Chapter 9. Mediation at the Grassroots: Claiming Rights by Empowering Citizens in Bangladesh

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Introduction

Although Bangladesh has been a parliamentary democracy with a popularly elected government in power for the last two decades, citizens experience neither the 'formal promise of equality', nor an accountable and transparent state. Indeed, citizen participation in the democratic process is limited to voting at the time of five yearly elections. State-citizen relations are fragile in most sectors and the state is near absent in the governance structures of the arenas and institutions that the poor populate. This disjuncture between 'the people' and the so-called 'democratic' state is evident from the fact that many rural poor people perceive the state/ government as a group of powerful, distant, inaccessible people or an individual who rules the land or 'kingdom' (Mahmud and Huq 2008).

The early years after the war of independence from Pakistan in 1971 witnessed the emergence of a new actor on the scene: grassroots development organizations or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)[i], who took on the responsibility of post independence rehabilitation, concentrating in areas where public action was weak or inadequate. It is now widely recognized that NGOs in Bangladesh play an important role in poverty reduction and equitable economic and human development (World Bank 2005). They are particularly sought after by the international donor community because of their 'enhanced operational efficiency' in terms of reaching services to the poor (World Bank 1991). Although NGOs initially adopted a stance of far-reaching social change, this radical edge was blunted during the 1980s, reflecting donor preferences, when nearly all of them began to prioritise service provision over 'conscientisation' and abandoned their role as mediators for social mobilization and collective action (Kabeer, Castro and Mahmud 2012).

The three NGOs in this study[ii] are among the handful that maintained their visions of social change and their roles as mediators between poor marginalized citizens in rural areas and state/non state authorities of power. They are Samata ('Equality'), Nijera Kori ('We do it ourselves') and Karmojibi Nari ('Working women'), names that reflect the essential character of each organization. Despite their distinct focuses, they share a vision of society characterized by social justice and equality, free from discrimination and exploitation. We look at how Samata mobilizes the landless to claim material and other resources to which they are denied access; how Nijera Kori empowers the poor to struggle against underlying structures of inequality, injustice and exclusion; and how Karmojibi Nari works to build leadership among women agricultural workers to claim recognition as economic citizens with rights.

Given the highly stratified society and economy of Bangladesh, Samata, Nijera Kori (NK) and Karmojibi Nari (KN) all see themselves as catalysts for social conscientisation and mobilisation, emphasizing the need for solidarity, awareness, self-reliance and collective action of the poor

for social transformation. At the same time, they believe that in the context of weak governance this transformation will not happen automatically but will need some sort of intervention and mediation from outside. They feel competent to take on this role because they believe that their education, social class and networks allow them to command some authority in official spaces from which the poor are excluded. Thus, all of them negotiate between the poor, marginalized people and the local power structure including employers, local government, police, and courts. However, there are differences in the ways they approach the process of mediation. The focus of Samata's mediation is on *claiming* resources by the landless; Nijera Kori mediates to *empower* the poor and the exploited groups more broadly; while Karmojibi Nari mediates to *negotiate* for better terms and conditions for agricultural workers.

The chapter is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the character of mediation on the basis of its history and ideology; Section 3 discusses the mediation approaches of the three organizations; Section 4 reports on the outcomes of mediation; and Section 5 reflects on the implications.

Character of mediation

In characterizing mediation we describe how the history of each organization shaped their beliefs and perspectives about unequal power relations and provided the rationale for their specific strategies. Samata and Nijera Kori belong to the first generation of organizations that emerged in the wake of the liberation war in 1971. They were founded by freedom fighters and activists, and defined by their resistance to the welfarist stance to development. In addition, they later positioned themselves against micro credit, which they believed further impoverished people without changing the underlying inequalities that made them poor.

Nijera Kori was set up in 1974 in response to the huge numbers of poor, destitute women migrating from the rural areas to Dhaka city in the post-war situation. In 1978, supported by international socialist organizations like the Left International, Nijera Kori started their programme in rural areas as they believed that the phenomenon of mass migration to the cities was created by the extreme exploitation of the rural poor and the concentration of assets in the hands of the rich.

