |
|--------------|---------------|-----------------|----------------|
| 1980-1997 | 6641 * | 1799 | Registered |
| 1997-1998 | 293 | 287 | Not Registered |
| 1998-1999 | 350 | 399 | Not Registered |
| 1999-2000 | 104 | 138 | Not Registered |
| Total | 7388 | 2623 | - |

Source: NK Annual Reports.

Table 7 Method of wage determination

| Category | Nijera Kori member | Non-member |
|----------------|--------------------|------------|
| By employer | 23.0 | 74.0 |
| By her/himself | 55.0 | 11.0 |
| By negotiation | 23.0 | 16.0 |

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 8 Member's earnings per household

| Income range (taka) | Nijera Kori household | Non-member household |
|---------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| < = 500 | 39.2 | 31.7 |
| 501-1000 | 25.7 | 21.8 |
| 1001-1500 | 16.2 | 27.5 |
| 1501-2000 | 9.5 | 13.4 |
| 2001-3000 | 5.4 | 4.2 |
| 3001-4000 | 1.4 | 1.4 |
| > 4001 | 2.6 | 0.0 |

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 9 Percentage of economically active women *

| Category | Nijera Kori member | Non-member |
|---|--------------------|------------|
| % of women involved in income generating activities | 36.0 | 24.0 |
| Poultry | 66.6 | 50.0 |
| Small business | 16.6 | 0.0 |
| Day labourer | 5.5 | 16.6 |
| Agricultural labourer | 5.5 | 8.3 |
| Handicraft | 5.5 | 0.0 |
| Housemaid | 0.0 | 8.3 |
| Begging | 0.0 | 16.6 |

* Multiple answers

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 10 Access to cultivable land by household

| Land in acres (decimals/acres) | Nijera Kori households | Non Nijera Kori households |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|
| 00 | 44% | 78% |
| .01-.05 | 18% | 6% |
| .06-.11 | 12% | 4% |
| .12-.16 | 2% | 2% |
| .17-.24 | 2% | 4% |
| .25-.33 | 2% | 4% |
| .34-1.00 | 18% | 2% |
| 1.01-2.00 | 2% | 00 |

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 11 Source of loans

| Category | Nijera Kori member | Non-member |
|--|--------------------|------------|
| % of family which presently has taken loan | 54.0 | 42.0 |
| Source of loan | | |
| Category | Nijera Kori member | Non-member |
| Formal sources | | |
| Bank | 19.0 | 4.8 |
| NGO | 10.8 | 56.9 |
| BRDB | 7.4 | 4.8 |
| IRDB | 3.7 | 0.0 |
| Informal sources | | |
| Relative | 26.0 | 24.0 |
| Money lender | 3.7 | 9.5 |
| Samity | 29.4 | 0.0 |

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 12 Coping mechanisms in lean season

| Category | Nijera Kori member | Non-member |
|---|--------------------|--------------|
| % of house holds whose members migrate for job | 42.0 | 66.0 |
| Stay away from home for a month or more | | |
| Month | % NK Member | % Non Member |
| 0 | 71.7 | 50.7 |
| 1 | 12.8 | 38.2 |
| 2 | 12.8 | 6.1 |
| 3+ | 2.6 | 5.0 |
| Survival strategy during lean season | | |
| Activity | % NK Member | % Non Member |
| Migration | 42.0 | 66.0 |
| Loan | 22.0 | 40.0 |
| Change occupation | 42.0 | 20.0 |
| Sell household utensils | 4.0 | 20.0 |
| Others | 16.0 | 4.0 |

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 13 NK-organised shalishes and village shalishes in which NK members participated

| Year | Gender-related issues | | | Disputes involving the landless | | | Social conflicts | | |
|-----------|------------------------|---|-------------|---------------------------------|---|-------------|------------------------|---|-------------|
| | Organisation (NK led*) | Organisation and local leading people jointly | Total | Organisation (NK led*) | Organisation and local leading people jointly | Total | Organisation (NK led*) | Organisation and local leading people jointly | Total |
| 1997–1998 | 584 | 428 | 1012 | 1053 | 534 | 1587 | 1205 | 1670 | 2875 |
| 1998–1999 | 502 | 232 | 734 | 631 | 656 | 1287 | 1407 | 759 | 2166 |
| 1999–2000 | 512 | 366 | 878 | 1119 | 576 | 1695 | 1005 | 1562 | 2567 |

(*NK led means led by NK groups rather than staff)

Source: NK Annual Reports.

