

Mobilization of the Rural Poor for Access to Agricultural Resources other than Land: Irrigation Enterprise by the Rural Poor

M. Karim[§]

INTRODUCTION

BANGLADESH, ONE OF the **poorest** countries in the world, covers an **area** of **143,998 square kilometers**. The estimated current population of the country is **106.6 million** and it is expanding at a rate of 2.18 percent per year (Bureau of Statistics 1989). **About 85 percent of the total population** live in rural areas and 80 percent are engaged in agriculture. Since the country's economy is predominantly agrarian, land is the principal productive asset.

Distribution of land, however, is very uneven. The top 10 percent of rural households own **52 percent of the total agricultural land** while the bottom 60 percent -- who may be regarded as functionally landless -- own only 9 percent (UNICEF 1987). This glaring inequality in land **distribution** is one of the causes of the **mass** poverty prevailing in the country. There is **little** likelihood that land reform to redistribute it more equitably will be carried out in the near future. Under these circumstances, any development initiative for and by the **rural** poor, if it is to be meaningful and effective, must be directed towards creating access to those agricultural resources that **are** not monopolized by the more privileged.

Based on this concept, Proshika Manobik Unnayan Kendra (Proshika - A Centre for **Human Development**), a Bangladesh **nongovernment** development organization, has facilitated a program for the sale of water by organized groups of landless and marginal **peasants**, to farmers **both** rich and **poor**. The program was launched in 1980, and **so far**, results have **been** encouraging.

This paper attempts to present a synthesis of the experiences of both Proshika and of the groups involved in irrigation. It also **outlines** the **process** from its beginning to the present, including the role of the Proshika field **organizers** in mobilizing the groups.

[§]Deputy Director (Programme) Proshika Manobik Unnayan Kendra, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

PROSHIKA AND ITS ACTIVITIES

Proshika is a Bengali acronym composed of the first few letters of each of the three words: *Proshiksan* (Training), *Shiksa* (Development Education) and *Kai* (Action). Since its inception in 1976, Proshika's aim has been to start a sustainable development process among the rural poor by making them conscious of their situation and by extending them support to organize themselves so that they may become self-reliant and make united efforts to improve their socioeconomic condition. Proshika supports both men and women who are landless laborers or marginal peasants, the two largest groups in the rural population, as well as groups of rural tradesmen such as fishermen, weavers, and potters.

Training plays a crucial role in the Proshika process since it is mainly through this activity that people's level of awareness, confidence, capacity, and skills are developed. Two categories of training are organized human development and practical skills. Human development training courses include social analysis, development concepts and approaches, analysis of development constraints, techniques of organization building, communication, development management, leadership, and participatory planning. Training courses on practical skills provide the skills necessary for making efficient use of resources and for effective implementation of economic projects.

Proshika extends credit and technical assistance to the groups to assist them to undertake income- and employment-generating projects in various fields such as agriculture, irrigation, pond fishery and open-water fishing, sericulture, beekeeping, cattle and poultry raising, home-stead gardening, social forestry, handicrafts, and cottage industry. Other programs that Proshika has initiated include popular theater, participatory research, development support, communication through video medium, health and nutrition education, literacy, and women's programs.

By 1988, Proshika had formed 16,440 groups of which 7,508 are women's groups. It currently employs a staff of 553 of whom 438 are based at the grassroots level. Operating in 36 project locations, which it calls Area Development Centers, Proshika's work now extends to 2,856 villages, 373 unions, and 65 *upazilas* (administrative sub-divisions) in 22 districts.

WATER-SELLING ENTERPRISES OF THE RURAL POOR

Context

Although primarily an agrarian economy, with agriculture contributing nearly 50 percent of its gross domestic product and accounting for about 59 percent of the employed labor force (UNICEF 1987), Bangladesh is not self-sufficient in food and imports an average of two million tons of foodgrains per year.

The second Five-Year Plan (1980-1985) promoted rapid expansion of the mechanized minor irrigation technologies, i.e., Shallow Tube Wells, Low Lift Pumps, and Deep Tube Wells as a strategy for increasing food production. Attributing the slow rate of irrigation development in the preceding years to a policy of high subsidization, a privatization policy was adopted for selling Low Lift Pumps to individual farmers or groups.

Some observers have expressed concern that in an agrarian situation characterized by concentration of landownership, landlessness, tenancy, and unemployment, such a technological thrust could end in concentrating water assets in the hands of landlords, if unaccompanied by policies and measures promoting equity. Through monopolizing access, landlords might also emerge as waterlords. The result would then be more exploitation, more landlessness, more unemployment, and consequently, more poverty.