In contrast, Samata's roots can be traced back to the movement to claim *khas*[iii] resources in *Ghugudaho beel* (large water body) illegally occupied by powerful people in the village including local politicians who used the poor to protect their land. Samata believed that it is only by creating access to resources and redistribution of resources that poverty could be tackled. It was during the process of mobilizing landless groups and negotiating with local government authorities to transfer deeds to the landless that Samata was formally registered in 1983. What ensued was a violent backlash against both the villagers and Samata's workers in 1985, which left many dead, injured and in jail with false murder and rape cases filed against them.

Karmojibi Nari emerged much later on May Day in 1991. It was founded by a group of young women who were actively involved in various movements (student, worker, cultural and women's), and heavily influenced by socialist ideology with links to the workers' party and trade union movement. Karmojibi Nari believes that the particular challenges of women, women workers and workers are created by a convergence of national and international pressures linked to forms neo-liberal capitalism. Their initial work was specifically against the exploitation of women workers in the urban readymade garment sector. Their purpose was to create awareness and leadership among women workers, ensure their representation in the central committee of the trade unions and fight for a separate women's committee in every trade union. It was when Karmojibi Nari realized that agricultural workers are not recognized under the existing labour law that their work on mobilizing agricultural workers began, initially through a short-term intervention, which is the focus of this case study.

Although each organization had related but distinct perspectives of what creates poverty and unequal relations of power and discrimination, the ultimate goal for all was social transformation. All of them believe that it is only grassroots conscientisation and mobilisation of the poor and marginalized that can dismantle entrenched patron-client relationships that keep the poor in poverty. They feel the poor need access to and control over local resources, information, skills, local institutions and so on, recognition of their rights as citizens and capacity and solidarity building for rights claiming. The three organizations believe that this conscientisation about rights has to culminate into struggles against underlying power structures and into building horizontal relationships of trust and accountability.

These beliefs drive the organizations to take on the role of mediators but each has its specific approach. Samata's approach starts with awareness and capacity building of the landless men and women and aims primarily towards claiming economic rights over land/natural resources and secondly, to gaining access to formal decision-making spaces at the local level. They emphasize on 'learning by doing', enabling the landless to fight their own battle but fighting alongside them. One of the directors commented that:

> There is a difference between receiving land and fighting for that land. … if there is no movement or struggle to claim that land, then people will not be able to hold on to it. People are impassioned to hold on to what they have fought to earn.

Nijera Kori's mediation approach is more holistic and entails 'the development of a critical consciousness about the nature of injustices and enfranchisement through their willingness to challenge injustice and claim their rights' (Kabeer et.al. 2007). Socialism forms a major part of the ideology that guides their approach for struggles against structures and systems that nurture and sustain inequalities. The starting point of Karmojibi Nari's mediation is the failure on the part of the state to recognize and ensure women's labour and wage rights, and their approach involves mobilizing agricultural workers to negotiate with employers for their rights on the one hand and engaging with policy formulation to ensure their recognition as workers with rights on the other.

Mediation Approach

The nature of social relationships in Bangladesh means that the poor are conditioned to maintain the status quo and need to be conscientised, organised and mobilized to challenge power structures. Participation and rights claiming is a process that has to be learnt and facilitated, and that imposes transaction costs that are greater for the poor. Therefore any effective engagement between the powerless and the powerful has to be preceded by some form of conscientisation, mobilization and solidarity building among the powerless. Therefore, effective political engagement by the poor requires has, as a pre-requisite, the building of peoples' consciousness, capacities and organization. This is the heart of mediatory politics in our three cases.

The three organizations share a common approach (or mode) of mediation which involves the following components: a) building peoples' organizations; b) capacity building; c) organizational policy to support mediation, and d) strategies for engagement.

Building peoples' organization

The mobilization process takes place through the following steps: 1) Defining the target group and area; 2) Motivating potential members, their household and community; 3) Group formation; 4) Networking and federation. By and large, all three organizations work with the 'landless', although they are not characterized simply by landlessness. The use of the term 'landless' by both Samata and Nijera Kori may be seen as a strategic move facilitating mediation, as it is widely understood and conveys in a single word their state of marginalization and deprivation. Samata mobilizes those who are dependent on land for their living, whether they own little or none. Nijera Kori's definition of 'landless' focuses on manual labour 'because a person who does not have a link with labour cannot be an activist', including daily wageworkers, rickshaw pullers and petty traders. (The term 'agricultural worker' is as unfamiliar as the term 'landless' is popular). Karmojibi Nari faces the challenge of creating a definition and building an identity for agricultural workers, which includes the landless and those with small landholdings.