- In 1997–98, 3421 men and 441 women participated in shalishes related to gender issues,
- 6436 men and 507 women participated in shalishes concerning disputes related to land issues, and 9,978 men and 801 women participated in shalishes related to social conflicts.
- In 1998–99, 1902 men and 293 women participated in shalishes related to gender issues,
- 3761 men and 489 women participated in shalishes concerning disputes related to land issues, and
- 5922 men and 563 women participated in shalishes related to social conflicts.
- In 1999–2000, 2234 men and 462 women participated in shalishes related to gender issues,
- 6285 men and 932 women participated in a trail or shalish concerned with oppression of the landless, and 6401 men and 1055 women participated in shalishes related to social conflicts.

Table 14 Female decision-making authority in family matters

| | Nijera Kori member | Non-member |
|--|--------------------|-------------|
| Female reported to have decision-making authority | 96.0 | 48.0 |
| Have some decision authority over:* | (of 96 %) | (Of 48.0) |
| Family expenditure | 77.1 | 66.7 |
| Investment | 44.8 | 40.0 |
| Child education | 53.8 | 45.5 |
| Marriage | 15.4 | 4.2 |
| Family planning | 46.6 | 12.5 |

* Multiple answers

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 15 Incidence of dowry-less marriages

| | Nijera Kori member | Non-member |
|---|--------------------|------------|
| % of households with marriages without dowry in the last two years | 54.0 | 22.0 |
| % of households with a male member refusing to marry because of lack of dowry | 18.0 | 58.0 |

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 16 Incidence of polygamy, violence against women and divorce

| | Nijera Kori household | Non-member household |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Polygamous households | 12 | 42 |
| Frequency of marriage | | |
| • Married once | 89.4 | 73.9 |
| • Married twice | 8.5 | 21.7 |
| • Married three times | 2.1 | 4.3 |
| TOTAL | 100.0 | 100.0 |
| Take permission from first wife | 50.0 | 36.0 |
| Experience of abuse | 50.0 | 81.3 |
| Perpetrator of abuse: | (50 %) | (81.3) |
| • Husband | 42.5 | 75.0 |
| • Father-in-law | 5.0 | 4.2 |
| • Mother-in-law | 0.0 | 2.1 |
| • Other male member of family | 2.5 | 0.0 |
| Incident of divorce in the family | 14.0 | 30.0 |
| Methods of divorce | | |
| • Verbal | 50.0 | 66.7 |
| • Legal | 50.0 | 33.3 |
| TOTAL | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Source: Ali et al. (1998).

Table 17 Participation of NK group members in local market, government and civil society committees and associations

| Year | 1997-1998 | | | | | | 1998-1999 | | | | | | 1999-2000 | | | | | |
|--|------------------|----|-----|------------------------|-----|-----|------------------|----|-----|------------------------|----|----|-------------------|----|-----|------------------------|----|-----|
| | No of Candidates | | | No. of Elected Members | | | No of Candidates | | | No. of Elected Members | | | No. of Candidates | | | No. of Elected Members | | |
| | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T | M | F | T |
| Union Parishad | 81 | 49 | 130 | 35 | 23* | 58 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 21 | 13 | 34 | 12 | 06 | 18 |
| Pourasava | 03 | 01 | 04 | 02 | - | 02 | 04 | 02 | 06 | 02 | 01 | 03 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| School Managing Committee | 195 | 13 | 208 | 111 | 06 | 117 | 163 | 74 | 237 | 48 | 26 | 74 | 171 | 26 | 197 | 103 | 06 | 109 |
| Village Bazaar Management Committee | 183 | - | 183 | 73 | - | 73 | 49 | - | 49 | 19 | - | 19 | 113 | - | 113 | 63 | - | 63 |
| Nominated to membership of development project Management Committee by Union Parishad. | - | - | - | 21 | 03 | 24 | - | - | - | 18 | 01 | 19 | - | - | - | 26 | 02 | 28 |

Source: NK Annual Reports.