It has been argued that effective demand for food by the rural poor is necessary to stimulate agricultural production. Therefore, establishing property rights other than land in the hands of the rural poor is essential for agricultural development in Bangladesh.

This was the context in which Proshika developed the program for water selling by the rural poor. The government's reaction to the program was positive. The Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development initiated the development of an experimental program for the provision of irrigation services by the landless. The Ministry of Agriculture encouraged nongovernment organizations such as Proshika, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee and the Grameen (Rural) Bank to develop programs to facilitate access of the rural poor to water resources.

Objectives

Several interrelated assumptions underlie the program and explain its objectives. First, providing organized groups of the rural poor with assistance in terms of credit, training, and technical know-how to acquire and run mechanized minor irrigation equipment will enable them to establish an irrigation service which they themselves can manage and control. Second, selling water to farmers means gaining control of means of production which are second only to land in importance. Third, by bringing more land under cultivation in the dry season this service will contribute to the creation of employment opportunities for the rural poor. Fourth, by obtaining a share of the benefits of the increased productivity of the land they will enhance their incomes. And finally, this new role of the rural poor in production will elevate to some extent their status in society.

Implementation Process

The process through which a group establishes an irrigation service involves several steps. It begins with the group identifying a potential command area and then negotiating with the landowners and sharecropping farmers who cultivate land in that area. Before proceeding, the group must establish its right to provide water in that area. If this is positive, then a formal

agreement is drawn up using signatures and thumbprints. The agreement specifies the duration of the scheme (usually five years), siting of the equipment, rates of water delivery, form and rates of payment (mostly **25-30** percent crop share) and the division of responsibility between the farmers and the group for the construction and maintenance of the main channels or drains and the feeder water courses to the plots.

Arranging credit for the purchase of equipment and to cover operating costs is the second step. During the first few years, the Grameen Bank, Bangladesh, in accordance with its agreement with Proshika provided the required credit. Since **1985**, however, Proshika has extended credit from its own Revolving Loan Fund. This has resolved problems in obtaining the loans on time, since delays in the past had badly affected the performance of some groups.

Groups participating in the program are selected by mutual consent of the groups themselves and the field organizers. As soon as a group is selected to participate it appoints a chairman, a scheme manager, a pump driver, and a lineman from among its members. A committee composed of a few of its members is formed to perform certain duties on behalf of the group, such as obtaining the loan, signing the loan documents, and purchase of the equipment. The driver and lineman are sent to the Proshika Training Centre to receive training in the **skills** required for performing their **tasks**.

After obtaining the loan the group purchases the equipment and auxiliaries and installs them at the agreed site with the help of local technicians. Following installation of the equipment the group constructs the main canals. Each command area is divided almost equally **among three** main canals and water is delivered sequentially from the tail to the head end.

Role of the Field Organizers

In the Proshika process, the role of the field organizers is of vital importance as it is they who set the organizational and the mobilization work in motion. The field organizer is based at the grassroots Area Development Centers, comes from the same locality, knows the area and the people very well, and has opted for working with the rural **poor**.

Groups are organized by Proshika without any intention to involve them in any particular activity such as irrigation, or other program. The purpose is rather to help the rural poor to develop an institutional base from which to mobilize themselves for socioeconomic actions pertinent to self-reliant development. It is easier to organize a group with the purpose of making immediate gain than to organize one conceived as a long-term enterprise from the very beginning. The field organizer, therefore, has a very difficult and painstaking task to accomplish. It takes several months to motivate and animate prospective members to organize themselves into a group.

After a group is formed, the field organizer must continue to maintain frequent contact with it to promote a collective spirit and leadership, to develop participatory decision making, to have regular meetings, and to cultivate mutual cooperation and solidarity among the members. The field organizer accomplishes these tasks through discussions and informal training sessions. Following this, groups are gradually exposed to the human-development training courses at the Area Development Center training facilities to acquire further analytical **skills**.

The quality of an organization is very much a determining factor in its success or failure in any endeavor. The field organizer plays a crucial role in this respect. It may take more than a year

before the group expresses the need to make a move. Sometimes the field organizer facilitates this by sharing some idea with them or by exposing them to the experience of other groups in the surrounding area. The mobilization could be for a social or for an economic action. The social action may be a struggle to realize the minimum wage fixed by the government, or the sharecroppers' two-thirds share of crops, or the actual quantity of wheat allotted to the laborers in the food-for-work program, or it may be a protest against any sort of violence done to them. The economic actions include any effort for employment and income generation. Some actions are both social and economic in nature, as for example, the irrigation service. Whatever the nature of the action, the field organizer will be involved.