The organizations select areas where their mediation strategies can make a difference and concrete outcomes can be expected. One Nijera Kori Area President said that Nijera Kori 'identifies places where people are most neglected, exploited and abused'; hence they work in shrimp farming and tobacco growing areas where people live and work under exploitative conditions. Karmojibi Nari works where female agricultural workers can be found, mainly in North Bengal and Samata works where *khas* resources are available.

Motivating the landless to join the group involves first motivating their families and communities. This is because they are not offered any immediate or material benefits and could face withdrawal of elite support or even backlash. Samata and Nijera Kori mobilize initially by going door to door engaging both husbands and wives. Karmojibi Nari mobilizes women agricultural workers by initially going to their workplaces, but they face difficulties due

to obstacles posed by the workers' husbands and employers to women joining. Without their support women themselves are de-motivated to join.

The ball starts rolling once the organizations motivate their target group to attend the first meeting. Several meetings may be needed until there is a consensus to form a group and select or elect their decision making body. While it is the staff of Samata who forms all their groups, in the case of Nijera Kori and Karmojibi Nari, it is the older landless groups (called *Bhumiheen Samities*) and 'cells' (of agriculture workers) that form the new ones. Group formation is not just about getting a group of people together but about creating a space where people can openly discuss the personal as well as the political. This space, which is rare for poor men by virtue of being poor, and for poor women by virtue of being poor and a woman, signifies the foundation of social transformation. For women, this space and the support group is of particular significance because they generally do not have the opportunity to interact with anyone other than kin or talk about sensitive personal problems like domestic violence.

All groups are between roughly 15 and 30 in number, segregated along gender lines, and meet on a regular basis. Separate groups for men and women allow women to have greater participation because in the Bangladeshi context women are generally uncomfortable talking in front of men who tend to dominate conversations. Nijera Kori in particular believes that men and women have different levels of consciousness, as men have access to other spaces and networks where information is shared. There may also be important social barriers to men and women meeting together.

The relationship between the organizations and the members is geared towards making these groups functionally independent, no longer requiring support from the organizations. However, at the time of the research, none of the organizations believed that the groups had reached that stage. According to the staff, group members see the organizations as trusted friends or even family because the organizations do not seek any benefit in exchange for their support. Staff see themselves as facilitators to inculcate a feeling of ownership among members over the group and build leadership and other capabilities so that they can fight their own battles by providing whatever support is needed (technical, legal, advocacy) for the groups to function. A member of Nijera Kori Report Cell talked about how their advocacy work began:

> When commercial shrimp cultivation started in Khulna in 1980, people protested in an unorganized manner. In 1990, when the state, ministers, banks, donors got involved in this process, the Bhumiheen Samiti came to us and said they need this issue to be highlighted nationally and internationally for their movement to gain support. That is how the advocacy and networking work of Nijera Kori began.

Unlike Samata and Karmojibi Nari, Nijera Kori has a unique relationship with the *Bhumiheen Samities* (BS), which are formed and structured as independent and self-governing entities with their own identity. Nijera Kori's intention is to nurture the BS to a level of consciousness where they are able to function independently. Hence, they stratify BS from primary level, where they are able to conduct regular group based activities (meeting, savings, forming new groups), up to

the fourth level where the groups are able to expand their movements to the national arena (Nijera Kori 2006-7). In principle, the relationship is between two independent bodies, and not between an organization and its members.