*In 1997-98 out of 23 elected members 4 were elected against an open post in Union parishad. In school managing committees all posts are open.

Table 18 NK participation in associational life of community

| Institution/ Association | Male | Female | Total |
|--|------|--------|-------|
| School Governing Body | 201 | 6 | 207 |
| Market Committee | 115 | - | 115 |
| Union Parishad | 47 | 29 | 76 |
| Urban municipality | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Government Development Project (Selected by TNO) | 26 | 2 | 28 |
| Civil Society Committee | 27 | - | 27 |
| Sugarcane Purchase Committee | 2 | - | 2 |

Source: NK Annual Reports.

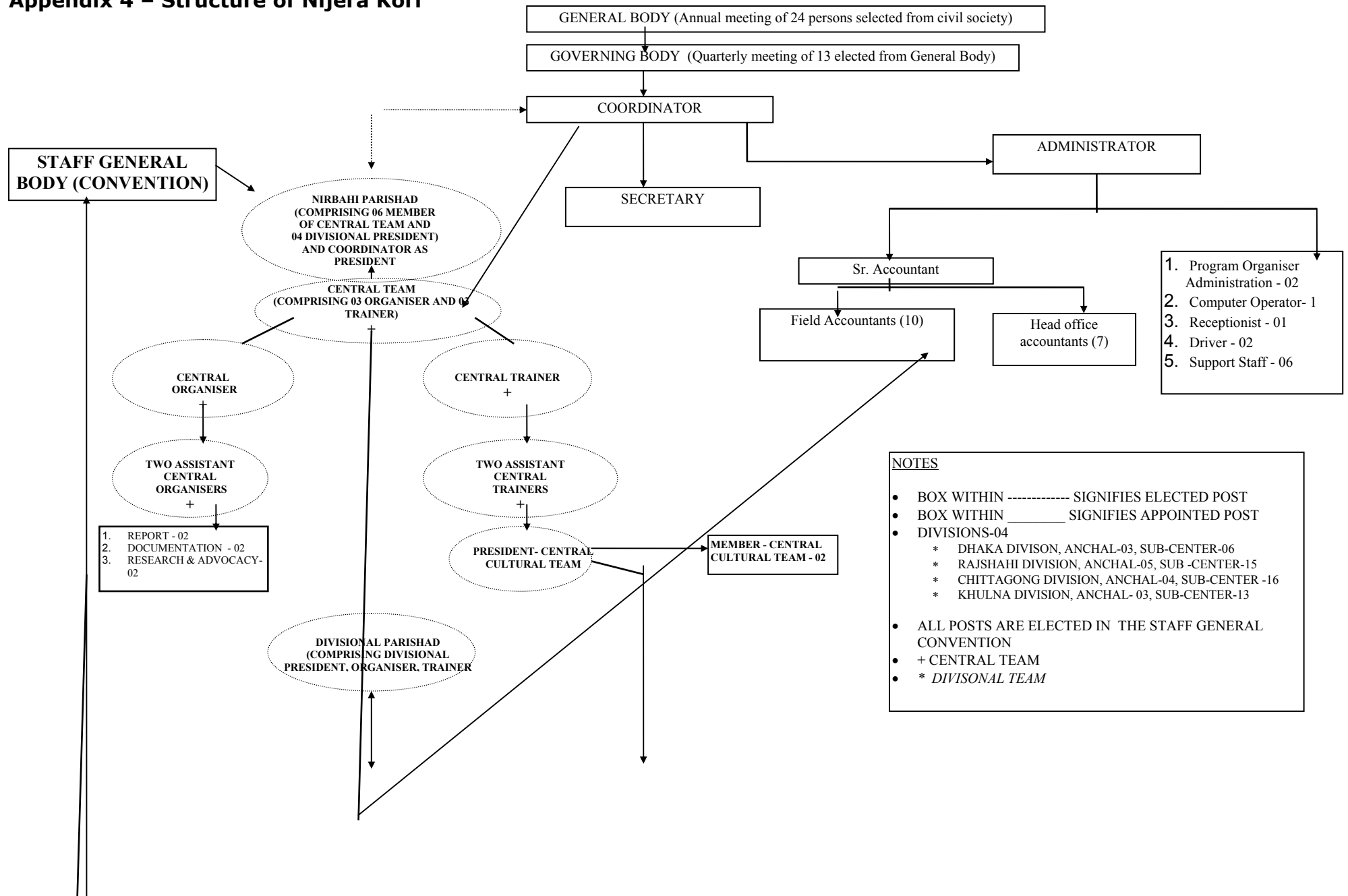
Table 19 Legal aid and advocacy activities