To undertake an irrigation project, a feasibility study is required. This is done by the group, the field organizer, and the extension worker (irrigation engineer) as a team. After identifying a potential command area the group has to negotiate with the farmers. The field organizer's involvement in the negotiations as a mediator is essential to ensure the interests of the group.

The field organizer next assists the group to prepare a project proposal to be submitted to Proshika to request the required credit. He arranges for training the driver and the lineman who have been appointed by the group. The field organizer and the technical worker help the group in selecting and purchasing equipment, in proper siting of it, and in boring of the well (for Shallow Tube Wells). The field organizer also assists in setting up proper record keeping so that Proshika may monitor the performance of the group. He makes frequent visits to the project site to see if any problems are hampering the smooth implementation of the project. If conflicts arise between the group and the farmers the field organizer intervenes to help resolve the problems.

The above description, however, in which the field organizer has to provide all the assistance applies only to new irrigation groups. In groups which have gained several years' experience in running their projects the field organizer's role is limited to monitoring performance. In many areas, broader organizations embracing many groups, have already emerged. These larger groupings are capable of dealing with the problems that individual groups face in bargaining with powerful elites.

Expansion and Performance

In 1982, Dr. Geoffrey D. Wood of the University of Bath, with the assistance of Proshika's Research and Documentation Cell, conducted a study on the financial performance of 83 projects. 51 Shallow Tube Wells, and 33 Low Lift Pumps that were in operation during the 1981/82 season in 11 Proshika Area Development Centers. The study showed that 78 percent of Low Lift Pumps groups and 75 percent of the Shallow Tube Well groups were successful. Though the result was inspiring, Proshika decided not to move too fast. Their program was expanded only modestly.

At present, the program covers 26 Area Development Centers and 308 groups with an equal number of projects involved in selling water for irrigation. Technologies that have been deployed include 201 Shallow Tube Wells, 82 Low Lift Pumps, and 25 Deep Tube Wells. By operating these, the groups are providing irrigation to approximately 2,950 hectares (ha) (7,295 acres) of land. Performance, however, declined from 1982 to 1984. In 1982/83 this was due to a sharp rise in operating costs as the price of diesel and oil increased by 50 percent, and in 1983/84 due to an

early flood which severely damaged the boro crop, causing most of the projects to incur losses. The situation began to improve again in 1985/86 due to a rise in income while costs remained stable, and yield as well as prices of rice increased. The current season (1988/89) has not yet ended. However, in the last season (1987/88) about 75 percent of the total 251 projects were successful.

EXPERIENCE

The irrigation groups have clearly demonstrated that given the opportunity, the rural poor in Bangladesh working collectively can be efficient entrepreneurs in socioeconomic-development projects. The groups have repaid 75 percent of the Grameen Bank loans and in July 1987 group repayment of the Revolving Loan Fund loans was 71 percent. This may be compared to the 46 percent recovery of official loans in the agricultural sector in the same year.

Proshika provides credit without requiring collateral, unlike the official loan schemes. The majority of the rural poor, especially the landless, are unable to provide collateral and therefore have no access to official sources of credit. The groups have shown beyond doubt that the poor are creditworthy and even trustworthy to be provided loans without collateral.

Whether managed by groups or by private owners, irrigation projects give rise to increased demand for labor especially where High Yielding Variety boro is added to the cropping cycle. With projects managed by groups, however, it is the poor who get the income through rent and profit. Moreover, small peasants and sharecroppers have greater control over water distribution in a group scheme as compared to a private scheme (Ahmed 1989).

Water selling by the rural poor should not be viewed only in terms of employment and income generation. There are social implications as well. The rural power structure in Bangladesh is based on a patron-client relationship (Hossain 1980) between the rich landowners and the rural poor in which the rich have the power to dominate and the poor, having no power, are dominated. In the whole bargaining process it is the rich who decide and the poor who must accept.

For the first time in Bangladesh, some groups of rural poor through the process of selling water, have created a new bargaining situation in which they are also decision makers. They have taken upon themselves a completely new role in the production process by applying an important technology, and thus have taken charge of a significant productive asset. This has given them a sense of confidence, dignity, and power. They believe that the effort has contributed to the improvement of their lives (Huda 1989).

CONCLUSION

Proshika and the irrigation groups have been running this project for eight years now. By this time a fair number of groups have become owners of irrigation equipment, paying off their loans and continuing their water-selling services. This indicates that the process may prove sustainable. Several other nongovernment organizations have engaged in similar endeavors. Still, if seen in the context of the creation of a wider impact for growth and equity, all of these efforts, including that of Proshika, have a long way to go and strong official policy support will be an absolute necessity, if they are to succeed.

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