Samata and Nijera Kori groups are federated from the sub-district to national levels, with both male and female representatives who are selected either by the group members or through elections. One-fourth of Samata committee members include other influential community members to widen support and acceptance in the committees. Karmojibi Nari 'cells' are not federated. Networking and solidarity building is done through meetings of cell leaders at union, sub-district and district levels, through which individual cells link up with cells in other villages and unions, creating a sense of unity needed to build confidence and spur movements to negotiate and bargain with employers. These meetings enable sharing of information regarding wage rates and successful movements in other areas, that can then be used for advocacy and bargaining. For example, cell members in one area informed their employer of higher wage rates in a neighbouring village, and demanded the higher rate. When the employer refused, they stopped working for two days and prevented the employer from hiring workers from outside, which ultimately compelled him to raise their wages. There are also networking meetings between cell members and local government officials and journalists to encourage recognition of agricultural workers as workers with rights and for legitimizing activities of the cells.

In addition, Samata and Nijera Kori encourage group savings that have a particular significance for group unity by providing a material incentive for the group to stay together. However unlike most micro credit and service delivery organizations, the savings are not held by the organization but in a bank account, with group and organizational representatives as signatories. The organizations believe that this enables the groups to interact with institutions that are not generally pro-poor. All decisions regarding use of savings, as with all decisions taken by the group, are taken democratically in the group. Group savings are used to fund group meetings, collective activities, court cases, and joint economic activities or to help individual members facing a crisis. Nijera Kori's experience shows that groups that have not been able to save or undertake collective economic activity run the risk of becoming inactive. Karmojibi Nari could not introduce savings even though its members because of the short-term nature of its agricultural worker programme demanded it.

Capacity building

Another core strategy for mediation is to build the capacity of the groups to engage in spaces from which they are excluded to claim rights. First and foremost, this entails creating awareness among members of their rights. All three organizations explicitly use the language of citizen rights as provided by the constitution. Samata and Nijera Kori further emphasize responsibilities towards the state, while Karmojibi Nari focuses on labour rights. All provide information that helps members to situate their condition in wider societal, national and global perspectives, to identify mechanisms for accessing resources, and to develop skills for leadership, bargaining, negotiating and lobbying. They use both informal group discussions to

raise awareness and formal structured training for deeper understanding of rights and development of skills.

In their informal group discussions, Samata and Nijera Kori emphasize relations between citizen and state in terms of constitutional rights, duties and responsibilities of citizens (birth and death registration, voting). Citizen-state relations are explained using both the concepts of class and gender. There is discussion on laws in relation to education, health, child marriage, polygamy, violence, etc.; issues of natural, economic and political resources and where these are concentrated; and the means by which the poor can gain access to these resources. This highlights the issue of exclusion of the poor from committees that allocate resources (school management committees, water management committee) and make decisions that affect the community (bazaar committee, mosque/temple committee, *shalish*[iv]). There is also emphasis on information sharing by designating literate members having access to TV or newspapers to talk about current affairs, movements in different parts of the country, and national politics.

Karmojibi Nari raises awareness on basic citizen rights and labour rights through informal 'cell' meetings, using a 'syllabus' on rights that they explain gradually. Apart from that, discussions are held on current issues relevant for agricultural workers, and protests and struggles led by workers taking place in different parts of the country. These discussions are held during group meetings for general awareness building, but certain group members also receive structured training at the office premises.

All organizations provide formal training to members. Samata's training is around: 1) Land rights: laws and rights, how to negotiate with influential people, how to access information, apply and lobby for *khas* land; 2) Gender relations and Development: family laws, property laws, laws related to child marriage, dowry, polygamy, violence against women, effects of contrary societal norms on family, society and the state; 3) Democratization: transformation of the Union Parishad (UP), the lowest elected body at the local level, to be responsive and accountable, how to access services from the UP, encourage landless to stand for UP elections, and become members of local committees; and 4) Resource Advocacy Services: awareness raising related to government services (livestock, fisheries, agriculture) and accessing such services. Additionally, Samata provides livelihood training on livestock, poultry, cow fattening, vegetable gardening, making organic fertilizer, etc to support their economic activities.

Samata believes in capacity building through 'learning by doing', reflected in the comment of a Social Development Officer:

> There is a water body in Ward 9 under the Water Development Board. We have been trying to lease it by forming a committee and working through the committee. We regularly do this kind of work through the group members. … The group members come with us even when we go to land registration offices so that after going with us for five days, one day they will be able to do it on their own.