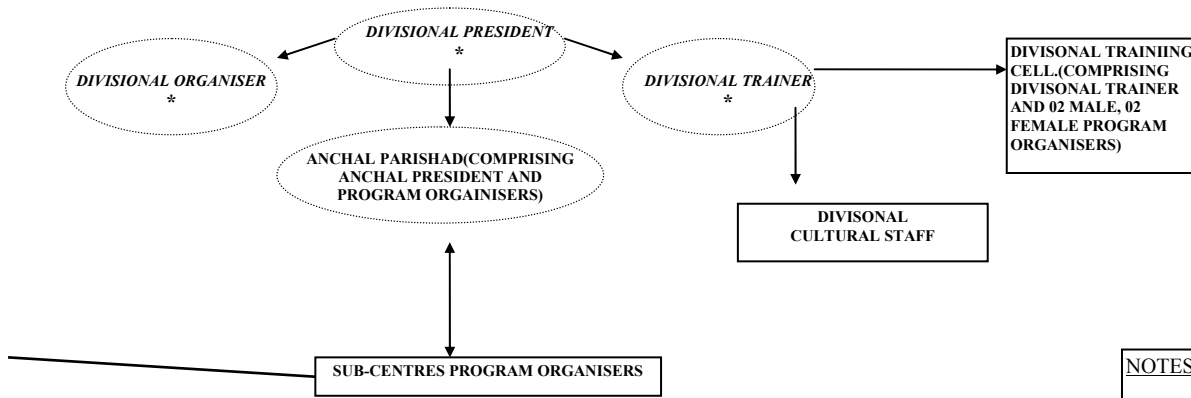
| Year | Up to June last year | New cases | Total cases | No of cases dis-posed | Result | | No of appeal cases against the judgement | | Total cases at the end of the year | No of cases conduct ed by Landless groups | No of Nijera Kori legal aid support |
|-------------|----------------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------|--|---------------|------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| | | | | | In favour of landless | Against landless | Group | Against Party | | | |
| 1997 – 1998 | 81 | 55 | 136 | 17 | 14 | 03 | 02 | 04 | 125 | 28 | 97 |
| 1998 – 1999 | 125 | 52 | 177 | 21 | 19 | 02 | 02 | 05 | 167 | 41 | 126 |
| 1999 – 2000 | 167 | 121 | 288 | 61 | 56 | 05 | 03 | 02 | 230 | 79 | 151 |

Source: NK Annual Reports.

- In 1997–98 appeals were made against 2 out of 3 cases. In 1999–2000 appeal were made against 3 out of 5 cases by the landless group. No appeals were made against the remaining two cases as compromises were reached with the other party.
- The other party did not appeal against all the judgements as there were no points for appeal in their favour.
- Out of the total of 230 cases, 6 cases were heard in the High Court and of the remaining cases 40% in District Courts and 60% in lower courts.

Appendix 4 – Structure of Nijera Kori





- NOTES**
- BOX WITHIN ----- SIGNIFIES ELECTED POST
 - BOX WITHIN _____ SIGNIFIES APPOINTED POST
 - DIVISIONS-04
 - * DHAKA DIVISION, ANCHAL-03, SUB-CENTER-06
 - * RAJSHAHI DIVISION, ANCHAL-05, SUB -CENTER-15
 - * CHITTAGONG DIVISION, ANCHAL-04, SUB-CENTER -16
 - * KHULNA DIVISION, ANCHAL- 03, SUB-CENTER-13
 - ALL POSTS ARE ELECTED IN THE STAFF GENERAL CONVENTION
 - + CENTRAL TEAM
 - * *DIVISIONAL TEAM*