Furthermore, Samata provides leadership training to Advanced Group Leaders who have the quality of leadership, decision-making and motivation to lead movements, and who are selected with the consensus of the group members. They are usually the leaders who are supported to stand for election into local committees.

Nijera Kori focuses on building 'critical consciousness', based on Freire, and solidarity through its training programme, initially focusing on group formation strategies, gradually moving on to intensive analysis of issues discussed during group meetings. They hold separate training at the local Nijera Kori office to ensure full concentration of the trainees, who are otherwise pressed for time because of their household and other responsibilities. A point to note is that the training is structured so that men and women train apart and together in alternate levels to enable open sharing in sex segregated sessions and to build mutual trust and understanding in joint sessions. There is a strong cultural dimension to their training through which issue-based songs and dramas are developed and performed by members. Thus one finds BS members singing about the negative consequences of globalization.

Karmojibi Nari selects 'cell' members for formal training on the basis of their ability to grasp various concepts and their ability to explain it to others in the group. Funding limits the number of members who can be trained, but the organization tries to ensure that the same people do not receive all training. Mainly the 'cell' leaders receive four types of training on awareness, networking, organizing and leadership. Karmojibi Nari's awareness training focuses on enabling understanding of the need to be organized and constitutional rights, including labour rights. The network training, provided to those who received the awareness training, teaches members on how to mobilize women agricultural workers and who to lobby with. The organizer training focuses on increasing membership. The leadership training is offered to three leaders from each union. Cell members select leaders for the awareness and network training, whereas staff members select leaders for the organizer and leadership training.

An important element of capacity building used by all three organizations is enabling the participation of their members in regional, national and international workshops and conferences, that not only exposes them to a global perspective and induces solidarity and confidence, but gives them a wider platform to express concerns and for policy advocacy. However, while voicing concerns and being heard may be easier at national and international arenas, it is much less likely at the local level because structural power relationships at the local level have not changed to the same extent.

Organizational Policy to Support Mediation

The three NGOs consciously take up a number of policies to build organizational capacity to support their mediation. First, all employ a conscious recruitment policy to build staff ownership of the organization. Samata recruits children of their landless group members who have first hand experiences of struggles for land. This, according to one of the Directors, has led to some criticism of Samata being a 'family organization' but according to him, 'when there is a price on one's head, one can only rely on your own people to fight alongside you'. Nijera Kori

recruits applicants who are committed to the ideology of social transformation that they believe in and are prepared to engage in activism that may pose personal risks. According to one Anchal President:

> We have been attacked by RAB (Rapid Action Battalion), elite, terrorists. More than one case has been filed against each staff. But even then, the staff continues working because of their commitment and responsibility. This sense of commitment comes from the fact that we have been educated by the peoples' money. So as educated citizens, we feel a responsibility towards the society. We also explain this to the members.

Second, all three organisations recruit local staff. Local knowledge and connections are crucial to establish trust with the people and convince them of the need to unite. Samata and Karmojibi Nari recruit staff locally to capitalize on their existing relations with the belief that they will be more committed to fight for their own people. However, Nijera Kori does not recruit staff locally in order to protect them and their families from the backlash of the conflicts that are bound to ensue. They feel that their staff has social acceptance because they work in the same areas for many years. Karmojibi Nari also realizes that recruiting local female staff could entail a loss of reputation, since women belonging to the community would have to bear the brunt of gossip and face pressure to maintain family honour.

Thirdly, the staff of all three organizations undergoes intensive training to support the groups. Training is provided on organizational ideology, goals, policies, mobilization and implementation strategies, and generally on structure of society and government, class structure, democracy and rights. Because the staff eventually trains group members (informally and formally), the content and the process of their training closely resembles that of the group members. Women staff members are provided with particular training needed to work within village politics and handle local norms that restrict women's mobility.

Lastly, all organizations look to create an organizational culture based on the principles of democracy, justice and accountability. The staff of all three organizations feels that they can express their opinion freely, participate in decision-making processes through regular meetings, and access the Executive Director at all times. In addition, in the case of Samata, landless group members are included in the General and Executive Committee. In the case of Nijera Kori, there is a practice of evaluation and accountability from the sub-centres to the executive committee through regular meetings where problems can be shared, decisions can be taken jointly, guidelines and policies can be reviewed, and workers can question decisions through discussions. Karmojibi Nari also has similar organizational culture and norms however, staff feel that in this particular agricultural worker project, democratic practice is somewhat constrained by the need to meet short-term deliverables and targets.

Strategies for engagement

The strategies adopted by these organisations to engage with local power holders run through the entire gamut -from collaboration to open conflict. Confrontation and conflict are necessary

to achieve some gains and may be inevitable in some cases. But the approach need not be confrontational from the start and a lot can be achieved through creating networks among the groups, and through dialogues between the groups and local authorities. Samata and Karmojibi Nari do not believe in conflict with the local government and local administration but in building strong reciprocal relationships with them that will facilitate claims of the landless group members. To do this, staff establish direct links with them to seek support where and when possible. A Samata Social Development Officer explained how Samata changed its stance to co-opt the rich who have the power to buy force, influence local administration, or embroil the poor in legal cases.

> The local influential groups do not want the poor people of the country to unite… because of their own interests. So strategically we avoided including them in our work…But recently there has been a change in the policy to recognize those among the influential who are aware and are not against the organization... who view our work with poor, landless as a positive change…We are including them in the committees because they can give us good advice and point us to strategies that will aid in the development of the landless.

Samata informs local government regarding activities of their groups so that local development activities can be coordinated to benefit the groups. For example, Samata staff pro-actively lobby Union Parishad and Land offices to ensure the inclusion of their members in the list for *khas* land distribution, work allocation in government projects and in safety net programmes. Samata organizes annual 'face to face' meetings between the landless and the UP to hold the elected representatives accountable to their election pledges. They also organize 'budget opening' meetings to ensure people's participation in budget preparation, and invites local administration to *shalish* to resolve conflict when it arises. Furthermore, they establish links with the police and involve the UP chairman and the Officer in Charge of police in resolving conflict between the landless and the rich to ensure justice without resorting to bribes. They also negotiate with formal banks on behalf of the landless so that they can open accounts.

Similarly, to avoid potential conflict between 'cell' members and local power structures, Karmojibi Nari starts work in an area by first establishing a relationship with the UNO (sub-district executive officer) and through him with the UP chairman. It is with their permission and support that Karmojibi Nari seeks to gain legitimacy for their work. Government officials are invited to the cell meetings at its initial stage and to preside over the networking meetings held by the cell members at the sub-district and district levels. According to one Programme Officer:

> The purpose of doing networking meetings at the field level is that at the initial stage, we do not want to have a conflict with the landowners. Through the networking meeting we formally inform the UP, the police that this is what we are doing in the area and also use the opportunity to let them know our demands. We are trying to stay within the legal framework to ensure that the landowners do not protest against their activities, that the local government does not create obstacles or destroy the cells. We do not need to create conflict, it will happen in any case.

In contrast, Nijera Kori does not believe in negotiating with the local government and local administration on behalf of the *Bhumiheen Samities*. Rather they prepare the BS to independently deal with the conflicts and confrontations that are inevitable. While negotiation is an option that they sometimes pursue, tactics often take the form of protests and sit-ins against which there can be a backlash from various groups, notably the rural elite, religious fundamentalists, members of the local government, or the police. The BS identify issues that want to fight against or rights they want to claim and the authorities that they have to mobilize against in order to do that. They decide on the methods best suited for the purpose and they ask Nijera Kori for technical, legal or logistical support and advice. In fact the relationship between BS and the local power structure is assessed as an indicator of groups' strength or weakness.

> We see what kind of relationship the members have with the influential people in the area. In most of the villages the relationship is conflictual/antagonistic. We take that to be an indicator of the group being active. The group has been able to identify the advantages that the influential want for themselves and be committed to put an end to it. Where there is no conflict, we believe the group to be weak.

Outcomes

The outcomes of these mediation strategies are evident in terms of citizen engagement and participation on a number of fronts as described by Gaventa and Barrett (2010). We draw on our quantitative survey of members of these organizations to examine the effect of social mobilization practices by comparing differences in outcome indicators between members of Samata, Nijera Kori and Karmojibi Nari and members of local service delivery NGOs (microfinance, health, education, legal aid, livelihood skills).