Appendix 5 Annual Report contents and illustrative excerpts

Contents: Annual Report 1999–2000

1. Introduction to report
2. Values of NK
3. Principles of NK
4. Management of NK
5. Evaluation strategies
6. Main problems in implementing activities
7. Strategies
8. Socio-economic conditions
9. Working area
10. Map
11. Main socio-economic issues identified
12. Prioritised issues
13. Organisational activities
14. Impact of organisational activities
15. Participation of landless in social and institutional empowerment
16. Economic activities and savings
17. Joint economic activities
18. Training activities
19. Cultural activities
20. Impact of training and cultural programme
21. Staff development training
22. Special programme activities
23. Impact of special programme activities
24. Joint activities with other NGOs
25. Social movements
26. Inspection and visits
27. Exchanges with partner organisations
28. External evaluation
29. Statistics of activities
30. Financial accounts
31. Agricultural rehabilitation programme
32. Conclusion

Excerpts from Annual Report 1999–2000

14. Impact of organisational activities:

- Self sustainability of groups: 81 groups have been promoted to second level from 1st level after attaining self sustainability. Group members held around 20 per cent of group meetings on their own initiative and responsibility without any help of workers of NK. This is 6 per cent more than last year.
- Impact of organisational activities and united force of landless organisation was not limited to the working area alone but it is also spreading to the neighbouring areas. In the current year, people in areas where NK has been

active have approached NK workers to form groups on their own initiative. These activities are expanding with the help of leaders from more advanced NK groups through preliminary discussion and review.

- Those who used to be referred to simply as poor, illiterate, etc. are now known as members of the organisation. This is a positive change of social status through organisational activities.
- Creative or progressive initiatives are no longer limited to person or group of persons or para. It is now taken as social issue of all people.

Women

Men no longer conduct shalish on their own. Women are participating along with men, giving their opinions and making their voices in the decision making process.

- Organised women members are contesting union parishad, school managing committee and other elections.

15 Participation of landless in social and institutional empowerment

Election in some of the union parishads were postponed due to pending court cases. In this year election was held in 13 union parishads after the disposal of pending cases.

- This year 21 landless male members and 13 landless female members contested against reserved seats for women in 9 union parishad election in the working area. 18 members, 12 male and 6 female were elected against reserved seats for women in the union parishad election. At the end of this year number of landless members elected in union parishad, pourasava stood at 79, 49 male members and 30 female members.
- 197 members, 171 male and 26 female, contested in the membership posts of managing committee election of 93 government/private primary schools. 109 members, 103 male and 6 female, were elected in direct election in the committee of 81 government / private primary schools. Number of members elected in the managing committee decreased last year as the term of some of the management committees expired. The total number of landless members at the end of the year stood at 207, male 201 and female 6. Election of 6 landless female leaders in the school management committee in this year may be cited as a notable success.
- 113 landless members participated in the membership election of 86 village/bazaar management committees. 63 landless members have been elected in 57 hat/bazar management committees. In this year term of 21 elected members ended with the expiry of their term. At the end of the year members of elected landless leaders in the hat/bazar management committees stood at 115.
- In this year 28 landless members, 26 male and 2 female have been nominated in various development committees, eg., Char Development and Settlement Project, road/culvert construction repair, etc.
- In the working area civil committees have been formed to prevent theft, dacoity, and other crimes with representatives of various professional groups. In this year 27 landless representatives have been nominated in these committees.
- In this year 5 representatives of landless organisation have been nominated in the 2 government sugar cane purchasing centres by the concerned authorities.
- One of the main objectives of 5 year plan of government is to ensure participation of grass-root level people in implementing Health and Population Sectoral Project (HPSP). To achieve this stake holder committees have been formed at union and thana level in a democratic way. 20 landless members, 9 male and 11 female have been elected as members of stake holder committees in 4 thanas. 48 landless members, 25 male and 23 female, have been elected as office bearers and members in 8 union parishads. The number of total elected landless leaders now stands at 68, male 34 and female 34.

- Landless organisation have been carrying out movement and struggle against anti environment illegal shrimp cultivation in the saline water in southern Khulna. Two saline water resistance committees have been formed in polder No. 22 and 29 with the representatives of various professional groups and landless leaders in order to make the resistance movement into a social movement. In these committees 50 per cent of the members are representatives from landless organisation and the remaining 50 per cent are representatives from various professional groups. It may be mentioned that participation of women members is also ensured.
- Standards of development in educational activities, food for education programme and other activities are increasing and theft of wheat, illegal fund and toll collection and other instances of corruption are decreasing in school management, hat/bazar management and other developmental committees where representatives of landless organisation have been elected and nominated. As a result role of representatives of landless organisation is greatly evaluated and appreciated.