The first set of outcomes is grouped around the 'construction of citizenship'. Members of Samata, Nijera Kori and Karmojibi Nari were more likely to see themselves as citizens of the state compared to members of the other organizations. Nijera Kori staff spoke of the plays organized by BS members as an example of the change in their citizen consciousness, whereby they felt that as citizens they had a responsibility to express solidarity and give courage to other citizens in the aftermath of a terrorist attack. The perception that they could claim rights from the local government were dramatically higher for members of Samata, Nijera Kori and Karmojibi Nari (70-80%) than for other NGOs (<10%). Members of Samata, Nijera Kori and Karmojibi Nari felt that their knowledge of rights, capacity to bargain for wages and make claims on local government have increased since joining these organizations and this perception was significantly higher than for members of other NGOs.

The second set of outcomes is grouped around 'practices of citizen participation'. There is a general positive influence of organizational membership on community participation (people come for advice, accompany people to access government service and give information). Members of Samata and Nijera Kori are much more likely to participate in local committees (15-

30% vs. <7%) and *shalish* (40% vs. 15%) and to visit UP for services. Participation in local committees and *shalish* is negligible in the case of members of Karmojibi Nari, who do not emphasize such participation. An example of an important new form of participation is contesting local government elections. In Samata's working area 187 UP members, including female members, belonged to Samata. Group members decide who to put up as a candidate and help in the campaign in any way they can, for example by offering to pay for printing election posters.

Between 60-80% members of the three organizations felt that they had greater voice since joining in terms of being able to speak to anyone and protest violence against women, corruption, religious fanaticism, injustice, harassment, etc., compared to less than a third of the members of other NGOs. The vast majority (about 90%) of Samata and Nijera Kori members are likely to participate in collective protests compared to negligible participation among members of other organizations. Protests by Samata members are centred on land rights, accessing government services and women's rights, while for Nijera Kori members the issues are around saltwater shrimp cultivation, justice and corruption. About one-third of Karmojibi Nari 'cell' members have participated in protests around wage rates, overtime and appropriate working hours. While voting in national and local elections is nearly universal, campaigning for elections is less common. About 45% members of Samata and Nijera Kori were involved in campaigning in last local elections compared to less than a fifth of other NGO members. Notably, around 40% of Samata and Nijera Kori members expressed their future aspiration of the country in terms of 'democratic Bangladesh', compared to one-quarter of members of other NGOs.

The third set of outcomes is grouped around concept of 'responsive and accountable states'. Members of all organizations have similar levels of access to government service and benefits. But members of Samata and Nijera Kori BS have relatively greater access to information on government development programmes and services and it appears that they use this information to hold the local public service providers to account. For instance Samata members surrounded a government family planning hospital and protested against the sale of free medicine, absence of doctors during office hours, etc. It was when they took a written memorandum of their protest to the UP that the hospital started operating within regulations.

One example of responsiveness of the local government is when the UP invites group members to participate in various decision-making processes. Over 70% of Samata members and about half of Nijera Kori members stated they were called by the UP, compared to members of other NGOs. According to the Programme Manager:

> When the VGD/VGF cards arrive, the chairman or the UP member calls our group leaders to his office to ask their opinion on who should get the cards. Sometimes they even come to the Samata office and tell us to ask our group leaders who should be eligible. The sanitary latrine was done by calling us for the discussion.

A visible outcome which could be related to any of the above is that members of these organizations report that they have successfully strengthened their economic base and reduced

vulnerability (for example, food shortage) since joining the organization through increased group savings, improved asset base and access to *khas* resources, education and health services and training.

The above description may suggest members' experiences are all positive. However, as the case studies show the positive outcomes are not without cost. There are negative outcomes in terms of social reprisals, increased exposure to violence and conflict and loss of livelihood from participation in collective action. Nijera Kori reported that a local UP member objected to women singing in the Eidgah (field for saying prayers) where they were holding a cultural programme. They further reported instances where the local people blame Nijera Kori for 'destroying the country' by bringing women out of their homes and taking them to rallies and marches. Although BS members were able to withstand the objections and provide counter arguments, this places them in a defensive and confrontational position with the community.