20.2 Cultural :

- Participation of women in people's drama along with men is increasing. Even in most cases husband, wife, brother and sister are performing in the same drama.

22.2 Educational activities :

- Group members established one primary school in Saghata working area, and 4 junior high schools in Char Jabbar. At the end of the year total number of educational institutions are 16 primary schools, 6 night schools, and 4 Junior high schools.
- 5299 students of primary schools, 619 students of night school and 1164 students of junior high school are receiving education.

22.3 Legal aid activities :

- 102 cases have been instituted against the landless members (male/female) in this year. Members also instituted 19 cases against vested interests.
- This year 61 cases have been disposed out of which judgements in 56 cases were in favour of organisation and judgments of 5 cases were against the organisation.
- Landless organisation appealed against the judgments of two cases and vested interests appealed against the judgment of one case.
- At the end of the year the total number of cases was 230. Organisations conducted 79 cases from their group savings and by collecting subscription from the locality. Nijera Kori provided legal aid support to the remaining 151 cases.

23 Impact (special activities)

- Members are gaining experience about government administration by conducting cases in various courts by themselves.

Joint activities with other NGOs and government:

This year Nijera Kori held workshops in each thana with 100 people of all levels. Participants formed 4 thana and 8 union stake holder committees after discussing necessity, responsibility and procedural aspect of the programme and through direct vote.

The Ministry was supposed to recognise the Stake Holder Committees but subsequently they did not do it. Yet Stake Holder Committees worked regularly in monitoring activities of government health centres, ensuring health

services to the people and making people aware of the government health services. Stake Holder Committees held meetings every month, village wise discussion meeting, and meetings at school, hat and bazars. Stake Holder Committees also held publicity week and staged dramas, arranged rallies in villages. They also arranged open discussion with health workers about their responsibilities in order to ensure accountability. Committees were mostly successful in order to ensure attendance of the health workers.

Government have nominated Nijera Kori as an implementing organisation in Bagatipara Thana of Natore District for implementing ‘Strengthening the Election Commission for Improvement in the Electoral Process Project’ of Bangladesh Election Commission. The most important aspect of this project is to give an idea about democracy, election, accountability and basic rights of the voters. In this year 1500 leaflets entitled ‘Substance of Democracy’ have been distributed and discussion meetings held in villages under this programme.

25.5 Impact (social movement):

- Women’s issues are no longer limited to women. These issues are turned into social issues. Spontaneous participation of men in women’s issues is increasing.
- Most of the activities of protests and resistance by landless men and women are reported in the national and local newspapers. Through this landless organisation are gaining the support of national civil society.

16. Economic activities and savings :

- Collection of savings amounting to Tk. 92,99,438 was planned by members, male Tk 46,07,484 and female Tk. 46,91,954 but as against this savings amounting to Tk. 78,01,059, male Tk.31,12,105 and female Tk. 46,88,954 have been collected. Members distributed Tk.33,00,304, male Tk.13,48,061 and female Tk. 19,52,243 to meet the monetary demand of members in agricultural season, contest false cases instituted against them, undertake welfare and other organisational activities. At the end of the year total savings amounted to Tk. 3,64,22,442/- male Tk. 1,50,11,746/- female 2,14,10,696/-.
- In this year 420 Bank/post office accounts, male 125 and female 295 opened. Number of Bank /post office accounts at the end of the year were 2644. Men 995 and women 1649.
- Position of groups savings :
 - Tk. 1,29,56,711 deposited in Bank
 - Tk. 66,68,953 invested in joint economic activities.
 - Tk. 1,67,96,778 in cash with Treasurers.

17. Joint economic activities

- In this year 44 groups, male 28 and female 16 took agricultural activities. 86 groups, male 38 and female 29 temporarily suspended agricultural activities as they did not get lease of land. A total of 108 groups, male 100 and female 8 participated in the activity, number of members being 1594, male 1401 and female 193.

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