In the experience of Samata, landless members frequently find themselves in a conflictual situation with powerful landed elite who harass, threaten, beat up and persecute members and their families and even file criminal cases against them. The reason why members are willing to face violence is because of their dream to own a plot of land. For poor people, participation in protests against employers and landowners can result in a temporary loss of employment and livelihood. Karmojibi Nari reported an instance where cell members protested against low wages and were laid off for three days. During this time they suffered from food shortage, before the employer agreed to their wage demands.

Reflection

The process of mediation described in this chapter show that capacities for engagement and pathways of gaining access to formal process and institutions are being created for the poor and marginalized. All three organizations have put in place mechanisms that they feel will make the impact of mediation sustainable (federation and networks, savings, building leadership that can mobilize new groups), but they themselves feel that these peoples' organizations have not yet reached the point where they can function independently. One reason for this is the higher transaction cost for participation faced by the poor (Thorpe, Stewart and Heyer 2003). It should be noted however, that dependence on organizational support is to be expected in the context of a weak democratic state, which does not encourage grassroots mobilization for claiming rights. A related and important sustainability issue is the dependence of the programme on donor funding. Since these are the only funds available for activities like mediation for social transformation, these programmes are unlikely to reach the scale of NGO micro credit programmes.

The question of representation is very much in the minds of the mediating organizations and in order to legitimize their roles, they use different strategies. Nijera Kori consciously states that *Bhumiheen Samities* are an autonomous entity, while Samata includes the landless in their governance structure and also employ family members of the landless. Samata and Nijera Kori describe their relationships to the members as 'helpful friends', 'matchmakers' (between

resources and people) and 'facilitators'. Karmojibi Nari being founded by active trade unionists sees itself as credible representative of the working class. Because of their activist experiences, all three NGOs believe that they are well placed to take on the role of mediators. While new relationships between these organizations and their members are being created, they do not appear to be entrenched like traditional patron –client relationships as members always have an exit option. Moreover, because of competition for scarce donor funds, NGOs themselves are dependent upon the 'success' of the groups for their own organizational survival.

However the claim of representation could be undermined by the fact that there may be an imposition of ideologically driven values and practices on group members, which may have costs for the poor in terms of challenging social norms and power structures. As noted however, those who do not want to pay these costs can leave, or simply not join in the first place. Moreover, inclusion into their governance structure does not necessarily ensure transparency in policy and financial decisions. In addition, it is not exactly clear whether certain issues for activism (such as globalization, certain religious practices) are identified by the NGOs or by the grassroots members for example. Lastly, donor accountability is also an issue. Donor agenda and shortsightedness may damage an organization in a way that breaks down the process of mediation resulting in the loss of years of work and effort (http://news.priyo.com/law-and-order/2011/08/20/anti-corruption-drive-casts-sh-35217.html).

Overall the relationship between the state and NGOs like these three is one of 'antagonistic cooperation', a phenomenon of simultaneous conflict and cooperation (Sanayal 1991). Samata and Karmojibi Nari recognize that conflict is inevitable but believe in working through existing power structures to achieve gains for their group members. The expectation is that these gains will empower the poor to participate and claim, which will eventually transform power structures. On the other hand, Nijera Kori believes that structures need to be transformed first before gains can be achieved by the poor and powerless. This does not mean however that Nijera Kori will not support members to participate in formal decision making spaces or that Samata and Karmojibi Nari will not encourage members to engage in direct conflict or contestation.

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[i] Although the majority of NGOs in Bangladesh work at the grassroots, there are some that work at the national and international policy levels.

[ii] This chapter is based upon the research carried out in 2007 in the south-west region of Bangladesh under the project 'Deepening democracy, building citizenship and promoting participation' within the Citizenship DRC. The analysis draws heavily from 18 interviews with the staff of Samata, Nijera Kori and Karmojibi Nari at the head office and at field level and relevant findings from the quantitative survey of 2400 members belonging to 8 organizations including the case study NGOs (Mahmud and Huq 2008).

[iii] Government owned land and water bodies.

[iv] Alternate informal dispute resolution mechanism.